Holtzman (2001) The Food of Elders, the "Ration" of Women

Holtzman, Jon.


Jon Holtzman’s "The Food of Elders, the "Ration" of Women: Brewing, Gender, and Domestic Processes among the Samburu of Northern Kenya" explores how Samburu women control the distribution of food in Kenya. There is some conflict over whether alcohol is a food product and therefore under their jurisdiction, or if it’s a privilege of the elders (still obtainable only through women).

The Samburu were historically some of the wealthiest livestock keepers. They survived on their livestock and livestock related products instead of farming, but a decline in the herding economy have forced the current Samburu into farming and wage labor. The new market relations have affected family life.

Women are responsible for providing food for children and elders, though the power to make decisions belongs to their husbands. Since the food is no longer exclusively from livestock, men give their wives money to buy food like corn and sugar. The men are often suspicious that their wives are buying other things, and refuse to let their wives buy things that don’t seem necessary. Meanwhile, elders are supposed to have ownership of everything within the household, but they don’t have as much power as they’re supposed to. Often, they’re the ones who designate the wives’ money to buy food and other items as well.

Wives divide the resources, and they’re often the only ones who know what food is in the household. They’re expected to distribute fair shares to all family members, but they have control over what they consider a “fair share.” Often they eat and distribute food when the men aren’t there, and they have many ways to keep food from their husbands and keep more for themselves and the children. This often means that the men have nutritional shortfalls while the children are *alright* (poor word choice). It is expected that men and elders will be able to undergo hardship for the good of his family.

The article is very wordy, and seems to reference several anthropological studies and terms with which I am not familiar. I’ll need to read it several times to get the full meaning of what the article is trying to get across.

It ties into the topic of food and gender very well, though, because it shows how women find subtle ways to gain power through the purchase and distribution of food. The role of the men is interesting as well; even if they’re aware of the unfair food proportions, they’re expected to bear it for the sake of the family members under their care.