

Miriam Kahn, *Always Hungry, Never Greedy: Food and the Expression of Gender in a Melanesian Society*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Pp. 187, plates, figures, maps, tables, appendices, references, index. Cloth \$34.50.

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Well over a decade ago, Marshall Sahlins (*Stone Age Economics* [New York, 1972]) constructed a provocative contrast between those "original

affluent societies" that, while spare in the material trappings of life, nevertheless appeared to foster satisfaction through a neat fit between their ends and their available means, and societies of the market in which a sense of "scarcity" is reproduced amidst material plenty. One of the enduring contributions of that argument to anthropological discourse has been to affirm the culturally constituted character of human "needs." Mary Douglas (*The World of Goods* [London, 1980]) has likewise argued that while economists have made it their business to think about how people make decisions concerning the allocation of resources between competing ends (or "wants"), they treat those ends themselves as givens. What is missing, and what anthropology can offer, is a culturally sensitive theory of consumption itself.

Always Hungry, Never Greedy helps us along the path to such a theory by providing an ethnographic analysis of ideas and practices concerning food in Wamira, a matrilineally organized, coastal community in the Massim region of eastern Papua New Guinea. The Wamirans are an intriguing case for a number of reasons. Living in a dry zone with degree of climatic unpredictability, they have innovated an extensive irrigation system to channel river water to their taro gardens, But despite their relatively intensive production techniques, they are not bent on increasing production, and in fact have elaborated social attitudes and conventions that, in contradictory ways, emphasize abstinence. The dominant idiom of Wamiran culture, according to Miriam Kahn, is "famine" (see especially chapter 2).

Kahn is quick to point out that although the Wamirans say that they are always hungry and, in particular, that they never have enough taro, in fact these statements ought not to be taken literally. Her own observations and measurements of nutritional intake, soil quality, crop yields and the like (chapter 3) suggest that the Wamirans have an adequate diet. She discusses central Wamiran myths (e.g., chapter 4), affinal tensions mediated by pork and piglet exchanges (chapter 5) and intramale conflict played out in the course of taro cultivation (chapter 6), local beliefs concerning creativity and the regeneration of life (chapter 7), and finally types of public feasts (chapter 8)--paying attention to food symbolism throughout. Through these discussions Kahn shows how idioms of famine and hunger are ways of talking about the fundamental "greediness" of human nature, the threat this nature poses to social relationships, and, therefore, the need for its control. Men in particular express these concerns with regard to their dependence on women and, in another way, on other men.

In her account of affinal tensions, Kahn suggests that Wamiran men face the classic matrilineal "double bind" insofar as "male solidarity

[within patrilocal hamlets] is threatened by men's needs to make alliances elsewhere to secure offspring" (p. 74). Men seek to escape their dependence on women in two ways. First, they engage in exchanges of piglets and pork with their wives' relatives: Because pigs are seen as "female surrogates"-- both as naturally fertile and as sources of food--their manipulation and control can be made to stand for control over female reproductive powers. Second, Wamiran men seek to circumvent their double bind altogether through a complex of ideas and practices relating to taro cultivation. For Wamirans, "taro are people" (p. 90). By controlling taro production, men see themselves as producing "children" without female intervention (although, in fact, women are very much involved in the practical processes of taro production, just as they are also in the case of pigs).

Kahn does not critically reexamine the matrilineal puzzle itself, particularly its assumptions concerning the priority of male solidarity. In view of ongoing revisions in our understanding of the existence of corporate "groups" in Highland New Guinea and elsewhere, drawing Wamira into this comparative context might have been productive. However, as she notes (pp. 149-150), her symbolically informed focus on food in Wamiran culture sheds light on gender ideas and relationships in a manner that is likely to facilitate comparisons between Wamira and cultures of the Highlands and the Sepik with regard to "sexual antagonism" (or the politics of gender). Moreover, insofar as gender and food ideas in Wamira are the conceptual anchors of a complex of fears concerning the antisocial, "inner" character of persons, they bear on the larger, comparative literature on personhood.

Kahn's thematic focus on food symbolism whets our appetite for more on other matters as well. Throughout *Always Hungry, Never Greedy*, we learn suggestive facts about contemporary socioeconomic transformations. In chapter 1 and elsewhere, we learn that Wamirans have left their homeland in search of urban employment in startling numbers and, because of local population growth, that absentees are unlikely to be able to return home. Very strong expectations concerning reciprocity obtain between rural and urban Wamirans (e.g., pp. 19-20). In this context, it is possible that Wamiran discourse on food and hunger does not only concern local threats to the possibility of community, but also provides the moral framework for engaging with a range of challenges coming from the wider world in which Wamirans now find themselves.

We are told, for example, that both those Wamirans who believe that famine was more acute in the past than in the present *and* those who believe the reverse attribute the change of fortune to the introduction of Western technology (pp. 36-37). Contrasts between themselves and

white people with regard to food's sociable uses appear to be an important means of Wamiran self-definition: "We are not like white people, we share our food" (pp. 41, 121; see also p. 27). Political discussion appears to be laced with references both to indigenous and to store-bought foods (pp. 136-137), but it is unclear whether "sugar," "rice," and such substitute unproblematically for local food categories in discourse, or whether they carry special meanings. Of the two types of feasting discussed in chapter 8--"incorporation" and "transaction" feasts--solidarity-reinforcing incorporation feasts appear to have become the means of integrating Western festivities like Christmas and birthdays into Wamiran culture (pp. 124-126). Local leaders with extensive experience in urban centers are active agents of this integration (p. 130): What does this signify?

Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of the importance of these themes is found in Kahn's account of her painful but very "educational" blunders in organizing her own going-away feast at the end of her first period of fieldwork. This account, mostly in chapter 8, effectively clarifies how feasting is a medium for defining and reproducing the political structure in Wamira. It also opens a window on Wamiran self-consciousness with respect to what distinguishes their own "customs" from those of whites, and what they are determined to preserve (e.g., p. 144). Kahn was encouraged by the Wamirans themselves to write about the turmoil her feast engendered; as one man said to her, "We are not fighting about you. We are arguing about our customs, our food distribution. Indeed, you should pay close attention to the details and write them all down!" (p. 145). Her account is extremely thought-provoking.

Considering the empirical complexity and theoretical importance of its central concerns, *Always Hungry, Never Greedy* is much too brief; this reader would have preferred the argument developed in more ethnographic detail throughout the book. The book's size does, however, make it a very good choice for courses on the Pacific, the anthropology of gender, and economic (or ecological) anthropology. It is engagingly written and, by means of a concrete, first-person style, also communicates a great deal about what anthropologists actually do in the field.