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THE CULTURE OF MILK IN THE RURAL SOUTHEAST OF MINAS GERAIS, BRAZIL

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of milk in the daily life of rural families that live in the Mantiqueira Mountains, located in the southeast of Minas Gerais, the largest milk-producing state of Brazil. Based on interviews, the research investigates the experiences and customs of these families concerning milk, as well as the challenges involved in keeping a traditional way of living in the face of pressures on milk production.

LIVING WITH AND BY MILK: THE CASE OF THE MINAS GERAIS COUNTRYSIDE

On the arrival of European conquerors in Brazil, native populations had neither milk in their diet nor domesticated mammals for milk production.¹ In terms of food, Portuguese settlers brought sheep, goats and cows, for both meat and milk and dairying purposes. While sheep had only a minor impact due to the country's climatic conditions, and goats were concentrated mainly in the Northeast region, it was the cow that predominated, by adapting to suitable climatic conditions and vast territories. As Valenze² points out, the cow turned out to be the main source of non-human milk in the world, not only due to the animal's nature and size, but mainly because of the nature of European expansion, in which traditional European agricultural and breeding practices were transplanted to the New World. *Portmanteau biota* – domestic animals, plants, pathogens and weeds, that

1 Reference to this study: Rogéria Campos A. Dutra: The Culture of Milk in the Rural Southeast of Minas Gerais, Brazil. In Anikó Báti and Patrícia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 325–334.
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2 Valenze, Deborah: *Milk: A Local and Global History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011).

accompanied Europeans – is the term coined by Crosby³ to designate this transplantation procedure which, at the expense of native species, contributed to the success of the European colonists. Milk production in the New World was not unconnected with the expansion of European attitudes towards the land and livestock, thereby implying the imposition of particular kinds of property laws, labour arrangements, and the dietary habits, of the colonisers.

Minas Gerais is a Brazilian state located at the southeast of the country, and its name, meaning ‘General Mines’, refers to the presence of extraction fields for numerous kinds of minerals in its territory. European exploration, which began in 17th century, focused on the search for gems, precious metals, and Indian slaves. During the 18th century, Minas Gerais became the gold-mining centre of Brazil, in which the extraction and export of gold dominated the economic dynamics of the colony. Fuelled by a workforce comprised of African slaves, the gold rush resulted in a huge influx of European migrants, as well as the imposition of a Portuguese bureaucratic system for controlling gold extraction and mineral transportation – which implemented an isolation policy on the mining region. The decline in gold extraction (by the end of 18th century) led to the emptying of mining villages, with families and their slaves moving to the countryside, thereby expanding the borders of human occupation. Although conventional historical interpretations consider the post-gold-mining period to be one of economic stagnation, some authors⁴ highlight the fact that this opinion is based mainly on exportation criteria. According to these authors, even after the gold-mining period, subsistence farming continued to develop in autonomous and independent farms, located on the banks of the main routes to the coast, which supplied the needs, not only of mining villages, but also of travellers, merchants and muleteers who crossed the territory.

As an intermediate region, between mining centres and the main exportation port located in Rio de Janeiro, Zona da Mata was considered a strategic region for the Portuguese crown concerns. Recognised, at that time, as a natural barrier to the smuggling of mineral wealth, it was called ‘East Backyards’ by Portuguese authorities,

3 Crosby, Alfred: *Ecological Imperialism: the biological expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 368.

4 Carrara, Angelo and Benites, Flavio: ‘Pecuária leiteira e comércio de queijos em Minas Gerais, séculos XVIII–XX’ (‘Dairy farming and cheese trade in Minas Gerais, 18th–20th centuries’), *História Agrária* 89 (2023), 95–126; Carneiro, Patrício and Mattos, Ralfo: ‘Geografia histórica da ocupação da Zona da Mata Mineira: acerca do mito das “áreas proibidas”’ (‘Historical geography of Zona da Mata Mineira’s colonisation: the myth of the “forbidden areas”’), *Proceedings of the 14th Seminar on the Economy of Minas Gerais* (Cedeplar, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2010), 1–25.

and its current name, Zona da Mata de Minas Gerais ('Forest Zone of Minas Gerais') derives from the Atlantic forest which was originally the dominant vegetation cover.

Later, as a result of the 'coffee cycle' – a period in which coffee was the main export product of the Brazilian economy – coffee plantations, which had spread along this territory by the middle of the 19th century, acted as a driving force behind its settlement and development. One of the consequences of this economic expansion was the large-scale destruction of original forests, as coffee plantations were replaced by pastures, so much so, that, today, only the summits of some elevations have small patches of residual forests.

In fact, Zona da Mata had already been acting as a strong supplier of agricultural goods and dairy products, such as cheese and butter, to the main centres, such as Rio de Janeiro, since the gold-mining period, but this activity increased substantially after the decline of coffee production. This was due to farmers dedicated to milk and dairy production, taking advantage of land availability, better transport conditions, and the growth of the consumer market in the cities. As a rural region lying relatively close to urbanised consumers, its rugged relief, characterised by the predominance of hills, narrow valleys and some mountain ranges, was considered favourable towards the production of milk suitable for cheese production. Moreover, Zona da Mata also had a specific regional breed of cattle with an aptitude for milk production, as well as a proliferation of molasses grass (*Melinas minutiflora*), a perennial grass native to Africa. The 'africanisation' of regional pastures was one of the effects of the intense commerce with Africa, from which many species of grass came, together with slaves and animals.

Minas Gerais's place in people's imagination as the land of milk and cheese, of authentic rural, religious and strongly-traditional values, to which the state's identity was strongly attached, was being forged during the first decades of 20th century. So attached to milk production was the state's image of Minas Gerais that, during the first decades of the Brazilian Republic period, at the beginning of 20th century, there were a governance model called the 'Coffee with Milk Policy', reflecting the predominance in national power of the oligarchies of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, the first recognised as the greater coffee producer and the second as the milk one.

The Zona da Mata region featured the first dairy industry in Brazil, founded in 1888. By means of increasing milk production in other areas of the state and the country, the region still continues to direct a significant portion of milk and dairy products to

regional cities and to the great centres of the Southeast. The region has a land-usage structure characteristic of family farming – besides milk production, the local economy is based on subsistence agriculture, and maize and beans cropping associated with horticulture and domestic poultry breeding.

There is much talk about the importance of milk-production or cheese-making for the regional economy, generating income for the locals, as well as jobs in dairy industries, but the way in which milk and cheese are present in the daily lives of the locals – we are referring here to small farmers and rural workers who live on their own land or in small villages – is not very well known. This aspect was a focus of our research on which this paper is based. The research in question adopted a qualitative approach aimed at getting to know these rural dwellers' experiences, perceptions and customs concerning milk, conducted by means of 20 in-depths interviews. These were interviews featuring just a few questions and long answers, progressing in the form of conversations that allowed the discussion to flow naturally and to be driven by the respondents' input. We considered this to be the more adequate form of an interviewing procedure for a population known to be good for telling stories, not only about themselves, but also about their neighbours and ancestors.

As reported by these farmers and rural workers, dealing with milk production on a small property implies that a full day's work is dedicated to it. Unlike their forebears, the farmers nowadays do not have so much time to dedicate to crop production or other rural activities, because of the pressure from dairy factories requiring ever-higher levels of milk production. In fact, the relationship between a small milk producer and these dairy companies is based on unequal terms: the lower the quantity of milk the farmers produce, the lower also is the price paid per litre of milk, and although milk production varies according to seasons, these farmers are expected to maintain a steady level of milk-production throughout the year. So, if in past times they milked their cows once a day, nowadays they milk them twice daily. This in turn requires that the cows be fed more often, with the result that the farmers must dedicate more and more of their time to restoring pastures and planting forage crops for animal fodder. In the case of maize, a traditional food present in their own diet, the farmers are increasingly buying this food for home consumption instead of planting it, thus dedicating their resources, such as land and time, to the provision of maize crops for their cattle. Time and money are scarce resources that must be applied to land, crops and cattle, leaving these small farmers in difficulty when trying to transform their work into money. Sometimes, it seems as if it would be wiser for them to hire themselves out some few days of the week to larger farmers in order to

improve the 'cash flow' of their own businesses. That was a theme that emerged during the interviews with these farmers, who have great expertise in different kinds of rural activities, such as the construction and repair of fences, a much-required task in the countryside. Even though working for others is a chance to earn money – they could, for instance, then invest in improving the genetic quality of their livestock – instead of milking their cows twice a day; but they refuse to do this, showing a kind of pride in being landowners, a position which does not align with providing labour to larger farmers.

MILK AND DAIRIES IN DAILY LIFE

The cultural relevance of milk and milk derivatives is evident from their importance in the locals' livelihoods. We can observe how milk production mobilises knowledge and skills in terms of cattle breeding, which may involve a variety of tasks, such as selecting and buying good and healthy cows, relying on visual assessment, taking care of injured or sick animals, or planting crops for animal feed. Furthermore, dairy produce has an important part to play in the people's diet, as their consumption behaviour is influenced by the values and ideas that they hold about the nutritional qualities of milk.

Even if milk and dairy products are regarded as one of the staples of their diet, there are certain nuances in their consumption according to the different products, events, and people involved. Liquid and fresh milk is a beverage for children – they drink it with coffee or chocolate powder, during breakfast, as part of a mid-afternoon snack and, sometimes, at night before bedtime. In former times, before health campaigns about breastfeeding babies became general, cow's milk had been used in this context since early days. Except for some herdsmen who drink it when milking cows, milk is not a beverage for adult men, it being associated with sickness or childishness. Although there are no reliable data on *Cachaça* (Brazilian White Rum) drinking in the state's rural areas, it is said, among the locals, that this beverage consumption is greater than that of milk among male adults in the countryside. Nevertheless, milk is a basic ingredient in local recipes for deserts and homemade pastries, such as cakes, pies and biscuits. Popular beliefs regarding milk's medicinal qualities are constantly present in ordinary conversation – such as drinking a cup of warm milk to calm a person and to induce sleep, or drinking milk for the relief of stomach disorders, or even washing one's eyes with milk to alleviate eye irritation. Fermented milk, such as curd, is not frequently prepared, as it is only used in cake- and biscuit-

recipes when milk gets fermented accidentally. Butter, although consumed in large quantities, is nowadays acquired in shops; some women told me that refrigeration tanks used to store milk for selling to dairy factories do not allow cream to settle on top of the milk, thus hindering them from collecting cream to make butter.

Cheese, on the other hand, is a highly valued food, eaten during breakfast and snacks, with coffee and corn cakes; sometimes it is eaten alone or even with bananas, and it is also used in deserts, in which fruit jams and 'dulce de leche' are accompanied by a piece of cheese. Although it is a product greatly associated with regional identity, the kinds of cheeses prepared and consumed by locals today are not the same as those which were traded during 19th century – the latter so much appreciated by tourists nowadays. The people mainly consume fresh cheese, instead of matured and semi-matured varieties, despite the latter being part of their ancestors' diet. The reasons for this change touch on the social and economic factors attached to the challenges associated with keeping a traditional way of living that they face. Firstly, nowadays they have access to refrigerators in order to preserve fresh cheese, a highly perishable foodstuff which, not undergoing a maturing process, can be enjoyed immediately after being produced. Secondly, they cannot afford to set aside the very large quantities of milk required to prepare matured and semi-matured cheese, due to pressures from the dairy factories on milk production. And lastly, they prefer fresh-cheese making due to pasture changes. Although molasses grass had an important role in cattle breeding in the past, nowadays the pastures produce braquiária (*Brachiaria*) – another African grass introduced into Brazil in the 1960s, for the rearing and fattening of cattle. According to the farmers, even though braquiária grass improves the availability of feed for livestock, thereby enhancing productivity, molasses grass, they argue, was better for the production of a fat milk, which is more appropriate for matured and semi-matured cheese production. That is the reason why some of them contend that the milk produced nowadays does not easily support mature cheese making.⁵

Although in pre-industrial times in Europe, milking was traditionally considered a female task, nowadays, milking, in these small rural families, is part of the sphere of male activity. Cheese for domestic consumption, for example, is made by women

5 Gonçalves, Urias: *Construindo uma tradição: a circulação do queijo minas artesanal na cidade de Silverania, Zona da Mata Mineira* ('Building a tradition: cheese circuits in the town of Silverania, Zona da Mata Mineira'), Ph.D. thesis (Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências Sociais. Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, 2018), 158.

from milk separated by their husbands. Along with eggs, cheese is gifted to urban relatives when these women go to the city.

MILK SHARING

A gendered division of work based on family roles – women dedicate themselves to domestic activities including keeping chickens and gardening, while men plant crops and raise cattle – can clearly be observed, as part of the conservative traditional values and customs that the farming families of this region, hold. Social inequality is reflected in the distribution of the land area – apart from landless workers living in rural villages, almost 80% of rural properties have less than 100 hectares per farm.⁶ There are low levels of spatial and social mobility among the inhabitants, as most of them have their roots ‘on that soil’, marrying relatives or neighbours, and surviving by working on land. In former times, the Catholic Church was a strong institution, regulating everyday life, carrying out baptisms, marriages, funerals, and linking the community in Catholic festivities, among which Holy Week played a predominant role. At that time, farmers used to share the milk produced on Holy Friday, because, as they told me, they had no refrigerators to store the milk. This was their only day off during the year, in which milk was not transported to dairy factories. One of the effects of the arrival of electricity, and then also refrigerators, to local rural areas, was, that milk-farmers stopped this form of distribution, as milk produced on Holy Friday could now be stored in the refrigerators for transporting to the milk factory on the following day. However, some farmers still maintain the tradition of milk sharing nowadays; moreover, there are other rural localities along Zona da Mata’s territory which remain firmly committed to this event,⁷ pointing out further reasons than just economic concerns, for maintaining this custom.

Holy Friday is a festive day, celebrated with enthusiasm by landless rural workers, as well as by other residents in local villages. On the previous day (Holy Thursday) they organise themselves by selecting the vessels they will use to collect the donated milk, so that they can bring a great amount of it home. Then they wake up at dawn on Holy Friday – some of them do not even sleep at all on Holy Thursday night – and

6 Zoccal, Rosangelo – Souza, Antonioc and Gomes, Aloísio: *Produção de leite na agricultura familiar* (‘Milk production in family farming’), *Boletim de Pesquisa e Desenvolvimento* 17 (2005), 20.

7 Pedrosa, Daniela: *A partilha do leite: reciprocidade, circuitos alimentares e sociabilidade em uma comunidade rural em Minas Gerais* (‘Milk sharing: reciprocity, food circuits and sociability in a rural community of Minas Gerais’), Ph.D. thesis (Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências Sociais. Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, 2023), 176.

go walking, in groups, carrying their vessels, to farms where milk will be distributed. It is a time of fun, loud conversations and jokes, and the experiencing of intimacy due the fact of sharing the same journey. They treat it as an adventure, having unexpected experiences, such as walking long distances along rural paths or mud roads in the dark, and, furthermore, asking for something for free, which still does not come easy to them. On coming back to their homes, family members, relatives and neighbours – women and children – have already gathered in order to prepare various recipes involving milk, with an emphasis on those which demand great amount of it, such as ‘dulce de leite’ and rice pudding, as well as cakes and biscuits. The women cook during the whole day, converting milk into delicacies in such a way that they do not leave any of the collected fresh milk unused. Then, in addition to tasting every prepared plate, they divide the delicacies into small vessels, sharing them with the cooking group, neighbours and relatives, as well as gifting them to the farmers who have donated the milk.

But ‘gifts are never truly free’, according to Marcel Mauss’ study⁸ on forms of exchange that occur in traditional societies. Comparing such societies with modern ones, Mauss points out that the reduction of things to commodities, which are – ‘by nature’, as economic liberalism tells us – detached from their owners, is a very recent phenomenon in human history. As with early exchange systems highlighted by Mauss, the milk-sharing event in Zona da Mata of Minas Gerais tells us something about the obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate, configuring a pattern in which the distribution of milk among the locals builds relationships, a reciprocal exchange. These exchanges occur among groups, not individuals, building alliances and inspiring social solidarity, or, at least, a set of obligations based on social conventions that is not materially reduced – the milk itself – but involves a morality, the moral of reciprocity. However, it is worth remembering that it is also a way of relieving latent conflicts among the locals due to social inequalities, such as the difference between farmers and landless workers, or between those who have plenty of food (symbolised by the milk) and those who live with food constraints.

8 Mauss, Marcel: *The gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (London: Routledge, 1990), 224.

CONCLUSION

The connections we have with food encourage diverse research approaches in order to understand its everyday importance in our lives. As a means of nourishment, food involves large fields of biological investigations, but in order to understand food as a phenomenon it is also necessary to investigate the social and cultural dimensions of our diet. Food can assist us in discovering the story of our history, from environmental relationships to economic systems, from regional identities to traditional customs and values.

Milk occupies a special place in the large sphere of studies dealing with food and nutrition, thus building bridges between the different fields of research. This is the reason why Wiley⁹ states that milk is a good example of biocultural interaction because, if, on the one hand, the ability to digest milk in adulthood is a good example of biological variation across populations, on the other, this fact strengthens the perception that milk became edible due to ecological, geographical, historical and cultural circumstances.

Historical conditions enabled milk and dairy products to be present in the Brazilians' diet. As a population derived from European colonisation, however, there are differences in milk-diet rules inside the country, such as between rural and urban populations. The research findings to date indicate that there is a strong connection between the milk-production system – a rural area strongly attached to milk production as an economic activity – and its presence in the local diet. Economic transactions have been the main path to milk circulation, linking farmers, workers and dairy factories, as part of the milk-production chain in rural areas of Zona da Mata. However, the milk-sharing tradition, as an alternative form of exchange, is still active, a transaction that transcends divisions between individuals and groups, objects and persons. The uniqueness of milk as food, for these rural people, is that its crucial role is recognised, not only in terms of material subsistence, either economic or nutritional, but that it is also connected with meanings. As a basic element of their social life, its consumption reveals the power of a cumulative tradition, sometimes denoting the pressures of being excluded by the broad impacts of modernisation, while sometimes also acting as a symbol of belonging and the building of alliances and moments of solidarity.

9 Wiley, Andrea S.: *Cultures of Milk: the biology and meaning of dairy products in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

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