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The Mindful Kitchen, The Embodied Cook: Tools, Technology and Knowledge Transmission on a Greek Island

Fieldwork and Cooking Lessons

“Little” Katerina was thirteen and a half when I filmed her in the kitchen.¹ The previous summer I had asked her what she knew how to cook, and she said “coffee.” Now, she was preparing grilled cheese regularly, and occasionally coffee. She noted that she likes to cook, but her mother and grandmother don’t let her because they want to get it done quickly. I had asked if she wanted to cook something for the camera; she became excited and planned in consultation with her mother Katina to make a zucchini omelet. Katerina displayed considerable self-consciousness about being filmed. Katerina insisted that I shut off my camera while her mother showed her how the zucchini was to be cut. I sensed a knowledge on her part of what occurs on television cooking shows and an awareness of her mimicking those shows, just as her mother and grandmother at certain times would say that they were “playing Vefa,” the Greek Martha Stewart, when they explained a recipe to me.² Little Katerina and her mother discussed and argued about how to arrange ingredients on the table as Vefa would. Katina also wanted her to explain the recipe clearly at the beginning, and got upset when her daughter broke into laughter the first time through. She remained off camera whispering corrections and instructions to her, with particular concern for her to speak in a way that would introduce the dishes clearly. But Little Katerina was not simply passive in relation to her mother’s instructions. When she disagreed with the way that her mother wanted her to arrange the ingredients to be prepared she said insistently: “It’s my show!” once again referring to the model of the television personality, Vefa.

Mindful Eating: Mindful Cooking

What might “mindful eating” and “mindful cooking” entail on a barren Greek island such as Kalymnos? Until recently, fast-food was almost non-existent here; even grocery store owners kept organic gardens and railed against the multinational food industries, referring to the products that they sold as “five pieces of bullshit in a can” (Sutton 2001: 66). Residents of Kalymnos have always cared deeply about their food, and been able to discuss its provenance, its proper preparation and its sensory properties. More than that, cooking is embodied in the many gestures and judgments, explicit and implicit, which make up the “proper” way to cook. More recently, however, many have been concerned about the fate of cooking on Kalymnos, commenting on whether the “younger generation” would retain their elders’ knowledge of cooking, or fall victim to fast and ready-made food. These discussions are not merely descriptive, but are moral discourses, laced with gendered assumptions. What is implied in the statement “the younger generation doesn’t cook” is the interruption of a natural, or traditional, flow of knowledge from mother to daughter. Indeed, “from mother to daughter” is a set phrase in Kalymnian discourse, reflecting how people see knowledge as typically transmitted and reproduced, at least in “the old days.” But is this, in fact, the case?

In this essay I document how Kalymnians do (or don’t) learn to cook and to eat in socially valued ways. My sense that much of this involves traditional mannerisms has led me to approach cooking using video as a key methodological tool. It is only by starting here, I would argue, that we can begin to understand the potential sources of change in food practices, and their significances.

While video has its specific methodological challenges, and it is important to be reflexive about the particular expectations that a video encounter may bring with it (cf. Relieu et al. 2008), I have found that video research can allow for an attention to bodily techniques that is much more difficult to actualize using traditional methodologies.

Within food studies, a growing body of work has been interested in the space of the kitchen as a key ideological site for cultural reproduction and resistance, both for women's potential agency and oppression (Adapon 2008; Allison 1991; Counihan 1999; Short 2006; Williams 1984). While this research identifies women's "voices," as they negotiate the tensions of cooking as private and public, as creative and burdensome, these scholars have for the most part not addressed the relationship of values to skilled practices, or questions of how cooking knowledge travels within communities and across generations.³

Here, I present a research report of some of the routes and approaches I have taken, and the tentative conclusions that I have drawn in this ongoing project.

Apprenticeship and Learning

How has cooking knowledge been learned in the past, and how is it being learned now? Anthropologist Marcel Mauss was one of the first authors to point to the importance of studying "techniques of the body." He defines technique as an act "that is traditional and efficacious." It has to be *traditional* and *effective*. There is no technique and no transmission if there is no tradition" (qtd. in Narvaez 2006: 60). Efficacious is defined not by some absolute standard, but as experienced within a particular social order.

How might such techniques be reproduced, and how might they change over time? Anthropological approaches to learning and the transmission of skills and knowledge, processes that have typically been studied under the label of "apprenticeship," help us address these questions. A growing literature in anthropology and related fields has examined the interrelationship of social and technical skills transmitted through legitimate peripheral participation in "communities of practice" (Chaiklin and Lave 1993; Haase 2006; Hutchins 1995; Lave and Wenger 1991; Terrio 2000). Researchers have been attentive to the complex and power-laden dynamics that exist between "masters" and "apprentices" in different cultural contexts (Argenti 2002; Graeber

1997; Herzfeld 2003; Hill and Plath 2006) and the way that learning specific technical skills is intimately tied to learning to be the type of person who can master such skills (Bryant 2005; Kondo 1990). But this literature also stresses the different implications for learning that takes place through sensory engagement, play-frames, observation (often surreptitious) and through embodied habits as opposed to traditional Western models of explicit instruction (Henze 1992; Keller and Keller 1999; Ingold 2000; Scott 1998; Suchman 2006). One of the few studies of female transmission of knowledge in a largely domestic context is the work of Patricia Greenfield and her collaborators on Maya weavers, one of the first works to employ videotape in the study of apprenticeship. They use Mauss's ideas to show how Maya girls' bodies are prepared from birth to have the capacities to weave using the backstrap loom, which requires that "a woman's body becomes an essential part of the loom. Weaving is not possible if there is not a body serving a part of the loom frame. The warp or frame threads are stretched between a post and the weaver's body" (Maynard, Greenfield and Childs 1999: 381). They argue that Maya girls' bodies are shaped "culturally and biologically" in such capacities as "low motor activity," maintaining a kneeling position for extended periods,⁴ developing balance through tasks such as carrying wood on their heads, and acute visual perceptive abilities which fit with the local model of "learning through observation" rather than learning by doing (384-85). But others have suggested that skill may not pass from an older generation to a younger generation, or from masters to apprentices, by any simple route (cf. Herzfeld 2003). For example, Hill and Plath have studied knowledge and skill among the female pearl and abalone divers—or ama—in Japan. The authors note that while mothers and daughters may dive together, a mother does not feel obligated to lead her daughter to the abalone. Viewed by the elder as a potential competitor—tagging along "stealing her moneyed knowledge" (211)—the daughter is very much encouraged to find her own abalone (212).

In most instances Maynard, Greenfield and Childs reach opposite conclusions from those of Hill and Plath about the intentions of the older generation in relation to the younger. They are in accord, however, in their attention to issues concerning the relationship of bodily techniques and perceptual/sensory skills with more explicit, verbal knowledge. It is this focus that I find useful for my own exploration of these issues. I also draw on the

recent rethinking of the relations of the material and the social represented by the anthropology of the senses (Howes 2003), actor-network theory (Latour 2006) and the “new materiality studies” (Miller 2005). I approach the kitchen as a mix of practices that blur the distinctions between the social and the technical, and in which cultural assumptions and power relations become embedded in material forms. A careful empirical examination of the role of the senses in making everyday judgments and supporting larger values, as well as an interest in the kitchen as an environment which affords certain possibilities for action (Ingold 2001), opens up possibilities for making sense of the significance of decisions like what kind of can opener to use, or how to satisfy the different demands of a three-generational family on a two-burner stove. In this exploratory paper, I examine one such bodily technique on Kalymnos, the practice of “cutting in the hand.”

The Kalymnian Kitchen(s): Workspace as Cultural Artifact

Kalymnos shares with a number of Aegean islands matrifocal patterns not found in the rest of Greece. Post-marital residence is preferentially matrilineal, at least for the first daughter, who typically resides in the same house or in a house adjacent to her parents. This means that the husband enters the family as an outsider, and women’s “domestic” work is much more central to the structures of power in Kalymnian society than in more patrilineal areas. This is not mitigated by the fact that women increasingly work in jobs outside the home; indeed, the matrilineal situation means that Kalymnian children continue to be raised in large numbers by maternal grandparents as well as by parents.

The organization of the kitchen as workspace has interesting implications both as a kind of cultural artifact of different cooking values and styles, and in terms of mother/daughter relations. Since daughters often have houses that are extensions, built onto or adjacent to their mothers’ homes, this means that there are often two working kitchens shared by the co-resident family.⁵ The mother’s kitchen may be quite small: a space large enough for a sink, a refrigerator, a small table, a wall cabinet for plates and a two-burner stove run off a gas bottle. It is usually a small room separated from the main living area. Alternatively, a shack outside the house may be used as a primary area for processing and

cooking; or simply a covered area that opens up into a courtyard can be used.

The daughter’s kitchen, by contrast, can be quite large, on the first floor of the daughter’s living area, and typically is not a room separated by a divider, but opens onto a larger living space. The daughter’s kitchen will include a full stove and oven, a large amount of counter space with cabinets above and below. The mother’s kitchen uses wall space for storage of pots, pans, implements and often plates. By contrast, the daughter’s kitchen will have those items placed in cabinets, and will instead use wall and counter space for decorative items. On occasion, the wall and counter space in the daughter’s kitchen becomes a display area for the tools of past generations. This arrangement allows in some instances for the mother’s kitchen to function as the primary everyday kitchen where foods are processed and cooked, while the daughter’s kitchen is used for lighter, occasional cooking, for making sweets or casseroles that call for an oven, and for the preparation of snacks and coffee. Because the mother’s kitchen tends to be outside the house itself, the odours associated with cooking, cleaning fish, along with the general messiness associated with processing food does not enter the living space, meaning that little effort is required when preparing for visitors. This set-up also facilitates the fact, discussed below, that the mother retains primary control over the everyday cooking for the extended family as a whole.

Techniques of the Body: Cutting in the Hand

One of the more striking features of observing cooking on Kalymnos relates to the manner in which certain food items are cut—that is in the hand rather than placing the item on a surface, which tends to be used for storage rather than for processing of food. It is striking to watch Kalymnians “chop” onions, tomatoes, potatoes, bread and other items in their hands. And it was only when I had video to refer back to that I could provide the kind of detailed description of technique that follows. A potato, for example, is cradled in one hand, scored all the way across in two or three passes, and then with a wrist motion the knife is drawn toward the thumbs which guide and balance and effectively serve as a cutting board (only the thumb of the hand cupping the potato is used when the potato is large, while both thumbs are employed for smaller potatoes, or once a larger potato has been partially cut). In the

case of an onion, one hand again serves as a cradle, while the loose wrist of the other hand is brought up and down in a repetitive motion scoring a grid-type pattern of shallow cuts on the surface of the onion. Then the thumb is once again used as a guide to draw the knife across the onion while the cradling hand rotates the onion. Finally in the case of a loaf of bread, the bread is held against the chest and the knife is used in a sawing motion to score cuts in the bread, which can later be fully separated by hand.

While from a purely technical standpoint one might wonder at the “inefficiency” of such an approach, which tends to, but does not necessarily, mitigate against small, even slices. This is not necessarily a problem, however, since most vegetables are used in soups and stews where they undergo considerable cooking and eventually dissolve, or in salads, where uneven shapes are the norm. While many of my colleagues in food studies wince when I show them the video of Kalymnian women processing food, from a social standpoint, this procedure makes sense; it is both “traditional and efficacious,” to return to Mauss’s phrase. Much of the processing of ingredients does not necessarily take place within the confines of the mother’s small kitchen, but instead in the courtyard directly outside the kitchen area. Women often prepare ingredients while seated, which allows them to socialize with family or neighbors while the ingredients are processed directly into a bowl on their lap. Richard Sennett has recently argued for the importance of understanding the ways in which we become skilled as a holistic process of negotiating a particular task, rather than something that can be analytically divided. Of hand coordination, he writes: “[r]ather than the combined result of discrete, separate, individualized activities, coordination works much better if the two hands work together from the start” (Sennett 2008: 164-65). One of his key examples of such hand coordination is the use of a cleaver in Chinese cooking to develop the skill to “cleave a grain of rice” (168). I would add to this that a holistic view of bodily techniques would draw on Mauss’s notion of the “traditional and efficacious” to understand how what from a technical point of view may seem inefficient, may make considerable sense in a larger social context.

Cooking Lessons, Redux

Let’s return to Little Katerina. Her “cooking lesson” clearly illustrated the kind of power relations and power struggles that may be acted out in the kitchen

for many Kalymnian women. No doubt, the fact that her mother’s kitchen would eventually become hers (the house was built for her, as part of her dowry) added to her confidence in relation to negotiating the kitchen space with her mother. But what of the embodied aspects of learning to cook? When it came to cutting in the hand, this was a challenge for Little Katerina. First, she used a butter knife (Fig. 1) and was unable to cut the zucchini into pieces she felt were small enough.⁶ There was a back-and-forth dialogue between her and her mother concerning the size of the pieces:

Katerina: It’s not coming out [small enough].

Katina: Don’t say stupid things. After you’ve cut half of the zucchini, score it again to the bottom.

Katerina: Is this good? Should I put this piece in?

Katina: Cut it thinner. If it’s not thin enough, cut it again.

Later, as she turned the zucchini with a teaspoon in the pan (Fig. 2), Katerina commented to me that it takes a long time to fry if the zucchini is not cut small, and it doesn’t get that nice brown colour all over (indeed, during the frying she tries cutting some of the pieces using a knife against the pan (Fig. 3), telling me to edit it out from the video). Thus, she has a certain knowledge of what is to be aimed for, even if she doesn’t yet have the skill to execute it. For example, Katina gave Katerina a low-lipped bowl in which to beat the eggs, with



Fig. 1
Cutting: Cutting in the Hand.



Fig. 2
Frying: Katerina, using a spoon to stir zucchini in the pan.

the result that she could not beat them with much force without spilling them. Katerina also didn't know what to do when things went wrong: while she was beating the eggs, the oil began to burn. "What happened? Is it okay? Should I add more oil?" Using a butter knife seemed less a safety issue, and more about employing whatever happened to be "to hand" to accomplish the job. There was no concern about Katerina using a teaspoon to turn the zucchini so close to the hot oil, as spatulas are virtually non-existent in Kalymnian frying. Some told me that this was because the spoon allows for more control than the spatula, but it certainly creates the potential for a burn from the hot oil.

My overall impression here is that for Katina, teaching cooking skills to her daughter is about teaching all the "tricks" and adjustments one must make to ensure the desired result (Fig. 4). Indeed, as Sennett argues, "Getting better at using tools comes to us, in part, when the tools challenge us, and this challenge often occurs just because the tools are not fit-for purpose" (194). In filming this "cooking lesson," I was able to address such technical questions in the context of the social relations and power negotiations between mothers and daughters, on the ways that cutting in the hand is learned and embodied, and on some of the ways that Kalymnians incorporate the camera and the idea of being filmed into their experience of the contemporary visual culture of cooking.



Fig. 3
Knife Frying: Katerina cuts the pieces smaller in the pan.



Fig. 4
The Plate: The Finished Product.

Conclusion

In many ways, embodied habits such as cutting in the hand are significant in that they generate certain cross-generational continuities. In Bourdieu's phrase, they "go without saying because they come without saying" (1977: 167) and thus are a strong link between the generations, just as Maynard, Greenfield and Childs (1999) describe for Maya weavers. It is therefore interesting to see contemporary sources of change in such embodied habits on Kalymnos. On my most recent field trip in the spring of 2008, I worked with several women in their thirties who, I was surprised to see, were using a cutting board for onions, parsley and certain other items. When I asked one woman about this, she admitted that she was never able to master cutting in the hand for particularly small items. She struggled along for a number of years feeling inadequate in relation to her mother's skills, until she saw someone using a board for cutting, and incorporated the idea into her own practice. This did not mitigate the social nature of her cooking, but allowed her to process most ingredients in the customary manner, while making an adjustment for the area in which she perceived her lack of skill. When I asked where she had seen this new technique, she told me that it was on one of Greece's most popular television cooking shows. While such shows represent a basic change in the *scale* of knowledge transmission, it is important to note that they do not represent a change in *form*, as they call for observational skills and the ability to pick up "tricks" and adjustments, just as Little Katerina's mother expected her to do.

I hope this research note has provided an indication of the promise of a video ethnography of everyday cooking. I conclude with the observation that in order to understand the fate of mindful cooking, it is necessary to pay attention to "techniques of the body" even if this means a return to the cutting board.

Notes

1. The name "Little Katerina" reflects naming practices on the Greek island of Kalymnos, where granddaughters are named after their maternal grandmother, but given a diminutive form until adulthood.
2. See Sutton and Vournelis (2009) for a discussion of the growth of indigenous cooking shows in Greece.
3. Short's work is groundbreaking in attempting to redefine what we mean by kitchen skill, but she relies on interviews for her study and does not focus on observation. Adapon's theoretically sophisticated account looks at both values and practices, but her application of Alfred Gell's theory of art and agency (1998) to cooking is quite different in focus than my own stress on learning and apprenticeship.

4. Indeed, they suggest that “kneeling” is a recognized stage in a child’s development akin to crawling or walking in Western societies.
5. Cf. Pascali (2006) for a discussion of dual-kitchen setups in Italian-American households.
6. While it is possible that the butter knife was a safety precaution for a young learner, I have seen Kalymnian adult women use butter knives to cut with. It seems to me that the butter knife was like the other tool choices discussed below, part of learning to make do with whatever tools come to hand.

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