

SESSION 2: MILK, MAN, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Presided by Catherine Baroin

Economic and Symbolic Uses of Milk among the Peul (Niger, Cameroon, Burkina Faso)

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Spread throughout the savannas of all West Africa, the Peul are cattle breeders and “milk people.” The importance milk has for them is manifested constantly in everyday life. The economic uses and symbolic values of dairy products among the Peul in Western Niger can be taken as a reference. **Whereas men usually do the milking, the rest of the dairy sector is entirely in the hands of women.** They alone manage the share of dairy products reserved for family consumption and the portion destined for sale. This pertains to two products: **curdled milk and butter.** On the other hand, **fresh milk and whey** are not sold. They are highly valued and reserved either for the family or even for certain people. This system of dairy product management is buttressed by **sophisticated knowledge** of types of milk, characterized according to several criteria. Milk qualities are associated with **fodder plants**, herbs and leaves of bushes, as well as with **grazing practices.** The most intensely experienced issues with regard to milk have to do with **cattle breeds.** They focus on the alternative between a good milk breed but difficult to raise in the current context and an easier breed to raise but whose milk is less appreciated. Milk, as the most valued foodstuff, enters in social relations via a very ancient contract practiced among most Peul tribes: **the loan of a dairy cow.** It involves placing a brood cow and its calf with a needy family so that they can milk it. Once she dries up, both the cow and the calf are returned to their owner. This **form of solidarity** enters into a code of conduct that is part of the Peul ethic and at the same time is consonant with Islamic religious precepts.

The role of milk in Peul society in other contexts can be measured by the yardstick of this traditional “dairy model.” **Among the Mbororo in Adamawa, the most significant changes** have occurred in the commercial dairy sector. The evolution first affects the economic role of milk sales, which no longer enable women to supply the family with food but only to make small purchases. There is also debate about the very practice of women selling dairy products in the street. Strong pressure with regard to lifestyle, social attitudes and especially religious dogma are tending to ban this activity. Milk then becomes a product only consumed in the home.

Among the Peul in the southwest of Burkina Faso, the decrease in uses of milk stems from another logic. In the past, in periods when milk was abundant, the range of products made from milk went as far as to include soap, used solely by the Peul and which had a strong identitarian connection. Today, with the rarefaction of pastureland and the diminished supply of milk, Peul women have given up making soap and even butter. Now they only sell whole curdled milk or even fresh milk. In a context of milk shortage, the range of dairy products has been simplified to the basic commodity itself.

The example of Niamey illustrates the dynamics of dairy sectors in the vicinity of the big cities in the Sahel. Some villagers’ wives have gone into the dairy trade, going out to purchase milk from wives of herdsmen and reselling it in Niamey. Others collect fresh milk to supply the city’s dairies. Here, milk is collected in the bush not from women but directly from the



herdsmen themselves, cutting out the women's role. The new commercial channel presents a challenge to the traditional management of dairy products, redistributes the sexual division of labor and leads to increasing milk production by feeding artificial fodder to dairy cows. However, cows fed on bran yield a milk that the Peul themselves don't care for.

Development actions for breeding in Africa have long emphasized meat production. Failures in attempts to modernize the dairy sector have been ascribed to the weight of tradition in an activity dominated by Peul women. In fact, the production and sale of milk among the Peul are currently undergoing major changes.

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Geographer, Emeritus research fellow at IRD, Paris, associate member of CEAF (Center for African Studies at EHESS, Paris). His areas of research focus mainly on Sahel-Sudan pastoral societies, the adaptation of pastoral systems to the political territorialization of their space, and the animal heritage in Sahel-Sudanese pastoral areas (Niger, Burkina Faso, Cameroon). He has published several single-authored books including, in 1988: *Des Peuls en savanes humides: développement pastoral dans l'Ouest centrafricain*, Paris, Éd. de l'Orstom, 387 p, in 1995 a 2-volume 1301-page comprehensive survey: *Hautes terres d'élevage au Cameroun*, Paris, Éd. de l'Orstom, as well as edited volumes, published by Éd de l'IRD, in 1999: *L'homme et l'animal dans le bassin du Lac Tchad*, in 2002: *Patrimonialiser la nature tropicale; dynamiques locales, enjeux internationaux*, in 2005: *Patrimoines naturels au Sud; territoires, identités et stratégies locales* and in 1999: *Figures peules*, Paris, Karthala. In 2008, together with C. Baroin, he coordinated the publication of a special issue of *Journal des Africanistes* on the theme "the link with livestock." He is also member of the scientific advisory board of the Mega-Chad Network (International network of multidisciplinary research in the Lake Chad basin), series editor for "A travers champs" (IRD) and member of the editorial board of the journal *Natures, Sciences, Sociétés*.