

on a particular aspect of gender and Islam, such as Southeast Asian women's political leadership, women's roles in social movements or gender and popular culture.

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Rice Talks: Food and Community in a Vietnamese Town. By Nir Avieli. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. 323 pp.

Rice Talks explores the culinary sphere of Hội An in central Vietnam. It is both an ethnography and a theoretical project, as it aims to show that the culinary sphere can be an important arena for gaining insight into what it means to be Vietnamese. How different such facets of identity as gender, class, ethnicity and religious affiliation are constructed, maintained, negotiated, challenged and changed within this sphere is discussed in the book.

In addition to writing about the history of Hội An in the introduction, Avieli offers a brief discussion of theoretical perspectives used by anthropologists in the study of food. In analysing the culinary sphere of Hội An, he found Handelman's scheme of mirrors, models and re-presentation useful for its attention to cultural production and reproduction. Avieli focuses on two research questions: (1) how do food and foodways reflect the social order and cultural arrangements of the Hoianese? and (2) how do the Hoianese reproduce, help negotiate or alter food and foodways?

The detailed ethnography captures the particular texture of everyday home meals as well as different types of festive meals. Its style of introducing a food event begins with a social interaction with an informant who invites or tells the author about a particular meal. The conversation between him and the informant is presented in the form of a narrative. The reader feels as if she or he is present at the field site.

Avieli organizes his findings into seven chapters. The first chapter examines the mutually reinforcing Vietnamese cosmological principles of *âm* and *dương* (yin and yang) of the Hoianese home meal. Although most Vietnamese may not have this binary concept in mind as they prepare dishes, they do pay attention to maintaining harmonious balance in physical and emotional health. In both food and social relations, harmony remains an important goal.

The second chapter, on “The Social Dynamics of the Home Meal”, focuses on the ways in which the meal mirrors the social structure and priorities of the collective, and in which social relationships and stratifications are evident in its manner of consumption. The role of women is also highlighted in this chapter. Avieli challenges those who relegate Vietnamese women to an inferior status. He points out that the legacy of formerly matriarchal Vietnam, egalitarian communist ideology, women’s responsibility for nurturing the family and their pioneering role in opening eating venues for tourists have enhanced women’s status. However, they continue to spend long hours in the kitchen and to eat after men. In this context, Avieli considers women’s status ambiguous and shifting.

The third chapter deals with underlying meanings of local specialties and their relationships to different aspects of Hoianese identity. The origin of *cao lầu*, a local dish of rice noodles, is mired in controversy: is it Vietnamese, Chinese or Japanese? Avieli rightly points out that the “relationship between food and space is much more complex and dynamic” (p. 67) than one might assume and that no local dish can be considered truly local in a place like Hội An, which has a long history of immigration and cultural exchange. In doing research on food in Bangladesh, I found the same thing to be true.

What Avieli tries to emphasize is that the culinary sphere is not simply a mirror image of existing social and cultural orders, and that it is always possible for Hoianese to actively shape and reshape their identities through that sphere. For example, he illustrates the ways in which tensions between Kinh people (ethnic Vietnamese) and descendants of various Chinese groups are ameliorated through the culinary sphere. Trying to distance themselves from China, Chinese

communities modify their dishes, which come out as Chinese but unique to Hội An. The modifications sometimes reach a point at which Chinese roots are no longer recognized and a dish is considered a local Hoianese dish. The culinary sphere reflects not only ethnic tensions but also the process of assimilation.

Chapters Four through Seven focus on feasts of various types. Ancestor worship is discussed in Chapter Four. Ceremonies emphasize the linkage between the dead and the living through rituals and feasts that provide opportunities for social interaction and bonding among family members. Chapter Five discusses wedding feasts in different social contexts and thus gives readers insight into the variety of wedding feasts in Vietnam. It also looks into food symbolism, which is not only expressed in ingredients or the preparation of food for these feasts; for the shape and type of dishes in which foods are served also have special meanings.

Community festivals are discussed in the sixth chapter. The attendant feasts are attended by people who consider themselves members of a particular community. Each communal meal includes a set of specific dishes, which distinguishes it from other community festivals. The collective identity of each group is represented through these dishes.

Chapter Seven focuses on the Vietnamese New Year or Tết Nguyên Đán. Food is central in the celebration of this holiday, and Avieli's informants tell him that the rice cake is the traditional food of Tết. It is said to represent independent and pure Vietnamese culture, in which patriotism is an important value. As the Vietnamese eat rice cakes, they are integrating into themselves everything that the cakes symbolize. By emphasizing the purity of rice cakes, Hoianese ignore the cultural exchanges that have been part of their history. In this way, festive dishes not only serve as mirrors but also play the role of a model. They are intended to influence and even transform the lived-in world. They also depict the existing social structure — the importance of the family over the individual, gender hierarchy and other important values of Hoianese society — and thus exemplify foodways as mirrors.

While Avieli presents many examples of foodways as mirrors, he presents only a few examples of foodways as models. He does present many examples of foodways as “re-presentations”. When individuals assert themselves and present a traditional dish in an innovative way, it is then re-presented in a different form. The culinary sphere allows experimentation in cooking, presentation and serving styles. These re-presentations are not always successful, but there is always room for negotiation. While Hôi An’s culinary sphere has been influenced by a diverse group of immigrants, Avieli argues that it has maintained a unique style.

Representations of cultural practices can be defined and interpreted in diverse ways, and the book highlights two situations that expose the intricacies of interpreting systems of knowledge as dictations of culture and behaviour. Avieli attempted to make sense of the “common pattern [of] pre-teen children [eating] separately, away from the family tray or table, squatting at some corner, eating from large bowls, especially when guests are present” (p. 61). On the basis of an earlier thesis posited by Sherry Ortner on the “nature-culture axis”, Avieli speculates that “children in Vietnam seem to be culturally conceptualized as animals or, at least, as existing in proximity to the natural and animalistic” (ibid.). In sounding out his interpretation with an informant, he faced strong criticism. He reasoned,

I suspect that, in this case, I was out of line, not because the interpretation was so far-fetched, but because of the implications, which are quite unacceptable when removed from the realm of the “taken for granted” into the spotlight and reflexive sphere of interpretation. (ibid.)

In this case, the association of children’s eating behaviour as natural or animal-like comes across as prejudicial and demeaning. Similarly, the labelling of the Vietnamese as war-like (p. 219) — because preserved rice cakes were used by soldiers — runs the risk of ethnic bias.

While Avieli makes sure that his informants represent the diversity present in Hôi An and that their voices are clearly heard, a criticism

is that the study presents no quantitative data on socio-economic differences in Hôi An. Nor does it provide information on how representative his informants are.

Nevertheless, *Rice Talks* brings a unique perspective to the study of foodways. The rich ethnography of the culinary sphere of Hôi An fills an important gap in the study of Vietnamese culture, and the theoretical framework adds a new dimension to the study of foodways. The book's extensive bibliography will assist readers interested in pursuing further research on the food of Vietnam and Hôi An and on food, symbolism and culture. For anyone interested in doing a comparative study of the culinary sphere, *Rice Talks* is a highly valuable addition to anthropological studies on food.

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