

**Haaland. Porridge and Pot, Bread and Oven: Food ways and symbolism in Africa and the Near East from the Neolithic to the Present. (2007)**

Haaland's theoretical underpinnings are founded on the work of Goody. Goody asserts that there exist a close relationship between food and cosmological and ideological beliefs. Haaland's main thesis, then, is that there exists two distinct food ways in the Near East and Africa during the early Neolithic: bread and porridge, respectively. Haaland proposes that these two food ways relate to the development of pottery for use in cooking – with porridge associated with cooking pots and bread baking with ovens.

Haaland begins by submitting an example of food, in this case beer, acting as a medium for maintaining social relations. The Iteso of Kenya use beer as both a nourishing food and as a ritual substance. Beer drinking is a fundamental aspect of the social person.

Haaland then attempts to investigate the evidence for pottery production and the cultivation of cereals in both Africa and the Near East in order to discover general trends. In the Near East, broadly defined and inclusive of Egypt, cereal cultivation occurred approximately 2000 years before the spread of ceramics. In Africa, however, pottery predated the cultivation of cereals by about 2000 years. In Africa where porridge making was the primary source of food, pots became exceedingly important in cooking. In the North, however, where cereals high in gluten (and therefore good for baking) were first cultivated, ovens were emphasized more than pots. This was reflected in the development of the Near Eastern house. With the advent of the oven, the house shifted from the round to arrangements of multiple square rooms with an emphasis on storage. Haaland concludes that "pottery in the Near East was not used primarily for cooking food, but rather for serving good and beer and for brewing" and as such developed much later than the primary food in the region (176).

Beer is unique because it is a common food product and carries significant symbolic aspects in both the Near East and in Africa. Indeed the example mentioned already shows the social significant for beer in African cultures. In the Near East beer was provided alongside bread as rations, developing a social dimension from very early times. In the Near East beer is near contemporaneous with bread baking, but still predates the presence of pottery. Because of the high temperatures in the Near East, it has been proposed that the sun could have been enough to heat up the fermenting beer. Egypt, then, is firmly placed in the bread eating world, while Nubia lies on a crossroad between the bread eating realm and the porridge eating south.

While Haaland proposes a suggestive thesis, the article is lacking in persuasive organization and clear presentation of evidence. A clear emphasis is placed on ethnographic evidence; however, both ethnographic and archaeological evidence is often presented without clear context making the lines of argument at times challenging to follow. Haaland should be applauded though for not ignoring the symbolic aspects of food ways. Even in the Neolithic, food possessed meaning and influenced both the choice of cultivated foods and the technology associated with its production, storage, etc. Modern scholarship on food-ways typically finds its theoretical foundation in concepts like *biopower*. While this is indeed a modern construct, it would be unwise to completely dismiss such tools of analysis from scholarship, even of the prehistoric where it has traditionally not been applied.