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Author(s): Gretchen Sneegas

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Cultures of Milk: The Biology and Meaning of Dairy Products in the United States and India

Andrea S. Wiley

Harvard University Press, 2014. 208 pp.

In *Cultures of Milk*, Andrea S. Wiley explores the material and cultural characteristics of milk in the United States and India. Wiley illuminates how each country's distinctive political, economic, religious, and historic context produces divergent meanings attached to dairy. These meanings, in turn, shape how milk is viewed and consumed. Wiley, a medical anthropologist, approaches this topic through the analytical lens of "bioculture," or how the forces of biology and culture constitute one another over time. In the case of milk, its biological properties are intertwined with its cultural significance in a relationship that continues to shift and flow according to current, historically specific conditions in both countries. Wiley illustrates how material characteristics such as dairy's nutritional value or lactose (im)persistence in humans are reflected and reconstructed through ideals of health and vitality. She marshals evidence from mass media, literature, regulatory policies, ethnographic and scientific data, and her own studies of child growth and milk consumption. As a result of these interplays, milk becomes embedded in discourses of national strength, vigor, and unity in both locations.

The book delves into the specific historical backgrounds shaping dairy culture in the U.S. and India, placing milk consumption within the context of colonialism and its consequences. Wiley argues that Britain had substantial culinary impacts on the United States, which had no indigenous dairying culture; in effect, Northern European immigrants transferred their dairying practices intact across the Atlantic, bringing cattle and Old World dairy products such as butter and aged cheeses. In India, the consequences of colonialism have been more subtle. Wiley traces millennia of Indian dairy history, which is characterized by the production of yogurt or "curd," *ghee* (a clarified butter made from fermented

milk), and fresh cheeses such as *paneer* and *chaana*. European practices of aged cheese production were not transferred to India, nor were European breeds of dairy cattle—India produces milk from its own indigenous *zebu* cattle and water buffalo.

However, British colonization did intensify the stance of the "sacred cow" as a powerful political symbol for the Indian nation. As Wiley indicates, Buddhist practices of cow worship and protection from slaughter gained new force during colonialism. As a result, calls for cow protection became a "rallying cry" as the cow became a compelling emblem for "Mother India," driving a movement for unity and independence (89-90). Yet despite the vaunted role of the *zebu* dairy cow as "sacred," Wiley notes that India actually consumes more water buffalo than cow milk, due to its higher butterfat content and the superior production of water buffalo relative to *zebu* cattle. While the U.S. does not have a religious history tied to dairying, Wiley makes a persuasive argument that Americans still see the cow as "sacred" in its own right, given its privileged status as nearly the sole provider of fluid milk, the political and economic subsidies the dairy industry receives, and the normative status of milk as a necessary food for growing children.

The theme of milk as food for children is common to both India and the U.S. Here, Wiley traces how dairy has played a role in discourses around building healthy bodies, going hand-in-hand with nation-building projects in the mid-twentieth century. Such narratives were characterized by the colonial context in India, and America's need for healthy, powerful bodies during both World Wars. These discourses are tied up in the nutritive materiality of milk in both countries, yet Wiley demonstrates how the biology of milk became entwined with broader themes of nationalism, purity, and the sacred.

Wiley's biocultural framework is a useful and compelling analytical hook to examine the ways in which milk consumption practices and meanings converge and differ between India and the U.S. A major strength of this approach is its ability to bridge the theoretical divide between

materialist and culturalist epistemologies, which traditionally have expressed opposing perspectives concerning how consumption practices are shaped and maintained. Is milk consumption a result of adaptations resulting from its nutritive value and the role of lactose (im)persistence in populations, or did lactose persistence arise from cultural ideologies shaping its prevalence? Wiley argues that the answer is both—the biological effects of milk and its role in the cultural imagination have together resulted in geographically specific consumption patterns.

What *Cultures of Milk* does not address, as Wiley discloses in the Introduction, is how these same biocultural processes have shaped dairy production. Production and consumption form a dialectic relationship; one cannot exist without the other. Wiley gives tantalizing hints concerning the role of production in both locations. For example, regarding state promotion of dairy consumption, she ties the U.S. school lunch program to the need to dispose of surplus dairy production. India, on the other hand, struggles to produce enough milk to meet demand, and has no comparable school or government programs. Given that India and the United States are two of the world's largest milk producers, this is a topic ripe for further analysis. Additionally, Wiley notes that Southeastern Asia is a little-studied region in terms of dairying practices. Further research on this topic will help close this gap in the literature.

In *Cultures of Milk*, Wiley asks the reader to consider the broader ramifications of telling children to “drink their milk.” She encourages us to consider the meanings we digest along with our dairy, and their biological, cultural, individual, and national ramifications. Wiley explores these views past the limits of “bio-ethnocentrism,” the normative establishment of Western European dairy practices inherent in many previous analyses of milk consumption (106). She inspires scholars to ask how specific historical, biological, economic, and political contexts shape dairying worldwide. In short, Wiley illuminates a path for those wishing to explore the distinctive ways in which biology and culture come together to shape lived experiences across the globe.

BOOK REVIEW | AMANDA MILIAN

High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America Jessica B Harris

New York: Bloomsbury. 2011. ix, 304 pp.

The author of nearly a dozen cookbooks and a recent inductee into the James Beard Foundation's Who's Who of Food and Beverage in America, Jessica B. Harris is among the top scholars of foodways in the African Diaspora. In *High on the Hog*, Harris constructs an elegant narrative history that connects the culinary experiences of the African and American continents to show how African Americans shaped the country around them. Harris disputes the portrayal of foods associated with slaves as “unhealthy, inelegant, and hopelessly out of sync with the culinary canons that define healthy eating today” (1). She discusses not only rural Southern fare, but also the elegant feasts that African American cooks prepared for the wealthy. These two distinct strands of the African American culinary experience guide the narrative. Ultimately, Harris emphasizes African Americans' culinary ingenuity, their ability to overcome adversity, and the significant role they played in the development of American cuisine, manners, and taste.

Moving chronologically and topically, *High on the Hog* offers a broad narrative of the origins and innovations of the African American culinary journey. Each chapter contains three parts: the introduction uses the author's personal experiences as a lead-in to the main subject, which is a topical analysis of African American contributions to American society and culture; finally, the chapter closes with an examination of the food of the period. Harris convincingly demonstrates how the diaspora built culinary connections between Africa and America. She walks the reader through African markets and traditional African and European dishes and cooking techniques. Through the Middle Passage, African slaves brought their culinary techniques and African tastes to America. After a somewhat superfluous “arrival story” for the many cultures on the North American continent, including the