Chapter 7

Symbolic Meaning-Making in Traditional Wedding Foods among the AmaZulu in KwaZulu-Natal

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Introduction

> Anthropologists have been historically interested in what people eat, where people eat, why people eat the food they eat, and what food represents to them. (Mead 1970: 2)

As this chapter will illustrate, by reinforcing group identity, shared experiences and cultural distinctions, food practices in families and communities establish social boundaries between and among individuals and groups. This can result in a sense of "us" versus "them" among different groups based on their respective food traditions and practices. For example, these divisions are reflected in the symbolism derived from how different ethnicities cook, share and consume meat. In addition, in some African communities, food creates age and gender boundaries, where it is taboo for women and girls (or in other instances, boys and men) to eat certain foods, and where particular cuisines are prepared and eaten by women and young girls, while others are prepared and eaten by men and boys. Thus, '[f]ood is central to the lives of people and their rituals. This means that food is ritualized' (Anderson 2005: 10). For example, food opens ideas of geographic boundaries by identifying people of the same lineage, village and religion.

As Modi (2009) notes, while food still holds an important cultural significance for many societies, colonisation, apartheid, globalisation, modernity and other socioeconomic transformations have resulted in a deterioration in traditional food practices over time. Trigg (2004) and Cope and Earle (2013) argue that understanding the history of food and eating practices in different contexts can help one to better understand that the practice of eating is inherently complex, involving not only the physiological act of consuming sustenance, but also a complex interplay of cultural, social, psychological and symbolic dimensions. In other words, the meaning of food goes beyond basic

nourishment and lies in its capacity not only to address our fundamental biological requirements, but also to serve as a means through which essential relations between physiological links, sensory perceptions, emotions and memories are understood (Chen and Antonelli 2020). The act of eating is, thus, entangled with cultural norms/values, economic systems, power dynamics and identity formation.

While critical food and social science research has long demonstrated the centrality of food and its symbolic meaning in shaping sociocultural identity (see for example, Byarugaba 2017; Fielding-Singh 2017; Reddy and Van Dam 2020; Sobreira, Garavello and Nardoto 2018), many scholars in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa focus their studies on food security and nutrition. Research that seeks to understand how humans interact with and experience food within socially defined contexts, is in its infancy. Thus, this chapter explicates and reflects on how beef as the staple meal at traditional weddings of the AmaZulu in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, South Africa, accrues symbolic meanings that are socially constructed to influence cultural and ritual celebrations and foodways. In social science, foodways encompasses the cultural, social, and historical practices related to food, including how it is produced, prepared and consumed within a specific group or community (Lawrance and De la Peña 2012). According to Harris, Lyon and McLaughlin (2005, viii–ix), foodways draw attention to '[o]ur attitudes, practices, and rituals around food' and offer a 'window onto our most basic beliefs about the world and ourselves'. The term "cuisine" refers to the characteristic methods of cooking and preparing food associated with specific regions or cultures. The chapter highlights how foodways and cuisines during traditional AmaZulu weddings, tend to conceal gender stereotypes and patriarchal and age dominance.

Traditional wedding foodways and cuisine subject rural women to food exclusion and place them as secondary eaters of cooked beef. This aspect of rural women's lives has not received enough attention in current critical food studies and social science research, which mostly focusses on how African rural women secure food for their families. The chapter reflects on the gender stereotypes and food taboos that are associated with caregiving, which conceals consumption norms that confine women to consuming specific parts of the cow. In addition, it reflects on the role men play, a role in which they dictate women's food choices within an undocumented indigenous knowledge (IK) framework of gendered food taboos, which is transmitted across generations. While scholars praise and postulate the importance of IK which is also known as "past orientation" of people, particularly men, the traditional food consumption norms in families and communities that tend to

marginalise girls and women remain largely unresearched. This chapter further problematises the ontology and epistemology of IK and critically questions the norms that exclude women.

Why a focus on traditional food?

Over the years, food has been ritualised in ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals and special prayer meetings, and has shaped identities (Mead 1970). Haaland (2007) contends, culture is a suite of close and extensive relationships, the identity of which often involves food as part of rituals embedded in cosmological and ideological beliefs. Within this context, food is intricately woven into a culture's understanding of the universe and cultural convictions. This chapter also focusses on beef as a traditional food of the amaZulu people of KZN in South Africa, and the symbolic meanings attached to *who* cooks and eats *what* parts of a cow slaughtered during a traditional wedding. Rocillo-Aquino et al. (2021) maintain that studies focussing on traditional food have a longstanding history and have recently gained interest owing to their cultural, sensorial and nutritional properties. These studies have led to insights into the holistic nature of food as both a cultural artefact and a source of sustenance that engages our senses and impacts our health. However, with the commercialisation and marketing of national cuisines and produce in global markets, for food to be considered traditional, it must belong to a defined geographic place, whether it is local, regional or national. Ricillo-Aquino et al. (2021: 3) further state that many foods are granted what is termed 'designation of origin' and 'geographical indication', which are legal and regulatory terms used to protect and recognise the link between the quality and characteristics of a product and the specific geographical area it comes from. The designation of origin and geographic indication enable consumers to identify and trust the authenticity and unique qualities of products from specific regions, as the specific geographical environment can influence their characteristics. Thus, traditional food is often linked to space, place and a territory, shaped by history and a constellation of associated knowledge, meanings, values and practices. It can be indigenous or introduced during ancient times, however, integrated into the local daily survival routine. As confirmed by Ivanova and Terziyska (2014: 124), 'traditional culinary traditions' are passed through history, with each new generation learning the recipes, eating habits and tastes of their ancestors. Culinary traditions reproduce a culture and are combined with regional specificity in terms of an authentic way of cooking according to the ancestral teachings of elderly people, a history of being consumed over centuries, since the time of our grandparents and linkages with IK and symbolic meaning.

A second conceptualisation of traditional food links it to the inter-generational transmission of knowledge and the use of local raw material (Kuhnlein and Receveur 1996). This demonstrates the "autochthony" of traditional food, or its characteristics as indigenous, native or originating in a particular place or region. Time plays a significant role in the categorisation of food as traditional food. This implies that the meanings of traditional food should ideally have a documented history demonstrating its social construction and evolution over generations, passed down from ancestors. Thus, the cultural significance of traditional foods is intricately bound to the passage of time. In other words, food gains symbolic meanings in both spatial and temporal terms. As time elapses, traditional food gathers profound meaning, encompassing its ritualistic and symbolic qualities that are intricately interwoven with the core of each culture. Through these processes, traditional food stands out distinctly from others. As discussed by Gartuala et al. (2020: 79), the 'categorisation of traditional food or foods came from IK' which is unique to a specific cultural context and is transmitted through socialisation processes and interaction among household members.

The continuing legacy of food colonialism

As indicated earlier, this chapter reflects on the traditional food and foodways in traditional weddings among the AmaZulu people of KZN province, in South Africa. As a region, KZN was colonised primarily by the British with the arrival of European settlers and traders in the nineteenth century. Dominy (1993) explains that the arrival of colonial settlers in KZN reconstructed Zululand, and this is where the present study was conducted. Colonial settlers also imposed 'their own social and political identities' (Trapido 2008: 52). Chanaiwa (1980) also confirms that the expansion of European material culture into Zululand was accompanied by the equally expansionist social and religious norms of the European world. Thus, the cultural context of the province, which includes their foodways and cuisines like that of many parts of the country and other countries, suffered the consequences of colonialism or food colonialism as termed by scholars, when colonial settlers took over their lands (Eriksen 2013; Garcia Polanco and Rodriguez-Cruz 2019; Steckley 2016; Whyte, Caldwell and Schaeper 2018).

McKinley and Jernigan (2023) interpret food colonialism as cultural genocide and a form of historical oppression, which undermined the indigenous foodways and cuisine of the colonised. Kesselman (2023) refers to food colonialism as the coloniality of food experience, emphasising the effects of colonialism as extending beyond the historical period of colonisation and as continuing

to shape how individuals and communities interact with food. Furthermore, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) and Ng* ug* i wa Thiong'o et al. (1986), food colonialism dismembered the cradle of African foodways and cuisine and destroyed Africa's food heritage. Singley (2012) maintains that food colonialism promoted western dishes over traditional African food, which was deemed non-nutritious.

Kuper (1960) explains that food colonialism not only enforced western traditions, but it also permitted the introduction of Indian dietary ideals, cultural traditions and nutritional norms associated with race, social status and gender; it also manifested in food preferences and eating etiquette that disregarded other cultural practices. This imposition of dietary standards, linked to the ideals of the colonisers, often clashed with existing cultural traditions and offended various societies. Kesselman (2023) points out that the colonial influence in South Africa exacerbated significant injustices within food systems. Colonialisation led to the marginalisation and exploitation of indigenous foodways and local knowledge, perpetuating deeply rooted inequalities and imbalances in the way food was produced, distributed and valued.

The impact of food colonialism extends beyond dietary choices; it encompasses cultural, social and economic dimensions that continue to resonate in contemporary societies. For example, a recent study conducted by Reddy and Moletsane (2021) on Indian curry, shows that Indian cuisine has received considerable scholarly attention in the past few decades in South Africa in contrast to the comparatively limited exploration of cuisines from other ethnic groups. This discrepancy underscores the unequal legacy of colonialism, where certain cultural elements are elevated and studied more extensively, while others are marginalised or overlooked.

In other spheres, Shostak (2023) highlights that food colonialism introduced socio-economic factors, which determined access and affordability, dietary ideologies and idolised food regimes. In other words, certain groups within colonised societies experienced limited access to, and affordability of certain foods owing to economic inequalities, which could lead to food insecurity and unequal nutrition. Colonialism also propagated dietary ideologies, impacting what foods were considered acceptable or desirable, which suppressed the dietary traditions and ideologies of colonised communities. Food colonialism idolised food regimes favoured by colonial powers, at the expense of indigenous food practices. This was the birth of inequalities that were imposed on colonised countries. Because of subordination by the coloniser over the colonised, food colonialism

led to the undermining and eventually to the weakening of indigenous culinary epistemologies (knowledge about local foods, from traditional recipes to the understanding of the nutritional and cultural value of certain ingredients). This loss was not only a result of cultural exchange, it was also a consequence of the uneven power dynamics between the colonisers and the colonised (Janer 2007). Thus, Bodirsky and Johnson (2008) and McKinley and Jernigan (2023) elucidate that food colonialism was a colonial trauma that pruned many African countries of the shared identity and the meaning attached to traditional food.

Other impacts of food colonialism include the replacement of African traditional foods with western and Indian traditional foods and the criminalisation of African ceremonial gatherings, which involved traditional foodways and cuisine (Dennis and Robin 2020). Furthermore, according to Beagan, Power and Chapman (2015), food colonialism not only controlled food systems in colonised countries, it also engendered social class trajectories along which different social classes or groups within society. These trajectories had an impact on the distribution of resources and opportunities and led to dietary inequality determined by the availability and affordability of food resources in communities.

Studying and thinking through food

Studying food is important in critical food studies and the social sciences, since humans are consumers of food, and the different cultures attach socially constructed meanings to the food they eat. Everett (2016) and Sibal (2018) assert that food plays an essential role in society by shaping identity and fostering the development of shared values. Almansouri et al. (2021) agree that food holds a special cultural and social meaning evident in celebrations. Food, for example, establishes cultural authenticity, transmitted across generations, fostering connections among people in shared cultures who gather to celebrate specific foods and dishes. Through food, people who have a shared culture embrace a sense of belonging and share memories of the past, which are drawn from IK systems, which is the wisdom of ancestors (Joseph and Turner 2020). Furthermore, food permeates social constructs and categories, which, for example: (i) shape people's cultural roots; (ii) influence how food is prepared and (iii) define who eats the food in terms of age, gender and marital status (Zeng, Zhao and Sun 2014). As such, over time, several discourses of food and foodways have emerged in critical food studies literature. One example identifies food as a symbol of common identity and socio-cultural heritage.

Haalad (2007) reasons that cultures are composed of intricate and extensive connections, with food serving as a central component of their identity, and that in an African context, it serves as a symbol of Ubuntu (meaning a shared humanity to others) used to strengthen familial and community ties. Similarly, Kesselman (2023) maintains that traditional food systems are revered because they embody principles of reciprocity and collectivity. In other words, traditional food practices involve a give-and-take approach within communities, where sharing and cooperation are valued. When consumers engage with a traditional food system, they celebrate the interconnectedness of individuals and their willingness to share resources. This fosters a sense of unity and mutual support, enriching the overall cultural experience tied to traditional foods (Quaranta and Salvia 2011; Trichopoulou, Soukara and Vasilopoulou 2007). In addition, food incorporates cultural beliefs, which shape *how* it is prepared, with *what* type of utensils, by whom, when, where and who can eat the food, either as a group or individually (Aktas-Polat and Polat, 2020; Meigs 1987; Sobreira et al. 2018). Thus, in African communities, as in other contexts, food has never merely been about the simple act of eating, it encapsulates the history, heritage and the identity of its consumers. Highfield (2017), for example, wrote a comprehensive analysis in relation to African narratives through diverse cultures.

Food is not simply a material reality as a micronutrient, but rather opens a deeper narrative which is understood by people that have been socialised into specific cultures (Watson and Caldwell 2004). To illustrate, almost three decades ago, Meigs (1987) identified three interrelated ways in which different communities or cultures understand food and foodways. Firstly, many cultures identify with their food heritage and use it to describe who they are individually and collectively, which means that food acts as a collective cultural identity. Secondly, food is a mediator and a referential touchstone for self-identification, having both a material and symbolic significance. This suggests that food is not simply a dish that is served, it also has both nutritional and symbolic value, which shapes and expresses individual and group identity. Thirdly, food comprises social constructs to which indigenous meanings are attached. More recently, Almansouri et al. (2021) and Grimaldi, Fassino and Porporato (2019) suggest that in a local context, food consumers celebrate what is known as a food heritage, which preserves traditions and consumer behaviour and is the cradle of the culture of many ethnic groups.

As illuminated by Siebert and Laschewski (2016), foodways and cuisines constitute cultural knowledge, which is treasured and preserved for future generations. Because food is linked to

specific locations, has a symbolic meaning and makes place or space unique and reflects its identity and values, the loss of cultural foodways and cuisines implies a loss of identity. Furthermore, as Waldstein (2018) argues, food enforces social control and morality and sustains the identity of a particular culture. Food ensures commonality, homogeneity, intimacy and solidarity. In some contexts, for example, people even define kin not by shared blood ties, but by shared food ties (Crowther 2018; Klein and Watson 2019). Further, food establishes intercultural and intergenerational relationships, transmitting IK as history, which serves as a bridge between the past and the future (Aktas-Polat and Polat 2020).

Understanding AmaZulu traditional wedding foodways

AmaZulu traditional foodways and cuisine for ceremonial events such as weddings have also been replaced or diluted by colonial foods over time. The latter were believed to better contribute to nutritional well-being and enhance the quality of life. This may have led social science and humanities scholars to pay scant attention to AmaZulu traditional foodways as an area of research, a gap this chapter in part addresses. In addition, the chapter identifies implications for future research on traditional food and foodways and cuisines of the AmaZulu in KZN.

Influenced by the scholarship of Mead (1970), a prominent anthropologist, who asserted that food has long been a subject of human interest and exploration and had become a language universally recognised and understood by people across cultures and backgrounds, I (the current author) conducted an ethnographic study focussing on symbolic meaning-making in traditional wedding foods among the AmaZulu in KZN. This study was further motivated by the insights brought by Durkheim (1997), who contends that new dimensions of food patterns, due to ecological and economic changes, colonisation, globalisation and urbanisation, require research into how they have impacted symbolic meaning-making in traditional food. Moreover, Johnston and Baumann (2015: 30) insist that research must proceed beyond what people eat to include '(i) how cultures talk about [and] use food in ... rituals and social gatherings, (ii) how they have sustained familial connections through food and (iii) how food knowledge and attached meaning is preserved or disseminated from one generation to the next'. Conducting such research would necessitate an in-depth ethnographic approach to gather local (indigenous) knowledge of the intricate ways in which food is ritualised and commemorated. This would involve engaging closely with communities to understand their cultural practices, beliefs and traditions associated with food to uncover not

only surface-level rituals, but also the underlying meanings attached to different culinary practices. Furthermore, the research also delves into how these communities maintain their connections with food amidst the evolving landscape of evolving humanistic values, development initiatives and economic changes.

Based on the above-mentioned reasons, the present study was located within a decolonial indigenous paradigm, which challenges the hegemonic dominance (overwhelmingly dominant influence) of western paradigms. Steyn and Mpofu (2021) as well as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) are some contemporary African scholars who actively engage on how European models minimised African ontologies and epistemologies. As a counter, the misrecognition of African history can be redeemed through the production of decolonial scholarship. By decolonising/challenging the centrality of Eurocentrism, this paradigm facilitates the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of indigenous and previously subjugated African knowledges from the perspectives of the Africans themselves (Chilisa and Kawulich 2012; Held 2019). In other words, a decolonial indigenous paradigm counteracts the singular importance assigned to Eurocentric insights, and mobilises other modes of knowledge that are of equal relevance. Informed by this paradigm, an ethnographic research study was conducted with fifteen families in the rural communities of Elandskop, uLundi, Kokstad, eZabelweni and Bulwer in KZN province, South Africa, who were celebrating or had celebrated traditional weddings where indigenous food was cooked and served to guests. These communities had been subjected to food colonialism, however, since the democratic dispensation (post-1994), had resumed celebrating traditional weddings and cooking traditional food for guests.

To honour the voices of the present study's participants and their narratives, and informed by the decolonial indigenous paradigm, in-depth interviews with the participants were conducted in isiZulu, their first language (and the author's). The interviews were transcribed verbatim before being translated into English. While it is acknowledged that some meanings might have been lost in translation, as a first language speaker of isiZulu, firstly, I carefully listened to each audiotaped session before transcribing it myself, followed by a meticulously reading and re-reading of the transcripts to ensure an impartial and unbiased representation of the data set. Finally, key understandings of the findings were taken from each participant's interview and given back to them to confirm the accuracy of the interpretation and to correct where needed.

The analysis and interpretation of the participants' narratives were underpinned by the theory

of food agency and the indigenous knowledge systems theory (IKST). As discussed by Made and Breakfast (2023) and Stewart (2009), philosophical foundations of the IKST are dependent on what is socially constructed. The theory of food agency is situated within the philosophical and social scholarly literature on human agency and food (Abbots 2017; Gorton and Barjolle 2014). In the context of qualitative research, Crotty (1998) and Schwandt (1994) suggest that the interpretation of peoples' experiences is contingent on their lived experiences. Language and culture influences what is known by people (Zhao 2020). The theory recognises that food patterns result from a web of corridors of knowledge construction of social, cultural, economic, environment, political and personal influences, which produce meanings, and the influence of IK (Gorton and Barjolle 2014). Tlhompho (2014) states that IK includes the unique traditional and local knowledge that exist within, and develops around, the specific conditions of women and men who are indigenous to a specific geographical area. Persens (2005) further defines IK as a contrast to the knowledge generated within the international system of universities, research institutions and private firms. IK is often used as a basis for decision-making, especially regarding food preparation and distribution. IK shapes identities and creates food taboos that are inherited by generations through their socialisation. From this understanding, IKST focusses on the knowledge, practices and beliefs passed down within traditional communities. The theory recognises the unique wisdom and expertise that these communities have accumulated over generations concerning their environment, culture and social systems. Williams (2019) asserts that both food agency and IKST theories recognise the wealth of knowledge within African society, encompassing its culture, traditions and rituals. In the present ethnographic study, these theoretical lenses helped facilitate the generation and analysis of data on symbolic meaning-making IK attached to AmaZulu traditional wedding food preparation, consumption, foodways and cuisine by accessing the memories and IK systems of participants who reside in the rural communities of KZN.

Symbolic meanings attached to traditional wedding foods

During the data generation, the elders from these research sites were pleased that an interest had been taken in studying traditional wedding food, since they felt that the ritualisation and celebration of such culinary traditions were often unrepresented and regarded as archaic or less valued. This was evident in a male participant, who stated, '*Nkosazane ngizwile kancane ukuthi uphuma eThekwini esikhungweni semfundo ephakame, nokuthi ufuna ulwazi ngohlobo lokudla esidlayo emgcagcweni*' (*'Miss, I heard a little that you come from Durban, from a higher education institution, and that you*

want information about traditional foods in ceremonies.'). After I replied that I was from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg Campus), he stated the following:

> *'It is interesting to know that our traditional ceremonies are catching the interest of people who are coming from such institutions. I take pride in being umZulu who has still preserved the knowledge that I learned from obabamkhulu bami (paternal grandfathers).'*

Maintaining eye contact, the old man then implored me to '*Please use isiZulu as a medium of communication because I did not go to school, but I know what I was taught by obabamkhulu bami (my paternal grandfathers)*'. Talking to women participants proved to be a different experience in several ways. For example, in an interview with a female participant about the preparation and consumption of traditional wedding food and where it was cooked and by whom, she did not maintain eye contact, but faced down and continuously rubbed her hands while responding to my question:

> *'We don't consider a woman that did not observe her ongagcagcanga (traditional wedding) as an umalokazane (wife), because umalokazane (also wife) is someone who has been introduced to ancestors through ... the cow where the incoming mlobokazi (newlywed wife) is expected to "khomba inxeba"(pointing the wound which is considered as an important ritual for the incoming wife) , as an indication that "I" consent to be fully integrated into my husband's name. We have seen young, educated couples getting married in isiZulu, and we celebrate this as it implies that ziyabuyela emasisweni (going back to our roots).'*

When I questioned what she meant by *zibuyela emasisweni (going back to our roots),* instead of responding, the woman turned to the male elder that was present in the room for a response, the male participant responded as follows:

> *'Abelungu (white people) came over to colonise us and how we used to do things. We lost our identity and how we celebrated our rituals. At some point in time, we were not allowed to meet as black people to celebrate our rituals. They also introduce their own food which undermined our traditional meals. We find joy when seeing our children going back to roots of being umZulu (a zulu person) which is celebrated through the slaughtered cow.'*

The narrative above highlights the experience of food colonialism which, as mentioned earlier, food scholars have illuminated. The experiences conveyed in the above confirm the validity of the existing literature on the experiences of the colonised. Turning to meat as a food item in cultural practice, the next section addresses the relevance of beef.

Beef

As discussed by De Garine (2004), beef is highly valued and slaughtering a cow constitutes the central ritual of a ceremony held in a family or community. Recent studies on traditional weddings reveal that when the AmaZulu talk about traditional wedding foods, they do not mention curry and rice, which is common amongst other ethnic groups (Gumede 2022). For example, as Dabasso et al. (2022) explain, the cattle (especially bulls) are slaughtered for meat consumption, rituals and high value ceremonial purposes. For the AmaZulu, the slaughtered cow or beef is a symbol of traditional wedding food and other ceremonies (Khanyile 2022). Boiled beef, in particular, becomes the staple item on the menu of the ceremony. The slaughtered cow represents and symbolises the presence of ancestors, situates IK into practice and ensures a successful traditional wedding. To illustrate, during data generation, a male participant indicated that traditional weddings are guided by ancestral knowledge:

> *'We learned and observed from obab'omkhulu (paternal grandfathers/ancestors). Before the cow gets slaughtered, we take it to the esibayeni (enclosure) where a male elder in the family declares the cow to our ancestors by reciting family clan songs. The cow is given ancestral integrity, which is officiating the beginning of the traditional wedding. Traditional wedding foods are also confirmed because the slaughtered cow meat becomes the staple meal of the ceremony. This meat that is served is cooked/boiled by us using water and salt in the pot where dumplings are cooked. This is where we resume culinary responsibilities as men in the family. Remember that we have the responsibility to ensure that we don't deviate from the teachings of our ancestors … ababeyipheka, bayephule (to cook and remove pots from the fire or from the stove).'*

> *'Iphenduka "ifuthu/ifutho (traditional fresh meat or crops) " because it is mixed with izinto zabelungu (western teachings). Different cow body parts are cooked and displayed as guided by the teachings of our ancestors or elders in the family. The display of cooked meat is first*

> *presented to the ancestors in a house called "kwagogo nomkhulu (kwagogo nomkhulu)", also known as the ancestral house where AmaZulu believed that ancestors are resting. The meat has to be first consumed by the ancestors spiritually before it can be be served to other family members and guests during traditional weddings.'*

The above narrative reveals the role of IK in a traditional wedding and the traditional food served to guests.

When probed why beef is considered traditional wedding meat, a female participant volunteered, '*Baba, le izophendulwa nguwe (husband, please respond to this question)'*, shying away from maintaining eye contact and covering her face with her hand. Her husband responded:

> *'Inkomo (cow) is considered a traditional wedding staple food because you don't just slaughter it. You slaughter because the head of the house has died. It is a way of dignifying his send off. We also slaughter the cow during weddings because, we declare it at the kraal (enclosure) where we believe that our ancestors are resting. If I can take you back, the wealth of our ancestors was tied up on how big is isibaya (kraal). We learned from them that umakuhlatshwe inkomo, lowo umcimbi ungowesintu not iphathi nje (when a cow is slaughtered, that ceremony is considered a traditional ritual and not just a party). Secondly, our ancestors died crying because umhlaba wabo nemfuyo yabo eningi yadliwa ilaba abafika bezosidlela umhlaba (he grazing land of their cows was taken over by western settlers). As we grow, we have not forgotten the scars of colonisers and how they have altered our traditional rituals and ceremonies. When AmaZulu speak about umcimbi wesinti (traditional ceremony) we want to eat inyama yenkomo nedombolo because that is our traditional food. Hai lezicoficofi ezafika nabelungu namandiya (western cuisines). Where there is only curry and rice, guests would say there was no food, bringing shame to ancestors.'*

These words imply that ancestors do not recognise non-traditional weddings, which are blamed on what is termed *impucuzeko* (modernity) and its lack of recognition of the symbolic meaning of traditional food and the slaughtering of a cow. What makes a slaughtered cow important as a staple food in traditional weddings is that it symbolises the presence of ancestors. The narrative above confirms that beef is recognised as the staple dish of ritualised events amongst the AmaZulu. As Adams (1990) confirms, many continents in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America consider

meat as the main dish served during traditional ceremonies and ritualised events. According to Adams (1990), men tend to consume more meat than women. Among the participants of this study, beyond the gendered consumption patterns that were skewed against women in terms of quantity, women also demonstrated a submissive deferral to men in terms of responding to certain questions related to traditional wedding foods and ceremonies. Their reluctance to respond directly in the presence of men generally as well as in the presence of their husbands, indicated entrenched patriarchal codes and unequal gender dynamics that were not fully anticipated as an outsider to these communities. Bhana (2010), Hosegood (2013) and Ifechelobi (2014) state that patriarchy silences women's voices mostly in the rural parts of the world.

The gendered consumption of meat among the AmaZulu

In their reflective study on meat consumption across states of human life, Ritzel and Mann (2021) indicate that age and gender are variables that have been used to determine who should consume what part of the meat and who should not. These are food taboos that perpetuate patriarchy in rural communities. Food taboos marginalise women from consuming specific foods which are consumed only by men in society. This is another aspect of gender-inequality in the context of food consumption. Choi and Jin-Lee (2022) confirm that in most cultures, eating meat is usually presented as a masculine activity, while vegetarianism is consistently associated with feminine qualities. The rite of passage of boys and girls or of men and women amongst amaZulu, as well as in many African ethnic groups, determines who should eat what kind of meat. Yount-André and Zende (2023) indicate that among South Africa's many African ethnic groups, meat is central to processes of redistribution that underpin networks of intergenerational reciprocity among kin and which allow young people to achieve social adulthood. Eating meat and feeding meat to others is a means through which people (especially men) might transition to adulthood, that is assume an appealable and desirable status in terms of age, wealth and power. Thus, meat has become a marker of unequal social roles.

Gender scholars have argued that one significant way contemporary hegemonic masculinities are constructed and reinforced is through meat consumption (Carson 2021). Meat consumption can also be seen to feed into patriarchal structures of human-male supremacy, celebrating a primitive masculinity and normalising aggressive characteristics by tying them to male, gendered and perceived as ("natural") behaviours. According to Carson (2021), feminists' scholars and

ecofeminists specifically, argue that there is an inherent connection between the systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice for women. When men eat meat, they are also symbolically participating and colluding in an act of domination over the natural world and women.

In the context of this chapter, narratives from all participants reveal that the cooking, distribution and the consumption of cooked cow body parts during the AmaZulu traditional wedding has led to gendered unequal social roles. Male elders disallow the *inhloko* (head of the cow) to be consumed by underaged boys, young women and married women. In patriarchal terms, the head of the cow is believed to be a special and important part of the animal and is to be consumed by married men. This confirms the superior status of married men in the family as well in the community. In this sense, marriage (as a heteronormative institution) assigns a gendered, special, idolised and exclusive value that enables married men to exclusively qualify and be deserving of eating *inhloko.* Further, a married man is regarded as the head of the household, a decision-maker as well as someone that is closely linked to the ancestors. Such ancestral linkage and lineage therefore provide the man certain privileges and powers in the home and community where he is perceived as the repository of ancestral knowledge. Thus, serving a married man *inhloko,* demonstrates his standing and the respect he is afforded in the family. In this context, while boys, girls and women are often expected to prepare food dishes*,* they are prohibited from eating parts like *inhloko* and other body parts of the cow that are reserved for men. Rodrigues, Goméz-Corona and Valentin (2020) and Zhao's (2022) research on food studies confirm that the consumption of food in many cultural groups is informed by hierarchies. These hierarchies are shaped by sex, age, marital status and gender.

The distribution of what remains to be served is equally relevant. For example, in addition to the head, married men are also served *isibindi* (liver) and *inhliziyo* (the heart). In turn, they serve what remains or what they would not eat, including *amanqina enkomo* (feet or trotters,), lungs and offal to boys, girls and women. The entrails or internal organs of animals are edible parts known as offal. In colloquial and linguistic terms, offal also references meanings about refuse, rubbish or garbage. While entrails and internal organs are eaten in many cultures (contingent on recipes, cooking methods and flavours), they are assigned meanings linked to waste which is supposedly meaningless and worthless, and therefore, that is to be discarded. Furthermore, the participants' narratives on traditional food in this study also suggest that *ibele (*the udder) a body part meant for milk production, is served to *omama* (mothers or married women). The indigenous meaning attached to *ibele* is that because like *omama* who use their breasts to feed their babies*,* it involves milk

production, only married women may eat the cow udder. However, in the Elandskop community, the *ibele* is also served to *izintombi* (girls and unmarried women), which indicates different inherited IK and meaning attached to the organ. *Umlenze* (the leg) and thigh are cooked and served to all guests attending the traditional wedding.

The findings above suggest that the positive meanings attached to the various body parts of a cow (*inhloko* in particular) are that they are reserved for the heads of households, while those that are assigned negative meanings such as waste, rubbish or garbage are reserved for boys, girls and women (those regarded as the less important in families and the communities) (Borona 2019; Manan and Tul-Kubra 2022). This chapter asserts that while calls to reclaim IKs and systems are gaining momentum among scholars and communities globally, the findings from literature and the present ethnographic study suggest that some of the social norms and values contained in the IK around traditional food, its preparation and consumption, are hierarchical and unequally gendered. Therefore, these revered ancestral teachings often carry discriminatory elements, in this case, leading to the marginalisation of young boys, girls and women, including married women, and using the consumption of traditional foods as a weapon of gender and age marginalisation. As Sewenent and Schwarcz (2021: 1) observe, such 'unwritten food norms' lead to taboos that are socially based and that prohibit people from consuming certain types of food. If food, and especially particular types of food are central to the AmaZulu wedding traditions, it is also appropriate to conclude that the food ritual and the food that is served also take on a particular gendered saliency. For example, according to Ruby and Heine (2011), due to its long-standing association with manhood, power and virility, meat is a symbol of patriarchy. According to these authors, due to the power and privilege that patriarchy affords them in their family and community, men especially, are therefore likely to selectively maintain the traditions that benefit them, and by extension, maintain the gendered taboos in traditional foods and foodways and the symbolic meanings that sustain their power over women, girls and boys.

Mengie et al. (2022) assert that women are disadvantaged by cultural food taboos in which certain foods are prohibited to them. De Garine (2001) explains that prejudice and stereotypes relating to food habits operate in a much harsher way within the framework of a society. Food habits can, therefore, be considered as playing a stronger part of a social marker than a cultural marker. They underline basic differences and even augment barriers between social classes; hence inequalities exist because of food consumption and statuses that are attached and owned as the identity of

societies. Mengie et al. (2022) further state that compared to urban and better educated populations, rural and less educated cultures tend to have a higher prevalence of food prohibitions. Women are more affected than men.

Learning from the perspectives of rural people

The dynamics between gender and associated factors including power, social systems and complex food landscapes, influence decision-making with respect to the intake of food to dictate the quantity of what kind of food, including animal sources of foods is consumed when and by whom in the households (Bukachi et al. 2022). As motivated, the ethnographic study described in this chapter spotlighted an understanding of a component in the foodways and cuisine of the AmaZulu during traditional weddings. It recognises the importance of articulating the meaning of food from the perspectives of rural people themselves and by so doing, contributes to the draws on the IKs of rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal.

The insights gleaned from the participants' narratives indicate that IK operates as a singular, patriarchal and dominant narrative that confers power and authority to men. A single narrative refers to a dominant perspective that holds sway over a particular received meaning that is a supposed grand truth. It suggests that there is a prevailing viewpoint that shapes and influences decisions, actions and practices (Mkhwanazi 2016). Thus, in the context of the present study, shaped through cultural and patriarchal conditioning, IK assigns men a primary decision-making role in various aspects of traditional AmaZulu weddings, including matters related to food preparation, consumption and the ceremony itself. To illustrate, the participants' narratives reflect that the IK inherited from ancestors, of which men are custodians and by extension, have the power to police the participation of boys, girls and women in traditional ceremonies, including weddings, assigns food taboos and symbolic meanings that favour the former and are negatively skewed against the latter. Specifically, the symbolic meanings attached to beef, which is the staple food of traditional wedding ceremonies, and the various body parts reserved for the consumption of men, are steeped in patriarchal norms and values that support the food taboos that disadvantage women, girls and boys. Insights arising from the data suggest that as the custodians of local, ancestral wisdom and IK, men and elders in the community rigidly pass these understandings and food taboos across generations. Such ongoing socialisation further entrenches and underscores traditional gender roles and unequal power dynamics within the community, leaving women marginalised and excluded.

Entrusting the IK transmission role primarily to men, perpetuates gender stereotypes and food taboos. For example, positioning men as the primary custodians and conveyors of IK, reinforces the pre-existing notion that certain domains of expertise are reserved for them. This way IK forms part of the marginalisation of women and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and food taboos in families and communities. As Sewenet and Schwarcz (2021) conclude, gender stereotypes and food taboos are a result of food norms that are written, and unwritten standards which govern people's behaviour. Food norms instruct individuals of a society about the cultural codes concerning food production, distribution and the consumption of food. For example, various traditional practices are based upon men's superior position that trigger negative consequences for women, including cultural abuse and violence. Many harmful traditional practices tend to benefit men and ensure women's low status within the family and society, preventing them from escaping various forms of abuse, including food marginalisation. In the context of this study, the exclusion of women from certain aspects of traditional food practices, such as which parts of the cow they may consume, underscores the unequal power dynamics between men and women. Such exclusions not only restrict women's participation, but symbolically reinforces their marginalised status in the family and community through gendered food taboos (Msuya 2020).

Achieving gender equality cannot be attained if the foundations of IK are not troubled, unsettled and unquestioned. Further investigation of the interrelated dynamics of gender roles, IK transmission and food practices could contribute to an understanding of cultural traditions, societal norms and gender dynamics that may lead to an inclusive agenda of activism against the marginalisation of women in traditional wedding foods and contribute to gender equality amongst the amaZulu. By exploring the complex relationship between gender roles and the transmission of IK, future research could uncover the historical, social and cultural factors that underpin this interaction and its impact on individuals and communities and contribute to ongoing scholarly debate on these topics. In addition, future studies could explore avenues for promoting gender equity, thereby challenging traditional standards and fostering inclusive representation within traditional practices, such as wedding foodways and cuisine.

Conclusion

This chapter focussed on beef as the staple meal in traditional weddings among the AmaZulu in KZN province, South Africa, and on the symbolic meanings they assign to its preparation and

consumption, as well as their influence on community foodways and ceremonial celebrations. As this chapter has demonstrated, food not only fulfils our energy needs, it also has a social function. Food has a strong alignment to and impacts on perceptions of masculinity and femininity as well as conveys gender stereotypes which influences our food choices (Zhao 2022).

The insights in this chapter also suggest that IK involves at best, an incomplete, partial and at worse, a questionable understanding or concept of the ontology and the epistemology which mostly marginalises women. Because of this understanding, women continue to be excluded in the food preparation and consumption during traditional weddings amongst the AmaZulu. This suggests that IK is largely discursive and should be contested if it marginalises women, while assigning men supreme power. Such problematisation of IK will also assist gender activists to address multi-faceted layers of patriarchy and social inequalities which constantly exclude women in both domestic and public spaces in society (including, during ritualised events such as traditional weddings). Horsthemke (2008) asserts that to be declared IK, the body of data or of learning must be factual or declarative, it must meet the requisite criteria: beliefs, truth and adequate justification. In the context of this chapter, IK is considered as invalidated and not legitimised knowledge, since the framing of this knowledge remains unidirectional as it perpetuates the dominance of men over women.

Scholars, policymakers, community leaders and activists in communities have a responsibility to work together to find solutions to gender inequality in communities generally, and to the food taboos that marginalise women in traditional wedding ceremonies among the amaZulu. This would enhance the policy, programmes and activism in resolving gender inequality and heeding the call to ensure that women are treated as human beings with equal rights in all spaces. However, as this chapter has illustrated, it is only when one has a deep understanding, from the perspectives of the local people themselves, of the symbolic meanings attached to traditional food in rural communities generally, and to the preparation and consumption of beef as a staple meal in traditional wedding ceremonies among the AmaZulu in KZN, that one can understand their foodscapes and foodways. This would contribute to scholarship in the Humanities, and to IK and Critical Food Studies scholarship specifically. In relation to activism and programming, this would contribute to addressing gender inequality and women's lack of access to resources and decision-making as well as participation in food preparation and consumption during traditional ceremonies. Traditional wedding foods and associated taboos should not marginalise women.

The distribution of food should respond to deepening gender inequalities and food taboos. South Africa could learn from the experiences of neighbouring African countries. For example, the Borana people of Northen Kenya also slaughter a cow in celebration of ritualised ceremonies based on their IK which determines social and cultural values. It remains remarkable that in celebration of their ceremonies, Borana women enjoy the same eating privileges that men have. The foundation of their behaviour towards women is informed by their IK system. Women oversee livestock products (milk and meat) and decision-making regarding the buying and cooking of food remains solely in the women's domain. Men are mainly engaged in pastoralism (Dabasso et al. 2022).

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