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Elder Women Making Family through Celebratory Foods: Kentucky, New Zealand, Thailand

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ELDER WOMEN MAKING FAMILY THROUGH CELEBRATORY FOODS: KENTUCKY, NEW ZEALAND, THAILAND

Introduction

This study, which describes how older women of three counties experience the preparation of annual celebratory foods, is uniquely responsive to the theme of EKU's 2011-2012 Chautauqua Lecture Series, "Living with Others: Challenges and Promises." How women of different countries lead their families in preparing traditional foods together each year demonstrates how, although each culture is unique, the challenges and promises of living with others are fulfilled and managed in many similar and little-examined women's ways in countries around the globe.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore how elder women of three cultures experienced preparation of foods for annual celebrations. The foods being prepared in Kentucky and New Zealand were for Christmas and in Thailand foods were prepared for Songkran, or Thai New Year. Women in the study were 65 years or older in Kentucky and New Zealand and 60 years or older in Thailand and included only participants who were involved with their families at holiday time. In each country, three to four focus groups met to discuss their experiences, yielding a total of 336 pages of transcribed conversation. Analysis used a derived etic approach, a method that depends on the collaboration of local teams that have primary responsibility for analysis of the data from their own culture. Analysis was done through face to face meetings, e-mail, telephone and

teleconference.¹ In the following, analysis and testimonial excerpts are interspersed, in order to provide the reader with a rounded understanding of each set of cultural practices.

Preparing Christmas Foods in Eastern Kentucky

Coordinating and Anticipating

In order to produce the Christmas meal in the expected way in Eastern Kentucky, older women coordinate the activities of multiple female family members to a degree that is unusual in many families. Planning begins in November, often over the Thanksgiving meal, deciding who would bring what, where the meal would occur, and when. A sense of anticipation is built by this preliminary phase, in which the older woman is clearly the leader.

Usually at Thanksgiving is when we all set down 'cause we're all cooking for Thanksgiving and kinda plan who's going to do what. And then after that we really start to work on getting the groceries for what I'm going to do and all the rest of them do the same thing.

I usually bake a fruitcake in November. Let it age a little.

The level of formality used in offering Christmas food to the family varied in Kentucky, from paper plates and food served from the stove to a fancy table with china and a centerpiece. But the degree of formality always matched that of the older woman's childhood.

But I've just always set my table earlier than Christmas maybe by the 15th of December maybe not time to get dirty, but still and I just set it like it is going to be on Christmas day

If you was raised up to use fancy dishes, you're gonna use 'em. I was raised up to eat out of whatever we had.

¹ Shordike, A., Hocking, C., Pierce, D., Wright St. Clair, V., Vittayakorn, S., Rattakorn, P., & Bunrayong, W. (2010). Respecting regional culture in an international multi-site study: A derived etic method. *Qualitative Research, 10*, 333-335.

The Matrilineal Progression

I used to cook it all, and now that I'm gotten a little older and a little more flabbergasted I guess I might say, about things, my daughters do bring things now, but basically I do the main things, I do the dessert and the meat, and the rolls... and all kinds of things like that and they bring a vegetable and a salad.

The quote above illustrates the general pattern of age-related roles in food preparation that exists in Kentucky families. The matrilineal progression serves not only to organize the work of preparing these large annual meals, but also to train the women of the family in the skills of preparing these traditional foods of Eastern Kentucky. In this progression, younger girls assist in simple ways, such as setting the table. Teenage daughters help to get foods to the table and clean up after the meal. Adult daughters bring increasingly meaningful foods to the older woman's home, beginning with the less critical and easier preparation of vegetables and salads and progressing with age to the most important key food elements, the meats and desserts. At the point in the shared aging of the family that the older woman can no longer prepare the turkey in her home, the meal is usually moved to an older daughter's home. After that point, the older woman brings a dish for which she has become known for as long as she can and often this is a dessert. This age-related progression in food preparation responsibilities among female members of Eastern Kentucky families maintains the continuity of this little-studied women's tradition.

Well, my daughter has Christmas now and I help her, whatever she needs me to do. If she wants me to cook the ham... or I can do the dessert, you know, whatever she needs me to do.

[84-year-old interviewee:] Well, my mother is 105 and she still says what are we having for Christmas? When are we going to bake the cake? ...She says I will help you bake, I'll help you stir up the cake. I'll say ok and she'll stir up a couple of times and that's it. She can't, but she wants to.

One way in which the tradition can become disrupted or require adaptation is when the older woman does not have a daughter to whom she can pass the Christmas

meal. Having a daughter-in-law begin to host the meal can be problematic, since she was trained to a slightly different family tradition that may not meet the older woman's expectations for the quality and types of special foods that should be provided to the family.

Going Home for Christmas

Having the family together at the older woman's house is especially meaningful to both the older woman and her family. It gives everyone an opportunity to return to a place filled with memories, in the company of those with whom many of those memories were made. Much preparation goes into preparing and decorating the space, often to accommodate quite large gatherings. In Kentucky, being rooted in a home place is highly valued.

(An older woman whose son had died): My kids all like coming for Christmas. There is nothing like going home and going to grandma's house. I mean if they had to bring all the food, they'd do it as long as I'd provide the house, cause it's just not the holidays unless you're at mom's or grandma's, and my kids have told me that. They were very patient with me though after I had the loss. And they just spoke up you know we are going to take it for you know a couple of years and I just thought, you know, that's not really fair to them, and now I feel better and I'm going to take Christmas now back over. They said oh, mom I always wanted to come home for Christmas. But they weren't going to ask until I was ready.

Special Foods Mark Cyclical Time

In many ways, what the older woman of Eastern Kentucky creates in the Christmas meal is a time capsule for her family to enter. She insures that the foods and space and timing of the Christmas meal are as like previous Christmas meals as possible. This gives the family a sense of repeating the same feelings and sensations as in younger years, through repetition of tastes, smells, emotions, and shared stories of previous Christmases. Meals involve special Christmas meats and desserts, homemade foods, and are fairly similar across all cases.

Q: Is there something special about Christmas or Christmas Food?

A: Let me think, usually it's rich. Butter and sugar. Butter and sugar.

Q: What makes the meal a successful meal?

A: Taking time to prepare the food correctly. You know what they like and usually when they set down and take that first bite and go ooooh like that, you have done ok.

A: A lot of it too, is just having family all together, and sharing.

Special foods that are prepared only at Christmas are offered to the family: usually turkey, sometimes also ham, and always a set of traditional Kentucky desserts. Regional desserts include jam cake, fruit cake, Christmas cookies, fudge, divinity, bourbon balls, nut pudding, custard, pumpkin rolls, and different desserts made with black walnuts. The older woman remembers the favorite Christmas foods of each family member and makes sure they are included in the meal. This adds to the complexity and labor involved in preparing the meal but makes the food special and the experience unique to the day. It also provides the older woman an experience that recalls her own childhood Christmases.

These are the things that you remember from a kid up. My daughter will make corn pudding and she'll make everything for everyone in the family. She knows what they all like and it is that way every year.

It gives you a time, not just the food, but to sit down, a time for memory, to think back at the times past. Family that's gone, and why we have Christmas.

I don't change nothing, what I cook one Christmas, I cook it for the next Christmas

It's something that you look forward to every year with your family.

I like to do just like I did when I grew up.

Remembering Family Matriarchs

A very important part of the Christmas meal tradition in Eastern Kentucky is sharing, both in the kitchen and at the table, fond memories of the women of the family who have prepared the Christmas meal in the past. This is accomplished in several ways. The vessels and pans they used to prepare and serve Christmas foods are used, and never without remarking on their memory. Each year, the same stories are told about former matriarchs at previous Christmases, foods they prepared or funny things they said. Their recipes are used and proudly “handed down,” to prepare the special foods of Christmas. The older woman desires to serve the same food the women before them served, and honors those family matriarchs through her actions.

I’ve got an old crock... it’s old, I don’t know how old, it was mother’s and I always make the rolls in it.

Don’s mother had a cake stand that I always wanted very badly and every time I’d see it, she knew that I really wanted it, but I really didn’t want it the way I got it, but anyway I put my cake on that cake stand and then I have a cranberry dish that an aunt always had cranberry sauce on.

I have a roll pan that my mother had and every time she’d bring it over to our house in the later years she’d say “Now don’t use that for anything else, you’ll black my pan.” So every time I get that out, and Mother has been dead thirty years, and I look at it and think, “Whoa it’s kinda getting black,” but I still use it for the rolls.

Preparing Christmas Foods in Auckland, New Zealand

The New Zealand team also studied Christmas foods. However, Christmas and Christmas foods are different in Auckland than in Eastern Kentucky. Christmas in Auckland falls in the middle of summer in the southern hemisphere. The women who took part in the New Zealand groups were middle and upper middle class from urban Auckland and were Kiwi—the white, immigrant New Zealanders, not the native Maori people. The ancestors of the New Zealanders in the study had emigrated fairly recently historically and brought

their various Christmas traditions with them and adapted these to their new land. Several themes emerged from the Auckland focus group participants.

Creating New Traditions for the Emerging New Zealand Identity

The Christmas food is the first food of summer, Brussels sprouts and fresh peas from the garden, potatoes and sweet potatoes and strawberries. While turkey and ham were often chosen as meats, they were typically served cold because no one wanted to be around the hot stove in the summer heat. There was also lamb, seafood. One of the women spoke of the concept of gathering the Christmas food:

[Gathering is] a very New Zealand thing and a Maori thing to do isn't it?
...Would the gathering be more what you would do in a rural community?
Yes, that's right. We got vegetables. And the slaughtering of the lamb or pig or something. Right. Mussels from Waiheke and all that. Gathering too is to do with fruit off trees. Strawberries...

The elder women expressed pride in both keeping tradition and adapting foods and locations to suit New Zealand. There was much reminiscing about traditions now abandoned, with a few current traditions described. Christmas cakes and puddings (with the tuppence and sixpence in them) were the most frequent old traditional food survivors and much loved. Homemade foods were held in higher regard, and store bought foods were acceptable. Desserts might be made ahead or purchased. Emerging Christmas food traditions spoken of included barbeque, spring foods, seafood, going food gathering and spending Christmas at the bach (the summer cottage, pronounced 'batch') at the beach. One of the most significant newer traditions was the shared roles and responsibilities for the meal. Everyone may bring a dish.

I would like to say too I think our modern habit of sharing all the preparation of the food and bringing it to the main house is a wonderful change.

The men have significant roles in cooking the Auckland Christmas meal—especially the barbeque.

All the men in the family cook fortunately. Yes. So they are all as capable, we have shared roles now instead of the division of labor so we share roles. We can all do carpentry and that, and we can all cook so well, everyone in the family, grandchildren are like that too so all those traditions have changed because of New Zealand being you know do it yourself.

Thriftiness was also much spoken of and associated with being a New Zealander, especially juxtaposed with the materialism at Christmas.

Making and Remaking Family

In memories, and still when possible, the Christmas meal is at the older woman's home.

They bring it to me, if it's going to be at my place and I get it ready to go in the oven, even though I hand it over to the boys to do. I do take care of setting the table.

Nowadays, it is often at the bach at the beach and family and select friends meet there to picnic and barbeque. Some of the ancestral dishware ends up at the bach as well.

We have a whole mixture of things because when dinner sets broke up the remaining bits were always sent to the coast so there was always a great old mix... Little bits of china and some very handsome bits would come out every year and the enormous, I mean the enormous serving plates and big lots of stuff put on, lots of vegetable dishes, handles and the tops long since gone but still functional... belonged to my great grandmother and have always remained at the coast... it's all old stuff that's recycled sort of within the family.

Family members and select friends come to the meal from close and far away, and many are missed who have dispersed to distant parts and cannot return for the holiday. Favorite foods are made for those who are there and special attention is paid to favorite foods for the men (fathers, brothers, husbands).

Validating the Self

The kitchen stands as a focal point for women's ways of knowing and doing at Christmas, and women's identities are very much connected with their food work. Appreciation of the food expertise of others was significant with the Aucklanders and food/recipe compliments were frequently given and appreciated. This may have been most apparent in the desserts with the Auckland women as the recipes flew around the group. Each woman had at least one specialty.

Mine was the Christmas pudding and I would like to tell you that these days I have a fabulous Christmas recipe for a Christmas pudding that is done in the microwave in 18 minutes and nobody wants anything else but that particular pudding. It's out of an American book and it is fantastic. And I've been doing it now for the last 8 years.

Recipe sharing was so important for the Auckland women that they created a recipe book as a result of the interview groups.

Preparing Songkran Foods in Chiang Mai, Thailand

The celebratory food for Songkran, the Thai New Year celebration, was studied in Chiang Mai. This centuries old Buddhist traditional celebration occurs from April 13th to April 15th. This is a very important holiday for the Thais with great spiritual, cultural and culinary significance. The women in the Chiang Mai groups were from both suburban and more rural settings, from an area in northern Thailand with a strong matriarchal tradition.

Buot Bath Tee Tum Prajum: Knowing and Doing the Same

Continuing the tradition is critically important. The ingredients for the foods are purchased or obtained at the same time and place each year. The foods are prepared in exactly the same sequence and way in every household.

Every house makes the same. It is the tradition, we will do once a year...
It is like this in every house. We cook similar food.

One woman clearly stated the importance of the continuity of the Songkran food tradition, echoing many others in the Thai focus groups, saying, “(I will) go on cooking until I die. If I die, the children will cook.”

What the women know and do the same is the long tradition of how foods are prepared and given. Some preparatory work is done before going to the temple. For example, chili paste is prepared ahead, and women may travel to collect banana leaves. April 13th, Song-kan Long Day, is the day to chase the devil away by cleaning up the house, sweeping and washing clothes. April 14th, Naw Day or Da Day, is for shopping at the open air market, cooking through the afternoon and preparing the special containers for taking the food to the temples. The Songkran foods are the usual northern Thai foods and have very specific meanings. The main dish, hang lae curry, has many different ingredients and means “unity.” Grass noodle curry has long rice noodles and means, “We will have long lives.” The dessert, Khan am jok, is wrapped in a banana leaf.

Kha nom jok means get together or wrap together, so every house will cook kha nom jok.

The women also prepare the favorite dishes of their ancestors.

The reason for giving to the dead ancestors [is that] it is the tradition to remember and be grateful to the ancestors.

Kuam Eau-a-torn: Making a Generous Society

Making a generous society is an essential tenet of Thai culture. Everyone helps and supports each other, including during the Songkran food preparation.

Each food has many steps so we must help each other, it makes us love and unite. People at every house will help each other.

The Thai women also understood the Songkran celebratory food preparation as spiritual work, in the concept of making merit, doing good works to make merit for themselves and their ancestors.

We make merit for our ancestor who died, our father, mother, and for ourselves too... which will transfer merit to the next life.

Merit affects Thai life circumstances throughout lifetimes.

We have to choose the best thing because in the next life we will be well born and smart.

Pai Tum Boon Tee Wat: Going to the Temple

The Songkran foods are primarily prepared for the monks and will be taken to the temple to feed the monks as well as the ancestors of those who have prepared the foods. The leftover food, the less perfect food, is given to the family, friends and neighbors. There may never be a sit down Songkran family meal. The food prepared on Song-kan day and Naw day is separated and taken to the temple on April 15th.

Food is separated for making merit at the temple on the 15th. The good, beautiful foods were chosen.

The food is combined with the food from all of the preparers at the temple. A long table is erected in the compound of the temple where monk's alms bowls stand in a row on either side.

Into the alms bowls we put sticky rice, food and Kha Nom Jok.

We will be happy to give them.

The monks can eat and we are happy and get a holy heart.

Older Women at the Center

The older woman was always the leader and orchestrator of the Songkran meal.

We must be the leaders to arrange everything.

She accepted help from others, usually the younger women in the family.

Children and young men and women help, but they do everything according to my order.

The elder Thai women missed some of their children and grandchildren who had moved away due to marriage or to get jobs in other places and who could not be home for the Songkran celebration.

Cultural Differences in Celebratory Food Preparation

The foods prepared for the two Christmases and for Songkran are, of course, different and specific to each culture. The meaning of the celebratory foods and food preparation also differ across the three groups. In Eastern Kentucky, family continuity and honoring the women of the family are of primary importance. In New Zealand, the emphasis is on creating new traditions to fit a new land and working together in an egalitarian way. In Thailand, it is important to make merit, honor ancestors and keep tradition.

Similarities across Cultures

In Eastern Kentucky, Auckland and Chiang Mai, highly coordinated multi-person actions over extended time create feelings of family unity and sacred experience. Older women are valued coordinators of preparing and sharing in eating or giving the special foods. Both Christmas and Songkran food-related occupations contribute to transcending linear time through regular repetition of action sequences, tastes, objects and shared memories of ancestors. The annual celebrations reflect the ways that elder women both hold to treasured tradition and manage the changes in family and society.

In Conclusion

The often taken for granted work of older women preparing annual celebratory foods creates family, expresses regional identity and maintains cherished traditions in Eastern Kentucky, Auckland and Chiang Mai. Over the world, we are so different, yet we all express ourselves through such basic occupations as food preparation in similar ways within each culture.

We would like to complete this offering of our research work to you with this thought. Let us move on from research and discourse that emphasizes how different we are to a more balanced view of how we all share basic occupations such as food preparation, caring for ourselves and others, work, play and rest. By understanding cultural differences in these occupations as diverse expressions of basic patterns of human doing, we can celebrate those differences and our common humanity.