

SESSION 2: MILK, MAN, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Presided by Catherine Baroin

“Camel’s Milk, Cow’s Milk: Qualities and Uses among the Toubou (Chad, Niger)”

CATHERINE BAROIN Anthropologue, CNRS/UMR 7041/
Equipe Afrique/Université Paris X

The Toubou are pastoral nomads who raise camels, cows and goats. Their geographic range is centered in Northern Chad and covers **about one-quarter of the Sahara and its southern fringe, the Sahel**. Rainfall is insufficient to raise crops in these vast expanses, so subsistence is only possible through extensive livestock breeding. Extensive breeding is done with two aims: to increase herd size and produce milk. Milk is consumed by families either fresh or curdled, whereas by increasing herd size a few heads of livestock can be sold on the market to buy millet, tea and sugar, commodities which along with milk form the basis of the Toubou diet. **Increasing herd size is also a means of maintaining a vast network of livestock transfers between families that form the web of social relations**. This paper will first examine the conditions of milk production, i.e. strategies breeders use to maximize output in an ecological environment marked by great uncertainty. Next, the annual breeding cycle of the various livestock species (camels, cows and goats) will be described. **Milking techniques** will then be discussed before **broaching the topic of dairy product consumption**. Butter (made exclusively from cow’s milk), occupies a special place, because it factors not only in diet, but is also used as a cosmetic, a remedy and, when produced in sufficient quantities, is sometimes sold. Milk on the other hand is rarely put on the market, nor is it sold in the form of cheese, which the Toubou do not produce.

1) The constraints of dairy breeding in the Sahara-Sahel environment

In the Sahelian fringe of Toubou country that will primarily be discussed here, rainfall occurs during a short period of the year, in July and August. It is a prosperous time of year when the pastures grow, quickly drying out afterward. But **rainfall is uncertain, and herder mobility in search of pastureland is an essential survival strategy**. The small size of breeding units facilitates the fluidity of movement: each nuclear family (father, mother and children) organizes its moves independently. They must take into consideration the livestock’s needs, which vary depending on the species. Unlike camels, cows need to be watered daily and cannot be taken far from the wells. But away from the wells, the desert pastures are rich in mineral salts, and these are essential for camels. They must therefore be led there every year, whereas cows are confined to the Sahel region. **The younger men go north with the camels from November to January while the women and children remain in the south with the cows and goats**. The camels are serviced at that time, and with the end of winter (after a 12-month gestation period) comes the major camel birthing season. Camel milk is thus abundant a few months later in the hottest season (April-May), a period when on the contrary the cows run dry, because calves are mainly born during the rainy season. The combination of these two types of breeding enables families to have a supply of milk nearly all year long. Goats are generally not milked. They serve as a stock of meat on the hoof, saved for religious feasts, family ceremonies or to honor a passing guest.

2) Milking techniques

Prior to milking, the milk recipient made of spiral basketry is smoked using certain plants to prevent the milk from going sour and which lends it a particular taste. Cows and camels are milked twice a day, morning and evening. The offspring are first called and put to suckle, then shooed away during the milking process, only later allowed to finish feeding. **Both men and women milk the camels, standing up, whereas only women milk cows**, crouching down, holding the milk recipient on their knees. Goats’ milk, usually looked down upon, is only used to feed orphans or very young children, because its qualities are similar to human milk

3) Uses of milk

Milk is consumed fresh or curdled. **Camel’s milk, which is naturally salty and frothy**, provides complete nutrition and young men in the desert live on it alone for several months. At the camp, on the other hand, milk is used in the preparation of millet-based mush. It also is used as a sauce to accompany



the dense millet flour “ball” cooked in water that is a dietary staple. **Only when cow’s milk is plentiful enough is it churned into butter.** It is then preserved in liquid form, in glass or wickerwork bottles, and this is also how it is sold when it goes to market. Milk, however, is not sold, because most families are far from the urban clientele. Yet other pastoralists in the Sahel, such as certain Twareg tribes, sell their milk in the form of dry cheeses that are easy to carry. But the Toubou are not familiar with this practice.

4) Butter

Having butter in reserve is an undeniable sign of wealth, and few families can make such claims. It is highly valued by Toubou women for its many uses. It is an ingredient in sauces that accompany millet. It is also used as a medicine, in particular for coughs. But above all, it is a cosmetic that the women value. They spread it mixed with ground aromatic herbs over the body and in the hair. This is mainly why they urge some men to return to raising cattle as soon as possible when after a severe drought the herd of cow has been decimated.

biographie

Researcher with the CNRS, UMR 7041/Equipe Afrique/Université Paris X, France, anthropologist specialized in the Toubou. She has studied the social organization of these pastoral nomads in the Sahara and the Sahel from a number of angles in several articles and books, in particular *Les Toubou du Sahara central*, Paris, Editions Vents de sable, 2003, *Gens du roc et du sable - Les Toubou. Hommage à Charles et Marguerite LE CŒUR* (Edit), Paris, Editions du C.N.R.S., 1988, reissued* in 2002 par CNRS Editions, *Anarchie et cohésion sociale chez les Toubou: les Daza Kécherda* (Niger), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press/Paris, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, collection “Production pastorale et société”, 1985 (published with the support of the CNRS).