

Memory, Ambivalence, and Food

ONE MAN, TWO HISTORIES OF FOOD

“Would you like to see a film of the time when you Kimaniki were murrans?” I asked Lekutaas, our colorful next-door neighbor in Loltulelei. A member of the Kimaniki age set, who were murrans from 1948 to 1960, hundreds of his age mates were captured on film in 1951 in the John Ford classic *Mogambo*. Ford was purportedly lured to Samburu District by the blustering district commissioner Terence Gavaghan, with the promise of “a thousand pig-tailed, ochre-smeared, spear-toting moran as extras” and all the charging rhinos and elephants he cared to film. Gavaghan delivered, while also providing hospitality to stars Clark Gable, Grace Kelly, and (especially, according to both Chenevix-Trench [1964] and Gavaghan’s [1999] memoirs) Ava Gardner. Three hundred or so murrans were brought down to a spot near what is now Samburu Game Reserve, feted in slaughtered oxen, and paid handsomely in cloth and other goods. The result was a rather corny five-minute sequence in which Clark Gable’s safari party—he was hired by Grace Kelly’s (subsequently cuckolded) anthropologist husband to lead him to gorillas—decides to stop their riverine odyssey to see the Samburu. The Gable party alight from their dugout canoes and walk through an eerily empty village toward the house of the district commissioner. Samburu warriors begin appearing menacingly from behind the odd conical huts of which the village is composed

(bearing no resemblance to actual Samburu houses), and the party hurries into the commissioner's house to find him in bed dying of malaria. The commissioner explains that the Samburu rebelled after he caught them poaching ivory. No hope for him, he explains, but please help get his two African policemen out—they are “good boys.” Gable's party exits between masses of angry Samburu, spears poised to strike, and jump into their canoes just in time to safely avoid a small group that, without explanation, suddenly decides to run after them and hurl some spears.

I discovered this classic but hokey film sometime after my doctoral fieldwork, and when I prepared to return in 2001 I copied the Samburu sequence onto my laptop to show to interested informants. Some had actually been in the filmed group; all were amused by oddities in the film—the strange houses, the fact that though threatening with their spears, the murrans are not actually holding them in a way that would allow them to be thrown. Among members of the Kimaniki age set in particular, there was considerable interest in seeing themselves during their glory days as murrans. When I told Lekutaas that he was going to see his age set when they were young, he was excited and replied in his characteristic half-joking manner, “Now we will see some real murrans,” grunting, flexing his muscles, and practically strutting about. “These ones who ate meat [*grunting again*—not like these ones these days who eat . . . I don't know what.” After he watched the film clip on the laptop, I was curious if he noticed changes in dress, ornaments, and the like. When I asked him to compare the murrans in the film with those of today, he had more on his mind than such superficial differences. “Are those murrans different?” I asked. “Very different,” he replied. “Those ones [in the film] were fools. They wouldn't even eat things at home.”

In this short exchange, Lekutaas captured the essence of the two master narratives employed by Samburu to discuss their history through food. In the first instance, murrans of today—and by extension all Samburu—were seen to be essentially degraded from their former glory. Where once they ate meat, garnishing not only physical strength but self-discipline and self-restraint, today they eat peculiar, unimaginable things—characterized, as Lekutaas's words trailed off in befuddled disbelief, simply as “I don't know what”. Yet within minutes Lekutaas transposed his condemnation of the current, degraded murrans eating practices to its mirror image: the murrans of his time clung foolishly to cultural beliefs that the Enlightened life of today shows to have no practical basis.



FIGURE 4. Lekutaas with the author. Photo by Sammy Letoole.

That Lekutaas encompassed both sides of this reality is not as surprising as it might first appear. While on the surface he appears to be, like many of his age mates, highly oriented toward what Samburu regard as “traditional” culture—always seen wearing tartan blankets, focused on his herd, prominent at local meetings and ceremonies but rarely venturing to town—at the same time his extended experience outside the district in the King’s African Rifles is central to his self-construction of a worldly and forward-looking persona. In the 1950s he spent two years in the jungles of Malaysia, fighting communist insurgents but also “learning about white things.” Thus, while he is very knowledgeable about Samburu traditions, he is often more enthusiastic about discussing World War II based on films he saw while in the service, contemplating the fate of Hitler, and sometimes imitating the goose-stepping Nazi troops.

Yet these seeming contradictions vis-à-vis food are not unique to Lekutaas’s mildly eccentric persona but are, indeed, characteristic of how Samburu live and remember through food. For if eating practices remain central to self-definitions rooted in the superiority of a pastoral way of life, they also form the basis for a self-critique rooted in the

impracticality of “traditional” cultural practices. There is little sound basis for the long-standing stereotype of pastoralists as “naturally conservative” and resistant to change (e.g., Schneider 1959), but Samburu, like many other African pastoralists, have been historically quite circumspect in embracing forms of development that they view as undermining core cultural values and the economic basis of their existence. Thus, while there is no question that a host of significant processes of transformation have been ongoing since the earliest days of colonialism, Samburu have accepted change only piecemeal and on their own terms, fusing it to their own notions of tradition, in contrast to “government” (that is, European) ways. However, severe declines in the livestock economy over the past few decades have changed these views. They have left many Samburu destitute and struggling to find alternatives, open to embracing the notion that current patterns of widespread poverty are empirical proof that perhaps they had been wrong about Development all along.

THE GASTRONOMICAL MASTER NARRATIVES OF SAMBURU HISTORY

Comments such as Lekutaas’s criticism of traditional eating are in many ways a contemporary and culturally specific instantiation of long-standing discourses and debates. How pastoralists eat has long been a source of interest and unease to observers in East Africa and elsewhere, as well as a source of self-definition for pastoralists, both in its own right and in contrast to these external discourses. Pastoralism, as practice and diet, has long been marked as a problematic aspect of the lives of East African pastoralists. From quite early in the colonial period, travelers, missionaries, and administrators drew stark boundaries based on the economic practices of pastoralism and agriculture, and the resulting dietary practices. Thus, for example, Karl Peters emphasizes the distinctive psychological makeup of pastoral peoples.

The continual flesh diet on which they live has physiologically increased their natural savageness, and the brutalising of the feelings that must ensue with people who are in the habit of slaughtering and devouring, in a cold-blooded manner, the domestic animal they themselves have reared, appears here in a very decided manner. . . . This law has always explained why the herdsmen of the nomadic races have constantly furnished the most savage phenomena in the world’s history, as we have seen them embodied in Europe, in personages like Jhengis Khan and Attila. In addition to this psychological law comes the fact, that such races are prevented

by the peculiarity of their employment, from establishing themselves anywhere permanently. The possession of great herds necessitates a continual change of domicile. While the agriculturalist is obliged to remain on his soil, to which his heart becomes attached, the nomad is indifferent to the charms of owning a home. (Peters 1891, 224–25)

This distinction was not merely economic but was layered with connotations that were ethnic, racial, and evolutionary as well. Pastoral peoples were viewed as more savage and more conservative than agricultural ones, yet they were often accorded a racial status more akin to European races. Indeed, despite their greater savagery, they were by and large viewed as savages of a decidedly noble variety. As Peters continues:

But if all the conditions are present that tend to bring to full development the wild and brutal qualities of the man, on the other hand, among the Massais there may be recognized the ennobling influence which is produced in every people by the inherited consciousness of rule. Accustomed to see all around them tremble at the name of Massai, the warriors of the race have acquired a natural pride, which cannot be designated otherwise than as aristocratic. From the first the Massais assumed towards me the deportment of young, haughty noblemen. (225)

Within the framework of colonialism, this opposition of cultivator and pastoralist provided a crucial distinction in understanding processes of change. While agriculturalists have been seen as quite ready to engage with Progress—through education, missionization, and the like—pastoralists are seen as uninterested, even disdainful of change, content in the nobility of their traditional ways. In this sense, they were seen as the inevitable victims of progress, swept away in the maelstrom of change—change that was most prominently seen as the spread of cultivation to their pastoral lands. Take, for example, H.H. Johnston, writing about the closely related Maasai in 1886: “They must turn their spears into spades and their swords into reaping hooks—or starve. . . . Soon there will be no cattle left to raid and the Masai will range the wide deserted plains in all their splendid, insolent bravery and die of inanition. The inhabitants of the walled cities or lofty hills will dwell secure from attack, and the wretched remnants of vanquished tribes still lingering in unprotected haunts will not be worth robbing. Then the proud Masai must turn to and wring from the soil the sustenance which only comes as the reward of honest labor” (Johnston 1886, 406–7).

Like many discourses and images of East African pastoralists, these are uncommonly resilient, coming forth into the twenty-first century,

seemingly altered little by the intervening 150 years. While in the colonial period authorities throughout East Africa pushed cultivation as a means of bettering pastoral peoples (e.g., Galaty, Aronson, and Salzman 1981; Little 1992; Fratkin 1994), the transition to cultivation continues to be viewed as an inevitable step that will finally be undertaken on the road of reluctant pastoral peoples toward modernity. Indeed, some read cultivation (and eating crops) as having a unique, civilizing influence. Looking at other parts of Africa, Gordon (1992) notes the widespread Namibian belief that to tame a Bushman you simply needed to chain him to a post and force-feed him mielie (maize) meal, the infusion of cultigens presumably transforming his wild nature. Both NGOs and governmental agencies continue to push agriculture as the key to the future of pastoral peoples, bringing the benefits of a more stable and economically viable way of life, as well as successful integration in the economies and politics of East Africa. While we must be cautious of too readily glossing the cultural specificity of what such perspectives mean in particular historical contexts, the kinds of issues to which they become fused and the agendas they support or contradict, their resilience is nonetheless significant.

These discourses form an important backdrop for understanding contemporary Samburu collective memory through the lens of food. They may be read in two different and important ways. These discourses provide an external critique of the cultural and economic forms of East African pastoralists, such as the Samburu, and are an important part of long-standing and ongoing external efforts to modify pastoralist societies. Yet they now have become part and parcel of a Samburu landscape of memory in which food is prominent. In an era of pastoral poverty, it has become increasingly common for Samburu to conceive of their current predicament with a degree (albeit misplaced) of self-blame, alleging that their reticence to embrace Development is at least partially responsible for the struggles they now face. There is thus a growing tendency to intermingle an identity based on the cultural superiority of pastoralism with an identity based on underdevelopment (Gupta 1998; Holtzman 2004), and to ambivalently embrace—sometimes in speech, less often in action—the very economic and cultural alternatives they have struggled against for decades. Consider the comments of Leirana, a junior elder from Lodokejek who has never attended school. His views are by no means atypical, as he compares the Samburu with the Kikuyu, the agricultural group from central Kenya that was affected most profoundly by colonialism, and which

in the independent period has been considered the most “developed” Kenyan ethnic group. Scanning the dry grasslands around his home in Lodokejek, Leirana mused on how different things would be if these were Kikuyu lands rather than Samburu: “If this place had been theirs [the Kikuyu’s] this land would be filled up with food. But these people here, they only know how to look after the animals.”

As Leirana’s comments suggest, a notion of Development and Progress informs one major discourse concerning the division of agricultural and pastoral peoples: if Samburu were more Enlightened (or if a more Enlightened group occupied their lands), things might be different—and better. While such discourses are considered with increasing degrees of acceptance by Samburu themselves, not surprisingly, Samburu discourses typically differ. Long-standing cultural values of East African pastoralists—and of Maa speakers such as Samburu and Maasai—construct the opposition between agricultural and pastoral foods as a central feature of their value systems. A reliance on a pastoral diet of meat, milk, and blood, and a general avoidance of cultivated food has long been noted to be of central importance in constructing the identity of Maa-speaking pastoralists (e.g., Galaty 1982). This is summarized neatly in the title of Arhem’s (1987) “Meat, Milk and Blood,” which emphasizes that while such a diet has never been easy to fully realize, it forms an important means through which Maa speakers construct their identity. Pastoral products are seen as the only proper foods, and the need to consume other foods—be they cultigens or wild foods—is viewed as a consequence of poverty, of having inadequate herds to provide proper food. Beyond these issues of ethnic self-definition, food is profoundly linked to an array of practices and values that are fundamental to pastoral life in areas such as the age-gender system, religious beliefs, and moral forms of sociability.

The centrality of a pastoral diet has been significantly problematized, however, by severe and steady declines in the livestock economy, beginning in the 1960s and accelerating through the present. In tandem with a more than doubling in human population, Samburu livestock holdings have declined from seven cattle per capita in the 1950s (the approximate threshold for a purely pastoral diet) to around two cattle per capita today. Thus, it is only a small, wealthy minority who can rival even the average livestock holdings of the 1950s, while large numbers of Samburu are virtually stockless. The immediate consequence is that Samburu have been forced to rely more and more heavily on nonpastoral foods—particularly maize meal—usually purchased



FIGURE 5. Author's host, Lekerem, with his cattle. Photo by the author.

with cash acquired through livestock sales, remittances from wage labor, or mercantile activities. As is elaborated in detail in the chapters that follow, this has resulted in transformations in practices and values surrounding eating that are generally held to have had negative consequences on social, moral, and physical well-being. Drawing on the contrast between a culturally salient diet of milk, meat, and blood, and the unappetizing, unhealthy, and symbolically empty “gray foods” or “poverty foods” of the present, a seemingly endless litany of complaints target the new ways of eating: These foods have made women promiscuous. Children’s stomachs are made “hot,” resulting in symptoms reminiscent of ADHD. Too much maize meal gives you liver disease. And most notably, new foods and new patterns of cooking and consumption have made warriors weak and shameless, the most salient expression of a loss of the sense of respect and social distance central to the age-gender system, seen across all social categories.

Two gastronomical master narratives, then, form the scaffolding of Samburu collective memory through food. On the one hand, a transition away from a pastoral diet is a form of Progress, leaving behind antiquated nonrational practices grounded in a cultural love of cattle. On the other hand, an agricultural diet is a form of cultural decay, eroding core aspects of ethnic self-definition and fundamental practices central to a construction of Samburu moral personhood. These two discourses represent what appear to be diametrically opposed models of memory concerning food. Each contains a historical metanarrative that employs the past to speak to present realities. Yet what is most compelling about the relationship of these two discourses is not their opposition but rather their interplay. Indeed, Samburu food-centered collective memory is characterized neither by consistency nor by unambiguous lines of contestation based on age, social status, gender, and the like. Rather, individuals may collage bits and pieces from each to make sense of their lives in ways that can be wildly ambivalent, as Samburu engage in everyday forms of meaning creation concomitant with critical daily struggles to feed themselves.¹

THE WHAT AND WHY OF MEMORY

Despite the recent surge in interest concerning memory in general and more specifically collective memory, scholars analyze—indeed, even define—*memory* in radically different ways. These differences center around a number of fundamental but often unacknowledged

questions, particularly concerning the social life of memory: To what extent can we extrapolate the individual faculty of memory to groups and institutions? How, or to what extent, should we extend the concept of memory beyond those things that are consciously remembered (accurately or inaccurately) to unconscious, perhaps unembodied, residues of the past inscribed in thought, practices, landscapes, and the like? Does the significance of memory lie principally in what it tells us about actual beliefs, relations, and processes of the past, or rather as an ideology that employs an imagined past toward present ends? The problem is not that any of these approaches (or any blend of them) is necessarily better than another, but rather that there is frequently considerable slippage in these terms, such that very different phenomena come to be homonymically labeled “memory,” although they are grounded in very different processes, in very different sites of agency, and with very different kinds of social importance. Without greater clarity and specificity regarding the meaning of *memory* and the interrelation of various memory processes, we risk reducing it to little more than an odd-job word.

The notion of *collective memory* stands to gain, in particular, from close reading. The term is somewhat problematic—as Wertsch (2002) argues, “a term in search of a meaning.” In many ways it conjures up the kind of anthropomorphic, extrasomatic beast that anthropologists seem determined to purge in attacks on the notion of culture through the 1980s and ’90s. The notion of collective memory takes a process (memory) that is a property of the mental and corporeal faculties of humans and other sentient beings, and locates it in an abstracted collective body that does not have (indeed could not have) parallel faculties for storing, recalling, and in particular experiencing memory.² In the varying contexts where we extend the concept of memory beyond the sentient being, it is always essentially metaphorical. We say that a spring has “memory” because the process of repeated compression and expansion affects the metal in ways that affect future compressions and expansions. Viewing a computer as an electronic brain leads us to say that before an essay is printed, it is stored in “memory”; in contrast, after printing converts the essay to paper, the shelf upon which it rests is afforded no similar faculty for remembering. Thus—contra Conner-ton (1989)—societies *do not* remember in a literal sense, and extending “memory” to a social group is arguably just as metaphorical as applying it to other nonsentient entities.

This is not to dispense with the cultural and social—that is, collective—aspects of memory. Individual memory is created and given meaning in the context of a social group, and valued and mobilized

in light of sets of shared meanings (Connerton 1989). Yet even as we embrace the role of the social and cultural in shaping memory, we must adequately differentiate the often very different phenomena we characterize as collective memory. For instance, social practices may foster individual memories that share varying degrees of resemblance to one another (e.g., as elaborated by Connerton and, in a different way, by Bourdieu). Societies (or individuals or factions within societies) may seek to inscribe events or to mark time. They may seek to create events or practices that never existed, or inscribe wholly novel, presentist meanings to ones that did, perhaps at odds with individual memories of those same occurrences. Thus, what we label as “memory” often refers to an array of very different processes—from monumental architecture to the reminiscences evoked by the smell of coffee—that have a totally different dynamic, that we may (or may not) care to understand for very different reasons, and that may or may not significantly overlap with one another. The interrelations among these varying phenomena may be most interesting, yet such interrelations are largely masked by labeling them all under the rubric of *memory*, implying that they are somehow all of a piece within the same phenomenon. Constructing the relationships between these phenomena is, however, the analyst’s work; these relationships do not intrinsically inhere in the fact that we may conveniently call all of them memory.

Some of the lack of precision in use of the term *memory* may stem from its ontogeny in contemporary scholarly jargon. The recent scholarly excitement over the study of memory places the concept in juxtaposition (though sometimes without total clarity) with its older, frumpier sibling *history*. Though some (e.g., Samuel 1994; Jordanova 2000) contest and problematize the distinction, *history* is frequently tied to empiricism, objectivity, and, as Hodgkin and Radstone note, “a certain notion of truth (2003, 3).” In contrast, *memory* is associated more closely with poststructuralist approaches to the production of knowledge, concerned with the subjective construction of understandings of the past linked to present issues. To an extent, there is a real difference in the kinds of understanding one aims to produce and the varying sources one may draw on, with history aiming to piece together a more or less accurate record and analysis of the past and memory aiming to view the past through subjective, imperfect, and conflicting lenses rooted in the experiences, understandings, and agendas of the present. Consequently, where history seeks to understand the facts of past processes, memory is less concerned with facts than with what is now made of the past by individuals or social groups. Yet this

distinction is far from clear-cut,³ and the invocation of memory may at times owe less to carefully constructed notions of what memory is than it does to signposting the brand of knowledge production a scholar aims to engage in—that is, one congenial to a postmodernist, literary turn, with a destabilized notion of truth.

Jing (1996) provides a useful distinction between several approaches to social memory, emphasizing differences in the social or political dynamic. First, collective memory (using Connerton [1989] as a central exemplar) concerns how memory is created and inscribed as a shared property of what is construed as a relatively cohesive social group (i.e., “the kind of people anthropologists used to study”), à la Durkheim via Halbwachs (1992). In contrast, official memory concerns how constructions of the past are used to validate the positions of those in power. Indeed, a tremendous amount of what is currently billed as memory studies in anthropology centers on public memory, constructed by political elites for purposes of contesting or establishing the legitimacy of power (e.g., Baker 1990; Deacon 1998; Verdery 1999; Hobsbawn 1983; Lane 1981). Popular memory is the mirror image of official memory, the historical discourses of the downtrodden, the unheard voices of the disenfranchised and oppressed (e.g., Scott 1985; Hofmeyr 1994; Minkley and Rassool 1998; Bozzoli and Nkotsoe 1991). This schema is useful in locating the varying forms of “memory” along lines of power. Where collective memory inheres in groups without reference to power and contestation, official (or public) memory is concerned with understanding how visions of the past are invoked for purposes of domination, while popular memory relates to the disempowered and is frequently linked to their resistance to domination.

Apart from these distinctions, the *kinds* of memories that are deemed worthy of scholarly explication can be problematic. Like most social science categories, the construct of memory is rooted in Western commonsense ideas and colloquial practice, which prefigure the form and content of our analyses. Consequently, there is a distinct if unsurprising tendency for memory studies to focus on the kinds of things that Western “common sense” construes as important forms of memory, most notably traumatic events, experienced collectively and in their individual manifestations. Not unlike psychoanalysis, in which individuals deal with issues from their traumatic past through a process of structured reminiscence, a significant body of memory literature is concerned with understanding processes of collective trauma, most notably the Holocaust (Young 2000; Wood 1999) and apartheid (e.g.,

Botman and Peterson 1996; Antze and Lambek 1996). Such a position seems problematic, since although the extreme and the sensational may form very important forms of memory, they do not broadly characterize memory as such. That is, memory may be a productive means of understanding processes of collective trauma, but collective trauma may be a less useful lens for understanding memory as a general process. In counterpoint, memory is also commonly approached through a lens of nostalgia. This has the advantage of bypassing the extreme in favor of the more mundane aspects of everyday remembering and the phenomenological experience of reminiscence (e.g., Casey 1987). Yet there remains a basic issue of how people remember, particularly since this can differ significantly even among Euro-American groups (Seremetakis 1996).

One further important issue, which bears significantly on memories of the sensorial experience of eating, concerns the contrast between discursive and practical memory (Shaw 2002). Paralleling Giddens's notion of discursive versus practical consciousness,⁴ some suggest a broadening of the definition of memory to include practices and meanings that have been historically sedimented, though not necessarily remembered in a conscious, concrete, narrativized sense. For instance, James (1988) contends that Udduk maintained a "cultural archive" from their foraging past—in ritual practice, cosmology, language, and moral knowledge—long after the practice of foraging had disappeared. More recently, Rosalind Shaw (2002) has provocatively examined how the slave trade shaped West African lives over the past several centuries in ways that, if not consciously remembered, resonate in novel expressions up through the present. Thus, contemporary rumors and discourses concerning politicians who commit ritual murders were shaped by colonial human leopard rumors, which in turn were shaped by cultural memories of the slave trade. Although making clear that the subsequent discourses are not simple reformulations of previous ones, she compellingly argues for the value of examining continuities over the long term.

These and related studies are important for a number of reasons in extending our gaze to nonverbal aspects of memory, such as bodily memory, as described in the work of Connerton (1989) and Stoller (1995),⁵ or to types of memories that, though unlikely to reach a narrativized collective memory, become part of the taken-for-granted aspects of daily practice (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Cole 2001).⁶ Attention to such phenomena, which are not always directly

and consciously accessible to our subjects, allows us to consider their engagement with conscious forms of memory—that is, how sublimated or hitherto forgotten phenomena may bear on the affective assessment of the past and the present in ways that may not be straightforward and that our subjects themselves may not even be fully conscious of.

From this discussion I draw two conclusions. From a more scholastic perspective, we need greater specificity in how authors apply memory to an array of very different phenomena, so as to preserve its meaningfulness as an analytical concept. At the same time, however, this multiplicity of uses is to a great extent driven by the very complexity of the phenomena we seek to analyze. That is, there are indeed very different forms of memory, very different types of processes that we tend to gloss (often rightly, sometimes wrongly) under the rubric of memory. How these phenomena interact and whether these different processes coalesce—in experiences of remembering subjects or merely in the minds of analysts—into a complex whole that we may label memory is a point I turn to now.

COHERENCE AND DISSONANCE IN COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Noldirikany, a Samburu woman of about thirty, presented a fairly standard and multifaceted indictment of the present mode of Samburu eating when I interviewed her at her home in the remote lowland site of Ndonyo Nasipa. Citing both physical and social maladies arising from the movement away from a pastoral diet, Noldirikany explained:

Diseases used to be rare when people didn't have food from the shops. Now diseases have increased. Samburu did not have a lot of killer diseases when these foods were not in use, these foods that are killing the Samburu. The old foods did not have diseases. . . . Milk has no disease, and even wild fruits cannot bring disease. So we think, and we conclude, that the old foods suit people's health. . . . [Also] Samburu no longer love each other, and they used to love each other very much. When a person had a problem, people solved that problem together out of love. When you were sick, or had a certain problem, or if you were starving—but now Samburu no longer love each other very much. . . . That's what we see these foods are bringing to Samburu nowadays.

This indictment is consistent with images of a pastoral good life most Samburu readily evoke, as is her assessment of the toll exacted by changes in eating on Samburu physical and social well-being. Food changes are at the core of patterns of decay that have resulted in a

diminishment in everything from physical stature to moral personhood, leading to increased susceptibility to disease and degraded patterns of commensality. Yet just moments later she added:

There is a lot of food today, and that is better. Because people no longer need to go to the bush to look for fruits from trees. People no longer have to scatter in different directions, and people are no longer dying of hunger. Like when times would get hard and a drought finishes the cattle, the government now takes care of people and gives them relief food. People have been spared, they no longer die of hunger. And it is easy to get maize meal these days, you don't have to struggle a lot to get it. It's easy to get it from a shop when you've sold your goat. Nowadays it is so easy to buy food from a shop.

In a somewhat puzzling way, then, in Noldirikany's view there is much to redeem those same "gray foods" that she had referenced but moments earlier as "these foods that are killing the Samburu." However odd this juxtaposition, it is broadly typical. The value Samburu see in these foods goes beyond the simple fact that they save lives during famines, though that is far from trivial. In her account, like many others, there is intertwined in these discourses a notion of lazy repose—in an odd and ambivalent way, a kind of good life in which one struggles far less for the now seemingly boundless food, even if this food is virtually empty of nutritional content and cultural meaning. In essence, there are several stories that Noldirikany has to tell here; each may separately make sense *vis-à-vis* her lived experience but fail to mesh cleanly with the premises and valuations of the other.

As this chapter concludes, and through the remainder of the book, I will attend to the complexities of change that make these issues profoundly ambivalent, creating dissonance in regard to collective memory. Ambivalence and dissonance have not figured prominently in memory studies in anthropology and related fields. In the infrequent instances where they are noted, they are not engaged with deeply as fundamental to the fabric and texture of memory (e.g., Jackson 1995; Ong 2003; Ganguly 2001), though some recent studies of post-Soviet states are a notable exception in their attention to the ambivalence and contradictions in identity that have frequently characterized this transition (e.g., Chatwin 1997; Berdahl 1999; Berdahl, Bunzl, and Lampland 2000). Elsewhere, Smith's (2004) recent analysis of the contradictory narratives of former colonists in Algeria is a theoretically productive attempt to engage with ambivalence as a fundamental characteristic of memory, arguing that collective memory is

frequently heteroglossic, as individuals retain multiple and often conflicting viewpoints concerning the events that they have experienced and now remember.

Smith's approach fits well with Samburu food-centered memory, in that the varying strands of remembrance similarly form a heteroglossic memory invested with more ambivalence and less coherence than typically characterizes accounts of change. Such heteroglossic memory is constituted less by incoherence in the Derridean sense of endless seemingly random possibility, and more by a concern for thickness in a Geertzian sense, of richly accounting for the varying, and sometimes countervailing, strands of causality and meaning that structure socio-cultural life at particular times and through time—of, in Sherry Ortner's terms, "producing understanding through richness, texture and detail rather than through parsimony, refinement . . . and elegance" (1995, 174). Such a history is neither linear nor shapeless but is constituted as a terrain of practices and meanings that are both affectively ambivalent and socially contested but also lacking some degree of coherence or integration, in which the ultimate configuration may be more bricolage of independent but intersecting paths than a design ultimately determined by some underlying master cause or meaning.

Needless to say, some argument concerning coherence is essential in any analysis, lest it become *incoherent*. The problem, however, comes from the fuzziness of the lines drawn between analytical coherence—as authors seek to distill some salient meaning from the messiness of the lives of their subjects—and empirical coherence, in which the particular subject or topic upon which the analyst focuses is held to be relatively devoid of that messiness. Thus analytical coherence may be seen as a necessity (dubious or otherwise) in the observer's process of constructing a comprehensible account, while empirical coherence is a *possibility* that may (or may not) be present in varying degrees. For a variety of reasons, the lines between these are often less than sharply drawn. The danger in this is not only ethnography that risks disservice to our subjects, but theories that by their structure imply an overly coherent view of the world, thus relegating messiness to noise outside or tangential to a coherent model, rather than as a dimension of social life fundamental to the model itself.

Factors related both to styles of presentation and analysis and to theoretical perspectives that lean toward worldviews of empirical coherence play a role in overly coherent renderings of ethnography and history. A key influence is the effect of narrative structure on our accounts. That

is, a history is always a history *of* something and that *of* in essence prefigures the content and structure of the account. In another way, a *history* is a kind of *story*, with a beginning, middle, and end and with key characters, actors, processes that are the engine that drives the plot. At any given moment, many different things are going on. To take a mundane and immediate example, I am now typing at the computer, while I am thinking, while I am drinking a cold soda, while I am wearing pants and a shirt and my semidress shoes, while I occasionally click on Yahoo News to see what's going on in the world, while I hear footsteps in the office hallway, while I am watching the clock, thinking that I will walk home in about an hour and wondering how cold it is and how dark it will be. Asked what I'm doing, now or later, I would probably give the account of my behavior that would most readily validate my time—working on a book manuscript—but I am doing a lot of other things that could just as easily form a singular account of my behavior. A soft drink manufacturer might see the real story in the large number of diet soda cans ferreted in various places around my office. An environmentalist, a transportation specialist, or a physical fitness expert might be more fascinated by my meditations on whether I will walk home, though not for the same reasons. Odd, seemingly random turns can change the whole course of events and abruptly refocus what is important—perhaps a major news event as, in procrastination, I click on Yahoo, or perhaps an accident, as I spill my soda on an embarrassing part of my trousers moments before the dean of the college passes my office. The passage of one, or five or thirty or a hundred years would doubtless cast today's afternoon of writing in a very different light.

In a similar vein, author Terry Pratchett muses:

Suppose an emperor was persuaded to wear a new suit of clothes so fine that, to the common eye, the clothes weren't there. And suppose a boy pointed out this fact in a loud, clear voice. . . .

Then you have The Story Of The Emperor Who Had No Clothes.

But if you knew a bit more, it would be The Story Of The Boy Who Got a Well-Deserved Thrashing From His Father For Being Rude To Royalty, And Was Locked Up.

Or the Story of the Whole Crowd That Was Rounded Up By The Guards And Told "This Didn't Happen, Okay? Does Anyone Want To Argue?"

Or it could be a story of how a whole kingdom suddenly saw the benefits of the new "clothes" and developed an enthusiasm for healthy sports in a lively and refreshing atmosphere that gets many new adherents every year, which led to a recession caused by the collapse of the conventional clothing industry.

It could even be a story about The Great Pneumonia Epidemic of '09.
It all depends on how much you know. (Pratchett 2001, 3)

The point here is that there is a seemingly infinite number of ways to describe the events of a particular moment and an equally infinite number of ways to interpret, structure, and characterize events after the fact. This is as true of anthropologists and historians as it is of our subjects. Indeed, a frequent critique of “traditional” anthropology in the 1980s was the extent to which a scientific, realist writing style influenced the kinds of knowledge produced (Stoller 1989; Marcus and Cushman 1982). While many of what were viewed as the most problematic issues in anthropological writing have now been to a great extent purged—or at least apologetically deemphasized in contemporary work—the absence of the ethnographer from the text, the portrayal of anthropologists’ subjects as nameless and characterless, an emphasis on generalizing towards norms, writing in the “ethnographic present”—their replacement with other conventions does not vitiate the extent to which our narrative structure influences the meaning of the text. In a historical analysis, how we make interpretations, how we organize events, and how we select what persons and events to include and exclude remain dependent to a disproportionate degree on a conventional narrative structure that is not wholly dissimilar to conventional literary forms. Most typically this is organized around a linear progression of time covering a duration that is within established conventions (e.g., the interwar years in Germany; the colonial period in eastern Africa; the Renaissance) and is neither so lengthy as to include material irrelevant to the thesis nor so short as to not allow sufficient action to take place. There are main characters (individuals or groups) and a main plot informed both by events and by a thesis grounded in theoretical or empirical concerns of the discipline.

My aim here is not to erase these conventions; indeed, I will make no heroic efforts to write outside of them. Just as Mueggler (2001) justifies his reliance on conventional Western chronological sequencing as a clearer mode of explicating an alternative model of Yi temporality (see Pandolfo 1997), what is more significant than uprooting these conventions (which inevitably gives rise to other conventions) is to recognize them and their influence on the content of our analysis. I am, consequently, most concerned with the difficulties a conventional narrative structure poses in recognizing and taking seriously an array of differing strands of causation and meaning, which may or may not bear a

necessary relationship to the central orientation of the text. Thus it is not simply a matter of recognizing that one's main analytical strand is composed of different strands, but that the ultimate focus of one's project may be composed of quite disparate processes, some of which do and some of which don't have a clear, organic relationship to one another except in the sense that they converge on the phenomena that one, as the observer, has found it worthwhile to explicate.

The effects of narrative structure, rather than being minimized, are frequently exacerbated by theory in anthropological writing. Most significant in this regard is anthropologists' tendency sometimes to overly conform their data to the theoretical interests of a discipline at a particular time. This problem is well known historically in anthropology—in any first-year graduate theory course, a student will learn of the circularity of structural functionalism, where whatever the processual and political complexities of a particular society, inevitably these serve to preserve and reinforce the social structure. Yet this tendency has not disappeared in contemporary ethnography, as I will highlight through two examples that are notable not only for the lucidity of their critiques of anthropological treatments of particular concepts, but for the system of knowledge production they see as responsible for the problematic analyses.

The first of these centers on critiques of the concept of resistance in the mid-1990s and related critiques undertaken by Ortner (1995) and Brown (1996). While each is congenial to the appropriate use of "resistance," they share a concern about the flattening of complex ethnographic processes that occurs in the application of the concept. Ortner attributes this not simply to ethnographic failure but to "ethnographic refusal," in which insufficient attention is paid to the social complexities that constitute the context in which resistance to domination is seen to occur, as well as the affective and motivational complexities in those agents purported to be engaging in resistance. Similarly, in the thoughtful essay "Resisting the Rhetoric of Resistance," Michael Brown takes issue with the overemphasis on issues of power found in anthropological analysis. Drawing on his own case study of shamans and Peruvian guerillas, he acknowledges that, although the case may to some extent be understood through the then trendy notion of resistance, this approach would fail to "fully address or comprehend the specificity of Ashinanka dreams of world transformation or the internal struggles that these touched off within Ashinanka society itself" (1996, 731). Brown concludes that notions of power have assumed

such centrality in social analysis that they risk becoming not only reductionist but circular and meaningless—in Sahlins's (1993) words, "a new functionalism."

In a more recent example, Englund and Leach (2000) make a similar, and equally strident, critique of anthropological uses of the concept of *modernity*. They suggest that modernity has become a powerful metanarrative that prefigures anthropological understandings of contexts of social change. Drawing on examples from New Guinea and Malawi, they argue that notions of modernity employed in anthropological analysis frequently mask very different sets of meanings that would otherwise emerge from detailed ethnographic analysis. As with Brown's analysis of resistance, what is most troubling to Englund and Leach is not that their case studies *don't fit* with a concern with modernity but rather that they can *be fit*. They warn of a preexisting metanarrative becoming a convenient device for structuring anthropological analysis, made all the more insidious by a failure to make this orienting principle transparent in the organization of the analysis. Thus, although it is frequently worthwhile to examine modernity (or "resistance," or "social solidarity") as a transcultural phenomenon—shared concepts are an intrinsic part of the comparative project of anthropology—it becomes problematic when the concept prefigures the forms of ethnographic understanding rather than the ethnography informing our understanding of the concepts.

These two examples highlight a significant means through which excessive coherence can enter anthropological analyses of memory, and other topics. In essence, they suggest, there is a tendency for concepts to drive analysis, rather than concepts being treated merely as potential tools for ordering data that ultimately may or may not correspond to ethnographic realities.

ACCOUNTING FOR TASTE: COHERENCE AND DISSONANCE IN THE HABITUS

In many ways, theories that posit coherence are the least troubling, since coherence is a transparent component of the model. In respect to memory, the most prominent example is Bourdieu's notion of the set of internalized bodily practices that he labels "the habitus," and in a similar vein Connerton's (1989) approach to bodily memory. Though dealing with different foci, each posits a significant degree of consonance between those aspects of memory that can be cognitively understood

or verbally narrativized and those aspects of memory that are rooted in unreflected-upon bodily practices or dispositions.

The notion of the habitus is central to Bourdieu's attempt to develop a theory of practice and of social reproduction that moves beyond mentalistic rules for structuring behavior while also having important implications for memory. The habitus is a set of relatively durable dispositions created out of the social conditions of a subject's upbringing and which, conversely, leads to practices that reproduce those same conditions. Your gait, your bearing, your tastes, and subtle aspects of language are embedded in the habitus, reflecting and reproducing aspects of the social environment. This has direct implications for the study of memory, for it allows us to look for memory in embodied practices that may or may not be clearly reflected in conscious memory (e.g., Stoller 1989; Bahloul 1996).

Two of the best recent works on memory in anthropology—Jennifer Cole's *Forget Colonialism?* and Eric Mueggler's *The Age of Wild Ghosts*—illustrate the value of a focus on these less obvious, unnarrativized aspects of memory making, while treading close to oversynthesizing these complexities into an analytically prefigured conception of what memories mean. It should be noted that neither author explicitly makes heavy use of Bourdieu, though the assumptions—and thus the concerns—are largely of a piece. Cole sets the stage for her study by explaining the contradictions and difficulties she faced in her first efforts to study memories of colonialism among Betsimakara inhabitants of Ambodiharina, Madagascar. Although she began her fieldwork convinced of the centrality of the colonial experience to contemporary Malagasy life, she was quickly struck by the extent to which Ambodiharina seemed less a dynamically constituted site of complex historical and political economic forces than the stereotypical “traditional” village of classic anthropology. As she writes:

During my first few months of fieldwork, however, my contemporary anthropological preconceptions seemed distressingly at odds with the situation I encountered. . . . What I found when I first arrived in Ambo-diharina was a world where people's relationships to one another were constituted through an elaborate moral economy of cattle sacrifice. It was also a world that—in its tone and tenor, its concerns with the ancestors, its enthusiasm for cattle sacrifice and its agricultural mode of subsistence—evoked classic anthropological accounts of African societies from the 1930s and 1940s. It was a world that Meyer Fortes (1945) and Evans Pritchard (1956) might well have invented for an essay exam for Oxbridge undergraduates.

Cole's response to this, however, was to delve more deeply into how memory is constructed. Broadening the scope of her analysis, she argues that colonial memory may be found less in neatly constructed narratives of the experience of colonialism than in a host of historically sedimented practices, ideas, and institutions that shape the contours of daily life—whether or not Betsimakara think of them through a lens of colonialism in everyday practice.

Mueggler's study of memory among the Yi ethnic minority in China shares with Cole an emphasis on exploring memory through its less obvious, visible, conscious forms. Mueggler focuses directly on the ways broader political economic forces have gained meaning through their insinuation in the intimacies of everyday experience, such as birth, mortuary rites, and spatial configurations. Through these practices, Yi form alternative visions of their experience over the turbulent decades encompassing the radical transformations of the Cultural Revolution, as well as their collective identity vis-à-vis the Chinese state. As Mueggler eloquently outlines his project:

The ritual techniques examined here imagine such a state: a constitutive presence at the center of the social world with an intimate relation to loss. In these rites, the state is found to be a strange image, abstract and uncanny, divided from this world as shade is from sunlight, as insubstantial as it is omnipresent. . . . The body of the nation can be mapped onto individual bodies, the digestive flow of its rivers onto corporeal digestive tracts. Ritual techniques for healing find the body and the national landscape to coexist as a single, extended "collective unity of habitations." To heal physical or psychic pain is to reorder this unity. It is to release the knots or reversals in the body's flows; it is to locate a habitable place in a morally ordered national landscape and to guide violence and loss back toward their origins at the rivers' ends. (Mueggler 2001, 6–7)

There is much to commend in both these works, though also room for circumspection. The insights of Cole and Mueggler in illuminating the uncanny links between both everyday and extraordinary practices and forms of memory to which they do not have an obvious relationship are important in complexifying approaches to understanding processes of memory-making. Conversely, however, these insights ironically run the risk of flattening and oversimplifying those memories. That is, through a focus on meanings of memory that are simultaneously less transparent and more consonant with one's thesis, one may neglect both the highly potent significance of the more obvious aspects of these memories and practices (which may not be consonant with one's thesis), as well as other meanings that suffer from

being less obvious and not resonating with one's thesis. With Cole, the conundrum lies in the fact that colonialism *appears* to a great extent to be forgotten. While she is convincing in demonstrating the ways in which it remains salient, what might be more contentious is how these colonial memories she has excavated might be ordered in relative significance to other kinds of meanings Betsimarkara derive from these same processes. In Mueggler's case, one might take the example of Yi exorcisms, which he potently links to salient tensions with the Chinese state. Yet it is also consistent with Mueggler's richly textured approach to recognize that not only are there myriad connections, meanings, and significances to which such exorcisms are also related but these dense, complex—and not necessarily logical, conscious, or straightforward—connections are central to the memory's power. Ironically, it is precisely the complexity that gives power to memory which is at risk when the anthropologist proposes that a set of memories may ultimately be understood analytically as about a particular issue or set of closely related issues.

Bourdieu's habitus is a means for considering why these seemingly disparate meanings might coalesce into a more coherent piece, but it also compounds the issues at hand. The habitus has obvious applicability to Samburu in providing a means through which the bodily practice of eating may become a salient site for particularly compelling forms of memory. One might suppose, for instance, that the powerful positive valuation Samburu attribute to a pastoral diet is grounded in a set of sedimented dispositions rooted in a lifestyle centered on pastoralism. To a degree this is axiomatic—and indeed, as I will explore in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5, Samburu experience different foods with varying sets of nonetheless quite powerful emotions. Yet if this may, then, serve to account for the coherence between Samburu social values or practices and bodily preferences for a pastoral diet, it does little to account for the dissonances, ambivalences, and inconsistencies in Samburu valuations of changes in eating practices.

This concern is somewhat different from the oft-repeated criticism that Bourdieu's theory is overly determinative or rigid.⁷ This criticism suggests that if dispositions are the product of a history that then reproduces the practices, which will reinforce and recreate these dispositions, there is no room for social and cultural change, individual agency, and the like, barring significant external forces. My critique of Bourdieu is somewhat different—concerned more with the tight coherence between social conditions and dispositions rather than what

the implications might be for the determinative nature of his theory—but potentially subject to the same countercharge leveled against these other critiques. Certainly Bourdieu does not argue that humans are automatons, but rather seeks a way that is “not locked in the dilemma of determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity” (1977, 95) by constructing a system with its foundations in human agency, but agency composed of agents whose motivations are by and large not of their own making. Such agents may freely choose to do what they *want* to do, but do not freely choose *what* they want to do. As he concludes his oft-cited section on embodiment: “Because the habitus is an endless capacity to engender products—thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions—whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it secures is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings” (95).

The facets of Bourdieu’s writing that imply a less deterministic, or more fragmented, reading of his work are laudable; they should be read as caveats, footnotes—evidence of his ability to speak to the limitations of his nonetheless brilliant system. They should not be read as license to in essence “play it both ways,” by drawing on a system that roots its central significance in its elucidation of a mechanism of social reproduction in ways that create a significant level of coherence between social processes and the bodily practices they engender, while denying that these implications for the system exist. In a (fragmented) word, all of Bourdieu isn’t overly coherent—just the Bourdieudian parts.⁸ The real question, then, is not whether Bourdieu’s system is totalistic. Rather—given that any fully totalistic system will render an unrealistic or incomplete picture of some aspects of the world—what kinds of processes interact with the mechanism he has postulated to work against this grain under particular circumstances or in particular arenas? Bourdieu’s great insight is in identifying a significant mechanism for social reproduction that relies not on mentalistic adherence to a set of codified cultural rules but on dispositions that are internalized, embodied, through the act of living in the context of a particular set of social conditions. The negative side is that it is untenable to hold that all dispositions correspond neatly to those social conditions. Consequently the question is how neatly the habitus and the social conditions that produce it fit together, and what kinds of factors may produce dissonance between them.

Ultimately, Bourdieu's project seeks to account for that which, according to Western folk wisdom, there is no accounting for—taste. Certainly, it is not the case that tastes or preferences cannot be explained. As Bourdieu has artfully shown, there is no question that one's cultural and social milieu is central to the internalization of individual dispositions. Yet it does not fully explain individual dispositions. What processes underlie these dissonances, and how do they import the role of the habitus?

Certainly there is the question of simple individual variation. Samburu—despite unanimously regarding pastoral foods as intrinsically more desirable—may have profound distastes for foods that their peers hold to be delicious. Consider, for instance, Yaniko Lesopiroi, a woman of about forty, describing her dislike for soup: “As for me, since long ago I have not drunk soup. And so it was [as a child], every time, I had to be beaten when a goat died so that I could be forced to drink soup [made from its meat]. But I would not drink it. Even now I will only drink soup [out of social obligation] when I give birth. But other times I still don't want it. . . . Finally they agreed to not give me soup.”

The question is the extent to which such individual preferences may be discounted as mere fuzziness or noise in the system, or whether memory plays an important role in otherwise unaccountable preferences, as psychologists have suggested. Associations with negative events can play a particularly important role in creating aversions to particular foods—for instance, eating food in association with a sickness, or forced feeding episodes in which authority figures compel children to eat an undesirable food (Batsell 2002). Psychoanalytical perspectives, most notably in the work of Anna Freud (1930), similarly emphasize the unconscious ways in which dispositions toward food are influenced by nonlogical connections related to sex, excretion, aggression, and the parental relationship (Counihan 1999).

This shaping of tastes in ways that may be illogical or nonlogical, conscious or unconscious, challenges a notion of the habitus constructed around a strongly unified self with a set of highly coherent dispositions. Yet at the other end of the spectrum, we cannot ignore the inherent properties of the activities or items around which these dispositions form. That is, if the notion of the habitus rightly suggests that our dispositions come into being principally through cultural construction, it is not the case that the materials out of which they are constructed are equal and interchangeable. Thus, in the realm of food, considerable research suggests that certain qualities of food

render them intrinsically more or less desirable, based on such factors as taste and the relative presence of an array of macro- and micro-nutrients—for instance, people tend to like sweet things and fatty things. This is, in fact, a key facet of Mintz's classic argument concerning the rise of sugar in England. Though sugar use on a grand scale articulated with political-economic developments in both the metropole and colony, underlying this was the fact that the sweetness of sugar makes it supremely appealing, owing to basic human—perhaps even primate—preference. Although the taste of sugar is only a piece of the puzzle of why sugar became such a necessity to the British during the Industrial Revolution, the powerful bodily experience of intensely sweet things was nonetheless significant to the developments most central to Mintz's arguments.

Thus we may not assume that all sets of dispositions are equally likely, equally resilient, or equally coherent. This is particularly the case in regard to food, because it resonates at multiple but not necessarily wholly intersecting levels. Stated simply, dispositions regarding food may be rightly interpreted to a significant degree to be part of a habitus structured by one's social milieu—yet this habitus is at the same time subjected to, as it were, the taste test. Thus although educated Samburu may typically make a favorable association between new ways of eating and Development and Progress, they nonetheless find the new ways unpalatable when they come in the form of plain boiled maize. By contrast—irrespective of age or ideology—modernity may seem like a good thing when you are spooning into the new, enlightened, and tasty dish of fried meat and vegetables.

Today when Samburu eat, cook, or, indeed, want for food, there is always some extent to which these prosaic, everyday activities are invested with meaning about the past and readings of the present through the past. Yet they are simultaneously—as they always have been—about other things, whether fulfilling one's basic bodily needs, caring for one's children, engaging in commensality with one's friends and neighbors, performing one's masculinity or femininity, recovering health and building one's body, or just enjoying a nice, hot drink. If Samburu subjects experience their history through food in ways that are deeply visceral, these experiences may be ambivalent, ambiguous, illogical, and nonlogical. We thus need to account for memory in ways that acknowledge that the fundamental texture of memory is not simply about a particular thing but more likely about many—perhaps

unrelated, perhaps conflicting—things. This does not dilute the power of memory in shaping collective experience or individual subjectivities but may render it all the more salient through the resonance of its intersecting paths at an array of levels.

The terrain of Samburu memory through food is less, however, one of contestation or contradiction than of ambivalence. It is not wholly inaccurate to map the two central master narratives of food onto sectors of Samburu society differing vis-à-vis forces of change, and also onto our own convenient analytical dichotomies. Thus, the “progress of agriculture” might be read as the discourse of the global, the modern, the colonizer, the European, the secular. The counterposed discourse of social and cultural decay is the local, the traditional, the colonized, the indigenous, the mystical. There are strands of such characterizations that contain some truth. Certainly, one has its intellectual pedigree in European discourses at least centuries old, and the other is grounded in long-standing practices and values of Maa-speaking peoples centered on a pastoral lifestyle. It is, moreover, the case that the strongest Samburu adherents of each discourse vary in their engagement in everyday practice with aspects of Euro-American culture—for instance, in Western education, clothing, housing structures, languages spoken, and so forth. But far more telling is how unusual it is to find adherents of either of the two master narratives of food who unambiguously promote discourses either promoting or denigrating the changes in eating Samburu have experienced with increasing intensity over the last two or three decades. That Samburu may creatively blend these seemingly irreconcilable discourses is not because the issues incumbent in these discourses matter so little that they may freely piece them together, as in some glib, postmodern collage. Rather each discourse contains a core that to virtually all Samburu is both so true and so weighty that its rejection bristles against commonsense assumptions fundamental to their lived experience.

The very intertextuality that exists between the two discourses is in many ways central to the ambivalence of experience. Clearly, whatever each of these discourses owes to other places or other times, each is of this place and this time, shaped and made meaningful in the context of diverse Samburu lives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As is by now commonplace in anthropological and historical analysis, even if a discourse of Progress or modernity has a particular intellectual, cultural, or political history, the specific Samburu actors who find these discourses meaningful employ them for reasons

and to ends that are of their own time and place. Conversely, although discourses and practices concerning food are of long-standing import to Maa-speaking pastoralists, these values and practices should not be essentialized as part of an ossified “traditional” culture but understood as a construct that contains new dimensions and new meanings in contemporary life. And, indeed, it bears emphasizing that part of this context is the presence of these opposed narratives. The Samburu instantiation of global discourses valorizing Progress takes on specific meaning and significances by virtue of its relation to its counterdiscourse, just as long-standing values and meanings concerning food are shaped in counterpoint to the former.

This intertextuality is fundamental to the construction of these competing discourses as more than simple ideas or affiliations—as lived, and deeply visceral, meanings. “Modernity” and “tradition” may insinuate themselves in different Samburu subjects’ eating practices in very different ways, but they are somehow always there, even though they may mean very different things to even very similar people. Food is so deeply embedded at many levels that it need not resonate in ways that are wholly consistent. It may be true that a diet lacking in animal products contributes to poor health, and even erratic behavior if nutritional needs are rarely wholly satisfied: these are phenomena that a belief in Progress cannot inoculate you against, and which the countervailing master narrative explains. It is also true that a flexible approach to economic life is desirable in the context of contemporary poverty, even if it is largely a caricature when those who have gone to school attribute this poverty to an overly rigid adherence to a livestock-centered economy by “traditional” Samburu, and this notion that their unenlightened outlook has contributed to contemporary conditions can also resonate even with victims of poverty themselves. The present and the past can mean very different things even to neighbors living side by side in the same community. For a thirty-year-old woman who has always been poor, subsisting predominantly on maize meal porridge, the idea of living on a predominantly pastoral diet may have the unreal quality of a historical dream-time. Older people may have lived that dream; wealthier neighbors or immigrants from other areas may still be striving to live it. The poor may welcome the availability of “gray foods” as a means of avoiding dependency on one’s neighbors, and especially the mass deaths promised by famines of the past; others who have successfully embraced “modernity,” through the market or employment, may feel that they are able to eat a better, more varied diet, which still

includes pastoral foods when they choose, supplemented with tasty chapatis or stews when they wish.

In the next chapter, I turn to considering the nature of food itself, both as an object in the social life of Samburu (and humans more generally) and as an object of scholarly inquiry. In doing so, I consider what it is about food specifically that renders it a particularly potent arena for such ambiguous, ambivalent, and conflicting forms of memory.