



Camel milk as a relational food among the Sahrawi nomads of Western Sahara

Gabriele Volpato

University of Gastronomic Sciences, Pollenzo, Italy

Introduction

Food is the materialization of the relationality upon which life unfolds. This is so both from an ecological perspective, with food being material and energy flowing through trophic webs and linking individuals and species into communities and ecosystems, as well as in the social sciences, where food, its production, distribution, and consumption define and are nested into social relations of all kinds. Under relational ecologies^[1] and dwelling modes, in which communities engage 'with the land and with the beings – human and non-human – that dwell therein' and where 'the land, comprised by these relations, is itself imbued with the vitality that animates its inhabitants'^[2], the relations that constitute foods are themselves infused of relationality; food becomes a relational agent.

This relationality of food is here discussed using camel milk among the Sahrawi nomads of Western Sahara as a case study. The Sahrawi have been living for more than a thousand years as nomads in a vast desert territory including Western Sahara and part of Mauritania. They live in tents, moving with their camels, goats, and sheep following the scarce rains to intercept the patchy green pastures for their livestock^[3]. To the Sahrawi, camel milk is a staple food whose production and circulation sustain and shape the Sahrawi and their multi-species mode of dwelling the desert. In this presentation, the relationality underpinning the role of camel milk among the Sahrawi is discussed understanding camel milk as an holistic representation of the Sahrawi pastoral system and way of life.



Materials and Methods

The information presented is based on extensive fieldwork among the nomads of Western Sahara and obtained through a combination of anthropological and ethnobiological methods such as open and semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and free-listings with Sahrawi nomads. Funds for this research and its follow-up were granted by Ceres Research School of the Wageningen University, The Netherlands, as part of my PhD research on recovery and adaptation of subsistence practices and ethnobiological knowledge among the Sahrawi refugees, and currently by Unisg.

References

1. Wagner, A. (2013). *The Gaddi beyond pastoralism: making place in the Indian Himalayas*. Berghahn Books.
2. Ingold, T. (2021). *The perception of the environment: essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. Routledge.
3. Caratini, S. (2003). La République des sables: Anthropologie d'une Révolution. *La République des sables*, 1-266.
4. Volpato, G., & Puri, R. K. (2014). Dormancy and revitalization: the fate of ethnobotanical knowledge of camel forage among Sahrawi nomads and refugees of Western Sahara. *Ethnobotany Research and Applications*, 12, 183-210.

Results and Discussion

The Sahrawi sometimes refer to camel milk as the 'white blood' of the *badiya*, meaning 'desert' in Arabic and by extension 'nomadic life' among Arabic-speaking nomads. Like blood, camel milk is a precious organic liquid, one whose circulation produces and reproduces human and multi-species communities in a seemingly inhabitable barren landscape.

From a biological perspective, camel milk is produced by she-camels after delivery to sustain the newborn calf for about a year after birth. In the Sahrawi pastoral system, humans and calves share the milk produced to support the reproduction of the camel herd and its human counterpart. Camel milk is itself the outcome of complex ecological relations of camels and humans with living and non-living agents. It stems from the long history of adaptation of camels to desert environments, from the diversity of plants of the *badiya*, their roots fishing nutrients out of ancient soils with the help of mycorrhizal fungi, their seeds remaining dormant for decades before sprouting at the first rains, from the networks of wells dug across the desert, from the combination of grazing on salty plants like *Nucularia perrinii* Batt., trees like *Acacia tortilis* (Forssk.) Hayne, and herbs like *Stipagrostis plumosa* Munro ex T. Anderson and *Limonium* species.^[4]

This complex ecological web, enacted in the desert through Sahrawi pastoralism, materializes as milk in a wooden bowl through the ritual act of milking, which among the Sahrawi is performed twice a day by men standing on one leg and holding the bowl on the other bent forward. From that moment on, camel milk becomes a social glue made of rituals, obligations, beliefs, norms and institutions that tie the nomadic community in a social web of reciprocity. 'Never refuse milk to someone asking for it', 'never leave an elderly without fresh milk', 'always pass the milk bowl to your right after drinking', 'share the fresh milk from your animals with desert neighbors (who often happen to be relatives)' are just some of the behavioral rules surrounding the distribution of camel milk to the wider nomadic community.

Camel milk is eventually consumed in a convivial setting inside tents, passing a bowl in circle, thus perpetuating its relational nature. As milk carries everyday a different taste depending on the plants grazed by the camels, and as the plants grazed change based on time and location, each sip of camel milk becomes a representation, to the knowledgeable minds of the nomads, of the customary nomadic territory, of the plants that inhabit it, of the places where these plants grow, of values such as freedom and dignity. In camel milk, the Sahrawi find the *badiya*; in every sip, a postcard of its landscape, a map of the relations from which it emerges.



Conclusions

- Camel milk, among the Sahrawi nomads of Western Sahara, is much more than a staple food; it is the white blood that stems from the ecological web of the desert and is circulated through rituals, norms, obligations and mechanisms of reciprocity, continuously producing and reproducing the *badiya*, a lively desert.
- The study of relational ecologies and modes of dwelling can use food as an analytical lens to investigate the complex web of species and socialities through which life unfolds.

Contact

Gabriele Volpato
University of Gastronomic Sciences, Pollenzo, Italy
Email: g.volpato@unisg.it

Acknowledgements

We are very thankful to many Sahrawi for their patience, kindness, and hospitality during fieldwork. We also thank the Italian NGO Africa'70 and the Sahrawi Veterinary Services of the SADR (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic) for logistical support and cooperation.