Journal of Historical Geography 54 (2016) 1–12

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

Milk to Mandalay: dairy consumption, animal history and the political geography of colonial Burma

Jonathan Saha

University of Leeds, School of History, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 5 November 2015
Received in revised form
14 May 2016
Accepted 25 May 2016

Keywords:
Animals
Colonial Burma
Dairy
Cattle
Borders
Political geography

ABSTRACT

British imperial writers in Burma regularly moaned about milk. They complained about the difficulties they faced acquiring it in the colony. They were selfconscious about how their consumption of it might be viewed by the Burmese population, who predominantly did not drink cow's milk. And they worried about the quality of the supply provided by itinerant Indian dairymen, who they viewed as being neglectful and insanitary. Through these concerns the absence of milk became a marker of the colony's difference from the rest of the Raj. At the same time, the colonial government came to recognise the importance of locally-bred working cattle for Burmese agriculture. In their attempts to protect these valuable nonhuman labourers, Indian dairy herds were represented as a problem breed that threatened the indigenous stock. The threat from foreign cattle coalesced around epizootic disease and uncontrolled crossbreeding. These concerns were coterminous with official and nationalist anxieties about the Indian human population in the colony. Building on recent scholarship uncovering more-than-human geographies, this article reveals how colonial policies designed to improve the dairy industry and protect Burmese cattle contributed to the material and imaginative territorialisation of Burma, and its eventual separation from British India.

Writing at the end of the First World War, Colin Metcalfe Enriquez, a colonial official who served in Burma's borderworlds, outlined the difficulties of meeting visiting dignitaries' dietary expectations when in remote parts of the colony. He recalled some of the tedious culinary preparations for one particular viceregal arrival:

> Take, for instance, the case of milk. Nothing is so necessary to State Visits as good, foamy milk, full of cream and so on. There was a large file relating to the particular quart I have in mind. It was to be delivered several months hence at a little river-side village where the steamer would touch at tea-time. Some say the correspondence started before the cow was born. But she was a placid old beast, and didn't mind *that* a bit, until the milkman put on his apron. Then she shied, and kicked the bucket over. The whole credit of the apron belongs to the Sanitary Commissioner, who had made a special study of the art of milking. But apparently he did not know this old cow, and how irreconcilable the apron made her. Her panic only increased with rehearsals. There were sterilisers, and boilers, and strainers too, including a bit of an old shirt. But these were kept beyond reach of her apprehensive glances. At the last moment, when everything was ready, a frantic order came to buy the milkman *rubber gloves*. Rubber gloves in a Burmese river-side village!! They were simply not to be had – not for all th[e] wealth of Thibaw [the last king of Burma], if he ever had any.[1]

As it transpired, the viceroy's ship did not even land at the village. It steamed past oblivious to all the fuss. The carefully orchestrated efforts, frenetic correspondence and the cow's distress had been for nothing.

As Enriquez's passage attests, the British found it hard to get cow's milk in Burma. Despite legislation that required village headmen to provide provisions for officials and other Europeans touring the colony, fresh milk often proved difficult to acquire.[2] This was in large part because, in contrast to the rest of British India, there was not a large local market for dairy products. The experience of imperialism did little to change this situation. Although during colonial rule the

E-mail address: j.saha@leeds.ac.uk.

[1] C.M. Enriquez, *A Burmese Loneliness: A Tale of Travel in Burma, the Southern Shan States and Keng Tung*, Calcutta, 1918, 245.

[2] R.W. Winston, *Four Years in Upper Burma*, London, 1892, 182; G.W. Bird, *Wanderings in Burma*, London, 1897, 43; F.W.T. Pollok and W.S. Thom, *Wild Sports of Burma and Assam*, London, 1900, 201; G.E. Mitton, *A Bachelor Girl in Burma*, London, 1907, 131; Anon., *A Dog's Life in Burma, Told by the Dog*, London, 1909, 36, 68, 86.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2016.05.016

consumption of milk certainly became more prevalent, it remained comparatively unpopular throughout the period. By the time of the Japanese occupation, an estimated 1.8 fluid ounces of milk per capita were drunk daily in the colony. This compared to 6.6 fluid ounces across the border in India, and to roughly forty fluid ounces in Denmark and the United Kingdom. Of the milk consumed in Burma, almost a third was imported and eighty-nine per cent of this was tinned condensed milk.[3] Deborah Valenze has characterised the global history of cow's milk as the triumphant emergence of a culturally malleable, universal commodity. She argues that it has been a story 'of [the] conquest of space, energy, and dietary preferences'.[4] It would seem that the example of colonial Burma reveals some of the limits to this campaign of conquest.

Whilst Valenze's narrative of conquest and resistance deploys terms associated with imperialism, in what follows I consider the history of milk not in terms of the 'conquest of space', but instead in terms of the 'production of space'.[5] This is because the history of milk was imbricated in the drawing of what has been called the 'embryonic border' between Burma and the rest of British India, which eventually led to the colony's succession from the Raj in 1937.[6] Milk was caught up in the geopolitical territorialisation of the colony, rather than simply being a conquering colonial commodity. Milk was part of this production of colonial space both figuratively and materially. In the imperial imagination the lack of cow's milk was believed to be the result of the religious mores of Burmese Buddhists. At the same time, the introduction of dairying was associated with the encroachment of Indians into Burmese life. Colonial officials viewed it as an alien and potentially damaging intrusion. Inextricably linked to these imperial representations, were material obstacles to the introduction of large-scale dairy production in the colony. Milk offers another demonstration that, as Felix Driver and others have long argued, material encounters and imaginative representations were inseparable in the making of imperial geographies. In addition, as a definitively mammalian product for nourishing warm-blooded creatures, milk points to the importance of animals within the production of colonial space.[7]

Building on the insights of more-than-human geography, this article attempts to keep animals within its analytical framework. Over the last fifteen years animal geographers have been arguing that nonhumans are central to the production of spaces. Introducing their ground-breaking early collection on the subject, Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert called attention to how humans have attempted to confine other species in 'animal spaces', both material and imagined: the zoo, the farm, the wild. But they also went further and urged geographers to take into account the ways that animals transgressed these confinements, producing their own 'beastly places' in the process.[8] This has pushed geographers to consider how animals might be brought into their scholarship, as well as how animals might force changes within scholarship itself. Certainly, the once axiomatic centrality of human-animals in human geography has been questioned. The privileged role of agent ascribed to humans has been much critiqued through anti-humanist post-structuralism and a re-conceptualisation of agency as relational, dispersed and contingent.[9] As Henry Buller has tracked in his recent surveys of this expanding field, this has led to considerable methodological innovation. Ethnographic methods along with observational and participatory forms of multi-species research have enabled geographers to provide space in their work for nonhuman creatures as subjects for themselves, as opposed to mirrors for humanity.[10] For those of us working on the past, some of these methods are challenging to deploy without the risk of anachronism. Nevertheless, the recognition of the importance of embodied experiences and materiality, the dissolution of the nature-culture binary, and the attention being paid to how social contexts are produced, which underpin these new methods, are developments that historical geographers can build on to uncover how animals have been imbricated in imperial geographies.

Within these discipline trends, this article picks up particularly on Kersty Hobson's call for animals to be conceived of as subjects within political geography.[11] In this case, the article argues that the politics of Burma's contentious separation from British India was informed by cattle. This does not mean attempting to represent the subjective experience of the animals involved in this history; although at appropriate moments – and when the sources allow – this is brought into the discussion. Rather, it means conceptualising cattle as 'lively commodities'. The term captures the tension in how nonhumans were recognised as subjects with particular capacities and characteristics, whilst simultaneously attending to the ways in which they were rendered as objects representing human desires and exchange values.[12] The implication of this when studying milk (or other animal-derived human food stuffs) is that historians should not neglect the living, flesh and blood means of production involved. In order to bring animals into the historical political geography of colonial Burma as subjects, the new relationships with cattle engendered by the commodification of their bodies and in the consumption of their milk need to be put at the centre of the study.

Drinking cow's milk was an act of 'interspecies intimacy'. It was a material and imaginative encounter with another mammal that involved consuming a liquid usually expressed to feed that creature's young. Brett Walker makes a similar point in his study of moments when humans have been attacked by carnivorous, predatory animals. He argues that these events demonstrate the unnerving human-animal intimacy of encounters in which a human is reduced to being another creature's source of protein.[13] The

[3] *Report on the Marketing of Milk in India and Burma (Abridged Version)*, Delhi and Simla, 1941, 8–11.

[4] D. Valenze, *Milk: A Local and Global History*, New Haven, 2011, 4–7.

[5] H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by D Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, 1991.

[6] N. Osada, An embryonic border: racial discourses and compulsory vaccination for Indian immigrants at ports in colonial Burma, 1870–1937, *Moussons* 17 (2011) n.p.

[7] F. Driver, Imagining the tropics: views and visions of the tropical world, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 25 (2004) 1–17; and for a study that argues for the material importance of animals, see J. Lorimer and S. Whatmore, After the 'King of Beasts': Samuel Baker and the embodied historical geographies of elephant hunting in mid-nineteenth-century Ceylon, *Journal of Historical Geography* 35 (2009) 668–689.

[8] C. Philo and C. Wilbert, Animal spaces, beastly places: an introduction, in: C. Philo and C. Wilbert (Eds), *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations,* London, 2000, 1–36.

[9] E. Fudge, A left-handed blow: writing the history of animals, in: N. Rothfels (Ed.), *Representing Animals,* Bloomington, 2003, 3–18; L. Nash, The agency of nature or the nature of agency? *Environmental History* 10 (2005) 67–69; D. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Chicago, 2003.

[10] H. Buller, Animal geographies I, *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (2013) 308–318; H. Buller, Animal geographies II: methods, *Human Geography* 39 (2014) 374–384.

[11] K. Hobson, Political animals? On animals as subjects in an enlarged political geography, *Political Geography* 26 (2007) 250–267; although, as has been recently noted, the impact of this on the sub-field of political geography has only been slight, see K. Srinivasan, Towards a political animal geography? *Political Geography*, in press.

[12] R-C. Collard and J. Dempsey, Life for sale? The politics of lively commodities, *Environment and Planning A* 45 (2013) 2682–2699; N. Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, Minnesota, 2009.

[13] B.L. Walker, Animals and the intimacy of history, *History and Theory* 42 (2013) 45–67.