This dissertation is about the people of Metangula, a small town on the shore of Lake Niassa in northwest Mozambique. It describes how they defined and navigated a meaningful existence, and where this manifested and took shape in local foodways. The work is based on 16 months of participant-observation in 2010 - 2011, interspersed with archival and library research, and complemented by a 97 household full-year dietary survey. Data suggest the population conceived of sustenance, and so wellbeing, to come in part from pro-social environments and affective states experienced and engendered while obtaining, cooking, and sharing meals. Acting in a sympathetic, self-abnegating, and peaceable manner underscored humanity. Anti-social sentiment and anomic actions compromised an individual’s personhood, and with it his or her metaphysical existence. This moral imperative underlay common distinctions of humans from sorcerers and animals, often with reference to alimentary habit. Individuals minimized their own and others’ suffering in part by provisioning food. This required intelligence, conceived to rely on cerebral-dwelling grubs, without which gains destroyed rather than enhanced life. It also demanded vitality, which came from foods pleasurable to consume, sanctioned sexual relations, and other contexts through which individuals became content and interdependent. Vivacity manifested in strength, but also in corporal girth and mass, which in turn served as measures of happiness and participation in the social order. Taboos on salt pouring that protected from illness
those without the mental and physical faculties to work further embedded compassion in both local foodways and the moral imagination. While the bulk of this dissertation is devoted to explicating local formulation of what food is and does to the body, its broader concern is related to the negotiation of existential dilemmas inherent in the human condition, namely controlling conflicting tendencies toward cooperation and competition, and balancing moral obligations to oneself and others. The dissertation is thus a contribution to anthropological scholarship on wellbeing. The study additionally offers an ethnographic introduction to the understudied Nyanja of Niassa Province, and a geographical and theoretical elaboration of food studies in relation to emotion, cosmology in the everyday, sensuality, and embodiment.