« After Fish, Milk Do not Wish ». Recurring Ideas in a Global Culture
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In October 1992, I began my research on the social history of leprosy in Mali. One of my first interviews took place with Hamadou Sow, a Fulani man from the village of Ségé in the Soufouralaye arrondissement (near Mopti). During our conversation I learned of a belief which associated leprosy with the simultaneous consumption of mudfish (in Bambara manògò; in French silure) and milk. The belief meant little to me at the time. Hamadou simply listed it as one of two other known causes of the dreaded disease: sexual intercourse without washing and sleeping beneath a full moon.1 From that moment onward, however, I faithfully documented these and other beliefs whenever mentioned in subsequent interviews. It quickly became apparent that the association of leprosy with fish and milk existed amongst many other communities and peoples throughout Mali, especially along the Niger River.

Several months later, while preparing a paper for the Mande Studies Association 1993 conference in Bamako, I found a brief but perplexing quotation from a fourteenth-century French doctor, Bernhard de Gordon, who taught at the university in Toulouse: ‘Comedere lac et pisces eadem mensa inducit Lepram’ (Skinsnes 1973: 224). The uncanny presence of this same belief in seemingly unconnected societies—medieval Europe and twentieth-century Mali—prompted me to investigate the matter further after returning to the United States. It turned out that the belief was more widespread than I had ever imagined. Although the connection to leprosy has since disappeared, the negative reputation of fish with milk circulates amongst many Americans even today. Most recently, a history professor at Washington University informed me that he also often heard the prohibition repeated within his family while growing up in Pennsylvania.2

Though undeniably thrilling for antiquarians, these dramatically diverse

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* I would like to thank Rosa Dejorio, John Hunwick, Ben Soares, and Ivor Wilks for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this article.
Citations of fish/milk avoidance can help us refine our understanding of culture within a global framework. On one level, they corroborate already established arguments that societies have always been intrinsically syncretic and porous agglomerations, not discreet entities with rigidly bounded belief systems. Over millennia, human ideas have circulated freely like oxygen—absorbed, rearranged, and emitted in increments over and over, across great distances. As the examples in this article suggest, we can identify fragmentary patterns of circulation but never a single source culture from which a given idea or belief has supposedly diffused across the world. A sufficiently wide view of history prevents one from labeling human thoughts simply according to the society in which they appear at a given moment in time.

On a second level, the citations reveal how knowledge and belief have long circulated simultaneously in both oral and written modes without necessarily being confined to a particular intellectual class. Even in highly literate societies like the United States, the fish/milk belief has passed from generation to generation as much by word of mouth as through published texts. The following discussion provides an example of how one can recognize the forgotten or never imagined links between societies seemingly unconnected in both space and time. Though focused on the past, this discussion can also inform debates over ‘multiculturalism’ now raging in the present.

The Fear of Fish

The numerous permutations of beliefs concerning fish clearly derived from notions and ideas of widely different provenance. Fish avoidance, for example, was practiced at times in ancient Egypt as it is in many parts of Africa today (Darby 1977: 394; Brewer 1989: 17). Catfish (a bottom-dweller similar to mudfish) in particular was classified as taboo and, as suggested by its association with leprosy, retains a mildly contemptible status in contemporary Mali. In a well-known work on animals, the Arab scholar al-Damiri (1341-1405) argued that fishes which live in mud are forbidden in Islam (Ruska 1987: 121). Though intriguing, such similarities in dietary beliefs hardly prove a common origin any more than the practice of vegetarianism in Berkeley and Bombay.

In many ways, searching for singular sources of beliefs distracts us from the more illuminating spectacle of their reconstitution in different contexts. Among the examples collected for this article, an eighth-century Arabic grammar by Sibawayhi (d. ca. 796) is the earliest which specifically cautions against fish and milk consumption. To illustrate the use of the conjunction wa (‘and’), Sibawayhi employed the following expression: ‘Do not eat fish

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3. For a thorough discussion of this issue, see Amselle 1990.
4. For a more involved discussion of this issue, see Goody 1987.
and drink milk’ (la’ ta’kul al-samak wa tashrub al-laban). His grammar became the most influential throughout Arabic and Islamic societies, and, to this day, the expression is imbedded by rote memorization in the minds of koranic students from Cairo to Timbuktu. Over the centuries, the example has passed from grammar to grammar, commentary to commentary. It appears for example, in Ibn Ajurūm’s (d. 1323) work which is the basis of a text—widely used for teaching Arabic in the Timbuktu region—by an early nineteenth-century Mauritanian scholar. Memorized and recited by each successive generation, the expression is as much an oral phenomenon as it is a written one.

Another early example occurs in Ibn Sina’s well-known eleventh-century medical treatise, The Canon. Here one is cautioned more specifically that, according to unspecified Indian sources, eating fish with milk can provoke ‘chronic diseases like leprosy’. Given Ibn Sina’s influence on medieval European medical writers, it is highly possible that Bernhard de Gordon derived his maxim from The Canon. However, that particular belief probably overlapped with other similar ones already circulating. One Jewish Talmudic tradition, for example, warned that eating fish in the spring predisposed one to leprosy (Unterman 1991: 78; Hirsch 1903: 403). Another tradition stated that eating fish and meat together could have the same effect (Fish . . . 1971: 1327).

In Mali, the milk/fish taboo appears to have similarly overlapped with the more specific stigma of mudfish. Many elderly informants (born in the first three decades of this century) mentioned mudfish when asked to describe what their own village elders had considered to be the causes of leprosy. The particulars of this belief varied considerably. For example, in some cases, eating mudfish in any form, not just with milk, put one at risk while in others only unsmoked mudfish was suspected. In still other versions, it merely aggravated pre-existing cases rather than provoke the disease itself. This last example resembles widespread assumptions that goat meat also aggravated but never caused leprosy.

As other scholars, such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977), have so forcefully argued, explaining cultural practice is far more problematic than its description. No fish is known to carry the leprosy bacillus. In fact, the only species in which the disease occurs naturally are nine-banded armadillos

5. Ahmad al-Jayyid Ibn al-Tālib Muḥammad b. Abu Bakr al-Ṣādiq al-Burtali (d. 1230 A.H./1815 A.D.), Sharḥ al-Ajāʿībiyya (ca 1800), Centre de documentation et de recherches Ahmad Baba (CEDRAB), Timbuktu, ms n° 5629.
6. GRUNDER 1970: 406; DARBY 1977: 400. A manuscript copy of Ibn Sina’s Canon can also be found at CEDRAB in Timbuktu.
7. The varied beliefs associated with fish and leprosy were learned during interviews with many individuals. More details on their ethnicities, places of origin, and ages can be found in my doctoral thesis (1995). A revised version, under the same title, will be published by Heinemann for its Social History Africa Series. See, for example, Ousamane Abocar, 6 Nov. 1992; Bakari Boré, 22 March 1993; Dramane Dambélé, 9 Apr. 1993; Jean-Baptiste Dambélé, 21 March 1993.
(rodents common in eastern Texas and Louisiana) and, more rarely, Mangabey monkeys and chimpanzees found in remoter locations in tropical Africa. Several leprosy specialists have also informed me that, in spite of past research, there is no recognizable connection between fish consumption and leprosy. Indeed, interviews with nearly two hundred Malian informants suggest that, despite the ubiquity of this belief, people never actually attributed real leprosy cases to diet. Mudfish was merely part of a theoretical etiology aimed more at promoting a particular dietary habit than at preventing a disease. People similarly used leprosy as a warning against other contemptible practices such as sexual intercourse during menstruation or sleeping beneath a full moon.

The most common explanations for actual leprosy cases were ‘God’s work’ (alla ka bara) and ‘sorcery’ (su baganw). My doctoral thesis examines these and other etiologies in greater detail. In short, people deflected responsibility away from patients so that their behavior and diet were never considered causes of their disease. Nonetheless leprosy’s theoretical association with contemptible practices reinforced its stigma, which patients felt more acutely in sundry forms of social isolation including divorce and exclusion from meals and prayer. Leprosy’s intense stigma in medieval Europe may also explain why the remarkably similar beliefs concerning fish and milk appeared so cogent there as well.

For the moment we lack sufficient textual evidence for understanding how people in Mali practiced and explained mudfish and fish/milk avoidance over time. One Arabic manuscript now housed at CEDRAB in Timbuktu, however, does offer a small glimpse at the intermingling of beliefs and practices of different origins. Well aware of the grammar example mentioned above, one mid-nineteenth-century Muslim scholar in Djenne inquired about the medical merit of the advice it contained. A scholar in Timbuktu replied that he found no evidence in Arabic scientific writings to support the belief. However, he did hear that the inhabitants of an island (presumably on the Niger) abhorred eating fish with milk because they believed such a diet caused leprosy. Allowing the questioner to draw his own conclusions, the Timbuktu scholar noted that none of these inhabitants was infected with the disease. In closing, he advised eaters of fish and milk not to consume one before digesting the other.

It is important to note that the grammar example mentions neither leprosy nor mudfish. Nonetheless, the Timbuktu scholar found a way of

9. Understanding how specific dietary habits develop requires extensive research outside the scope of this article.
11. Sa’id al-Ḥabīb Bābā b. Muhammad al-Ḥādi al-Wāḏānī al-Timbuṭi, Ajwība ([early 1800s?], copied 1266 A.H./1850 A.D.), CEDRAB, ms n° 1038, p. 20. Note the precise date of original composition is not indicated in this text.
connecting its message with local practice. A legend collected by a French researcher, earlier in the twentieth century, suggests that, in some communities, people explained their aversion for mudfish differently. The legend says that the rivalry between two clans originated when two travelling brothers arrived at the Niger River but, without a canoe, were unable to cross. A mudfish appeared and offered to transport them. When the first brother reached the other side safely, he instructed the fish not to carry the other whom, he said, was violent and cruel. The fish did so anyway. When the second brother arrived safely on the other side, he killed the fish with his saber and offered half to his brother. The first brother refused and proclaimed that thereafter none of his descendants would ever touch the flesh of that fish again.12

The peculiar qualities of mudfish, its physical appearance as well as its ability to survive in the river bed during dry spells, no doubt contributed to such apprehensive fascination in Mali as well as in other parts of West Africa. Decorative and ritual objects found around the Palace of Ife, in what is today southern Nigeria, depict the fish in a variety of contexts. Most notably, a bronze pendant features the Oba (King) of Benin supported at each arm by his attendants and positioned above a human head with mudfish emanating from its nostrils. Mudfish also spring from the Oba's waist and, along with some frogs, fill the space beneath the attendants' feet.13

The association of fish consumption with leprosy also existed in some parts of Northern Nigeria. Charles Henry Robinson, a British missionary who visited Kano in the late nineteenth century, learned that leprosy patients generally avoided fish of all types fearing that their conditions would worsen otherwise (Robinson 1897: 149). From the same area, a handbook of medical advice written in Arabic verse included a recommendation against fish and milk.14 Again, as in Mali, these varied examples suggest an overlapping of multiple beliefs rather than the linear diffusion of a single coherent idea.

One major significance of all the examples presented thus far relates to the reconstitution of ideas in widely varying contexts. In all societies, fish/leprosy theories or fish/milk phobias appear to have circulated both orally and textually, exposing the actual porosity of assumed boundaries between 'formal' and 'folk' knowledge, European and non-European,

12. Dr Cazanove, 'Les conceptions magico-religieuses des indigènes de l'AOF', L'Hygiène sociale [ca 1920-30s], Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (CAOM), Aix-en-Provence, Agence FOM 384, 2083. Rosa Dejorio (University of Illinois, Champaign) collected from informants in Ségou very similar legends used to explain the origins of that town.
14. Manuscript n° 836, Falke Collection, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL. The title page is missing so the author and date are not known. It most likely predates the twentieth century.
Islamic and non-Islamic, etc. The beliefs documented by Robinson were listed as Hausa ‘superstitions and customs’ in a 1913 monograph. Seven years earlier, however, a respected and well-known British leprosy specialist, Dr Jonathan Hutchinson, promoted virtually the same ‘beliefs’ as ‘scientific hypothesis’ in a 407-page book, On Leprosy and Fish-Eating: A Statement of Facts and Explanations (1906). Synthesizing data collected from around the world by himself and by others, Hutchinson argued vehemently against the then prevailing contagion theories. He suggested instead that the ‘cause of the disease is some ingredient or parasite generated by, or introduced into, fish which has been either not cured at all or cured badly’ (ibid.: v).

Hutchinson’s devotion to his hypothesis had grown steadily since 1855 when he first observed leprosy patients in a London hospital. In 1874, a Norwegian doctor, Armauer Hansen, first identified the actual leprosy bacillus. Although, at the time, the bacillus had never been found in fish or any other species except humans, Hutchinson continued his search for even the most trivial evidence. His massive tome reads much like conspiracy theories of today, earnestly though lamentably struggling to iron out every possible contradiction one by one. Hearing that the ‘Kaffirs’ of Natal in South Africa had leprosy but never ate fish, he travelled there with his daughter in 1901-1902 to see for himself. He acknowledged that this was indeed the case, but insisted that those individuals contracted the disease from other ‘men who had been into Cape colony to work, and had there presumably eaten bad fish’ (ibid.: viii).

‘All the facts which I obtained in South Africa supported the conclusion that the disease had commenced in those regions in connection with the establishment of fish factories at Cape Town, and subsequently on other parts of the coast and that it had spread inland and northwards by the conveyance to those parts of badly cured fish’ (ibid.: ix).

In true conspiratorial fashion, the book includes several maps with small red dots indicating the primary points of incidence around the world. They all fall, of course, near coastlines, rivers, and lakes. In a similar fashion, it also correlates the rise and fall of leprosy incidence with the power of the Catholic Church which promoted fish diets on fast days (ibid.: 91).

Even in his day, Hutchinson’s theory lacked credibility amongst most other doctors who then believed in leprosy’s contagiousness and advocated strict isolation of its sufferers. With the advent of colonial expansion, containment of the bacillus in leprosariums became the most popular method of prevention in Asia and Africa. Hutchinson considered this harsh method unnecessary and used his fish hypothesis as an argument against it. In this one respect, he was ahead of his time. By the 1950s, the international medical community acknowledged the futility of leprosariums since the disease was not highly contagious after all. Newly developed sulfa drugs also enabled effective out-patient treatment for the first time.
As late as the mid-1960s, a handful of doctors trained in scientific medicine were still earnestly investigating the fish hypothesis. Meny Bergel, director of the Leprosy Research Laboratory in Rosario, Argentina, published several articles (1958, 1959, 1960, 1966) attempting to explain 'the well established correlation between the occurrence of leprosy and the ingestion of diets high in decomposing fish'. In short, he found that the consumption of rancid fats and unsaturated fatty acids favored the growth of the Hansen bacillus in laboratory rats. Though never harboring the actual disease, fish nonetheless facilitated its development. Bergel therefore suggested that there was indeed some merit to Hutchinson's long abandoned ideas. Since then, however, medical researchers appear to have completely lost interest in the fish hypothesis which, according to several leprosy specialists consulted for my research, is no longer taken seriously.15

Fish/milk phobias, whatever their origins (Sibawayhi, Ibn Sina, Bernhard de Gordon, etc.) or manner of transmission (medical texts, Arabic grammars, word-of-mouth) have similarly defied conventional cultural boundaries and reappeared in the most incongruous places. In 1315, a physician of Valencia sent a letter of advice to his two sons then studying in Toulouse. In addition to counsel concerning lodging and sleeping habits, he warned that eating milk and fish at the same meal 'produces leprosy' (Thorndike 1944: 156-160). A sixteenth-century collection of French proverbs listed a witty phrase of similar meaning though without specific reference to the disease: 'Après poisson lait est poison'.16 With comparable poetics, the American Benjamin Franklin warned in his Poor Richard's Almanac (1742): 'After Fish, Milk do not wish'. Such warnings clearly circulated orally amongst 'common folk' as well. A 1947 monograph on folklore collected in the Ozark mountains (in northwestern Arkansas, southeastern Missouri, and northeastern Oklahoma) includes a chapter on 'Mountain Medicine' which describes a widespread belief that 'fish and sweet milk, taken into the stomach at the same meal, combine to form a deadly poison' (Vance 1947: 115).

In the 1950s, the folklorist, Newbell Niles Puckett, amassed a rich collection of 'beliefs and superstitions' from hundreds of individuals then residing in Ohio. Of those interviewed, a number of individuals of African, German, and English origin repeated this belief in slightly varying forms. One eighty-year-old woman specifically warned against catfish and sweet milk (Hand, Casetta & Thiederman 1981: 265, 381). A 1967 study of dietary habits amongst African-Americans born in the South mentions one man who avoided fish and milk at the same meal—an 'old tradition' which he never broke (Winifred 1967: 137). As a final and very recent example,

15. Personal communications, Dr Wayne Myers (Armed Forces Institute of Pathology), Dr Paul Converse (Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health), and Dr Leopold Blanc (World Health Organization).

one of my colleagues learned the same advice from her African-American grandmother.17

As these scattered citings suggest, eating fish with milk remained contemptible even though its supposed consequence, leprosy, had disappeared as a major health problem in Western societies. In other words, the kernel of an idea survived while its contextual meaning changed. This pattern may also apply to beliefs relating to sexual intercourse during menstruation. In Mali, many elderly informants heard from their own elders that children conceived during menstruation were predisposed to contracting leprosy.18 Jewish Talmudic traditions and the versified Arabic medical guide from Northern Nigeria stated essentially the same belief (Unterman 1991: 147). Without mentioning leprosy specifically, two of Puckett's informants reported that children from menstrual intercourse would be 'deformed' or have red skin (Hand, Casetta & Thiederman 1981: 63, 91). Again, stigmatized biological conditions were associated with contemptible practices. In the absence of one condition, other similar ones assumed the same role.

To this day, medical researchers do not agree on the manner of leprosy's transmission. Some speculate that the bacillus can enter the body through the respiratory tract, the skin, and possibly even the gastrointestinal system. How this occurs exactly remains uncertain. A medical handbook published by the Hawaii Department of Health states: 'Most people infected with *M. leprae* never develop any illness.' Of the four or five percent of exposed individuals who do develop the disease, the majority will have spontaneous resolution of their infection' (Frankel 1991: 6). Risks of infection are thought to increase only by living in close contact with an untreated person for a prolonged period of time. While the disease is not hereditary, a leper's family members are at greatest risk because they share living quarters.19 Nobody can yet explain why the illness develops in some people and not in others, although some speculate it may depend on the 'functional capacity' of the immune system or on genetic factors. Most specialists agree that the risks of contracting leprosy from another person are extremely small, especially when compared with other diseases like smallpox, measles, and meningitis.

Recently, doctors have been identifying each year about ten new cases of leprosy resulting from infection on United States soil. (Nearly all other cases are known to have originated abroad.) This phenomenon is somewhat puzzling, since these few individuals had no prior contact with other patients. Upon further investigation, researchers found that all the domestically infected individuals did have prior contact with nine-banded

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17. Jacalyn Harden, personal communication.
armadillos. It has been known since 1971 that this animal can carry the bacillus and can be infected in the wild. As noted above, Mangabey monkeys and some chimpanzees are the only other species found to carry the disease. Dr Wayne Myers, of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, is currently investigating other animals in Benin which may also be responsible for leprosy transmission. Like several other specialists consulted for my doctoral research, he highly doubts that fish are connected in any way to the puzzle.

Though, for the moment, the fish hypothesis is no longer relevant in medical circles, its peculiar history should help inform current discussions in the social sciences and humanities. Proponents of 'multiculturalism' in the United States have drawn more attention to once neglected regions like Africa, yet in the process they have reinforced a myopia which rigidly divides the study of humans on the basis of discreet cultural units of races, nations, and classes. In a similar fashion, cultural theorists have revealed the constructed nature of knowledge while nonetheless preserving the myth of its hierarchical arrangement. Unlike material artifacts, ideas in their most basic form are as mobile and mutable as the air we breathe. They float easily through prison walls and across continents. They are inhaled through our listening ears or reading eyes, absorbed in our thinking brains, and exhaled in some new form through our speaking mouths or writing hands. We can identify some of the places through which they have passed but never a single source from which they originated. In that sense, they belong to the world as a whole rather than one particular person, society, or culture.

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ABSTRACT

A widespread belief in Mali associates certain forms of fish diets with leprosy (Hansen’s disease). Very similar aversions to fish diets have existed in ancient Egypt, the Islamic Middle East, northern Nigeria, medieval Europe, and colonial America. This article compares evidence collected from oral interviews and Arabic manuscripts in Mali with examples from sources for these other regions. The striking similarities in belief provide an opportunity for rethinking assumptions about ideas and their transmission. In this sense, this article contributes to a growing body of scholarship which challenges the categorization of human beliefs and knowledge in terms of discreet units such as ethnicities, races, nations, and classes. It also questions categorization on a hierarchical basis in which links between ‘scientific’ and ‘folk’ knowledge are often overlooked. The article concludes with a suggestion on how human thought can be understood in global terms.
RÉSUMÉ

‘Après poisson, laict est poison’. D'idées récurrentes au sein d'une culture globale. — Une croyance répandue au Mali lie l'ingestion de certains poissons à la survenue de la lèpre (maladie de Hansen). Une aversion semblable à l'égard du poisson est attestée en Égypte ancienne, au Moyen-Orient, dans le nord du Nigeria, en Europe médiévale et dans l'Amérique coloniale. Cet article compare les données obtenues lors d'entretiens oraux et celles trouvées dans les manuscrits arabes du Mali avec des exemples provenant de ces autres régions. Les similarités frappantes existant entre ces croyances sont pour nous l'occasion de repenser les hypothèses relatives à la transmission des conceptions et des idées. À cet égard, cet article rejoint les efforts des chercheurs qui contestent la classification des croyances et des connaissances en fonction de critères rigides comme l'ethnie, la nation, la race ou la classe. Il conteste également les classifications qui laissent de côté les liens entre connaissance scientifique et savoir populaire et il s'achève sur une proposition visant à appréhender les idées et les croyances selon une perspective globale.

Keywords/Mots clés: Mali/Mali, Islam/Islam, food taboo/tabou alimentaire, leprosy/lèpre, medicine/médecine, multiculturalism/multiculturalisme.