LeCount (2001) Like Water for Chocolate

LeCount, Lisa J.


The link between social food eating and politics has, in history, often been used in such a way as to incur reciprocation from those invited (LeCount 2001: 935). As well, the sharing of food has been used as setting for negotiation and preserving power. These feasts are separated into two types: inclusionary and exclusionary (LeCount 2001: 935). Inclusionary feasts are used solely to garner the support of the people by providing large amounts of commonly found food in a public setting. Exclusionary feasts, also called diacritical feasts in the article, were hosted by the wealthy for the wealthy and powerful (LeCount 2001: 935). It was conceivably in this type of feast where certain political exchanges and alliances could be made.

The use of food and drink to garner political support can be traced back to the European Bronze Age and the use of wine during political interactions between people. The Late Classic Maya are “an excellent case study to investigate the linkage between feasting patterns and political competition” (LeCount 2001: 936) because of the structure applied to their feasting.

The Maya had two instances in which they have such extensive meals. One is within personal religion pertaining to the family, the gods, and the ancestors (LeCount 2001: 936). The second is the public festival constituted of a much more political atmosphere (LeCount 2001: 936).

LeCount goes on to describe societies in which diacritical feasts are not commonly used as a means to garner power, explaining how in this way the need for haute cuisine was virtually nonexistent in certain nations where “the political hierarchy was based on divine rule” (LeCount 2001: 936). Status of the Maya was shown in a few different ways. One way in which they did so was through architecture (LeCount 2001: 938). LeCount stressed this point almost to a fault, deviating from the subject of food. However, the point was made was clear; haute cuisine was preserved for the elite.

For example, chocolate as a drink, though not used in rituals, was consumed at social and political gatherings (LeCount 2001: 943). Most foods were used in religious practices, however, and lengthy descriptions of them were included to show the intricacy with which they were completed. The different types of tamales and meats were used specially for different religious celebrations and while the everyday foods of the Maya have drastically changed over the years those foods tied to tradition haven’t been altered much (LeCount 2001: 944).

LeCount spends several pages in an in-depth examination of the types of vessels used in food preparation and presentation, looking for differing forms and styles that could indicate that they were used specifically for ritual foods or if there were special vessels made for the elites (LeCount 2001: 246). This, like the over-analysis of architecture, also sometimes deviated from the discussion of food but managed to make connections, for example, through the examination of small bowls and their connections to food, religion, and the elite (LeCount 2001: 946). LeCount studies many different drinking vessels for any sign of significance in the culture, coming to the conclusion that “chocolate drinking was a highly charged political ritual among the Late Classical Maya” (LeCount 2001: 947).