

The Milk Road

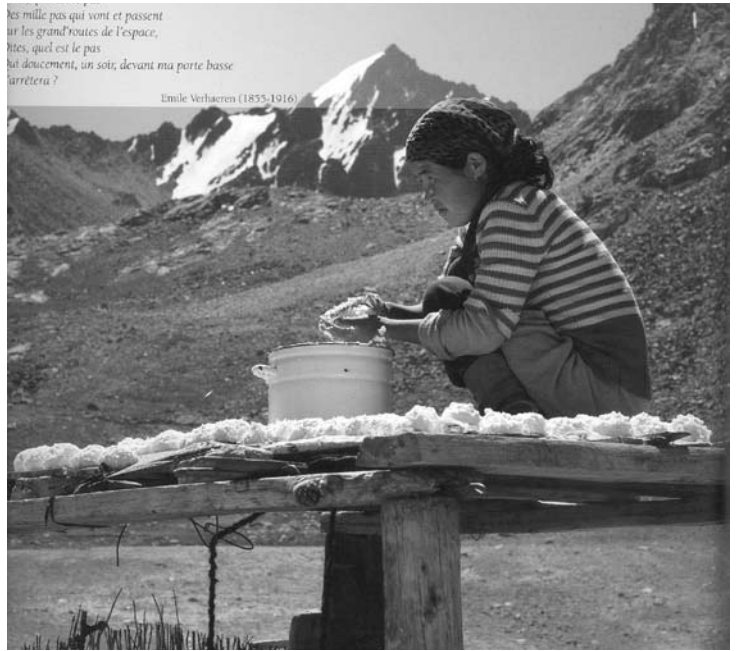
COLETTE DAHAN and EMMANUEL MINGASSON drove from France to China, seeking out the dairy cultures of Central Asia for their book *Voix Lactées*

Stretching across the Eurasian landmass from Romania to Mongolia, sandwiched between boreal forest and the tropics, lies a vast belt of grassland. Mercifully, Western Europe failed to colonise this part of the world (much of it was absorbed into the Russian/Soviet empire) so it remains relatively unknown to westerners — most British people know more about India or South Africa than they do about Kyrgyzstan or Armenia.

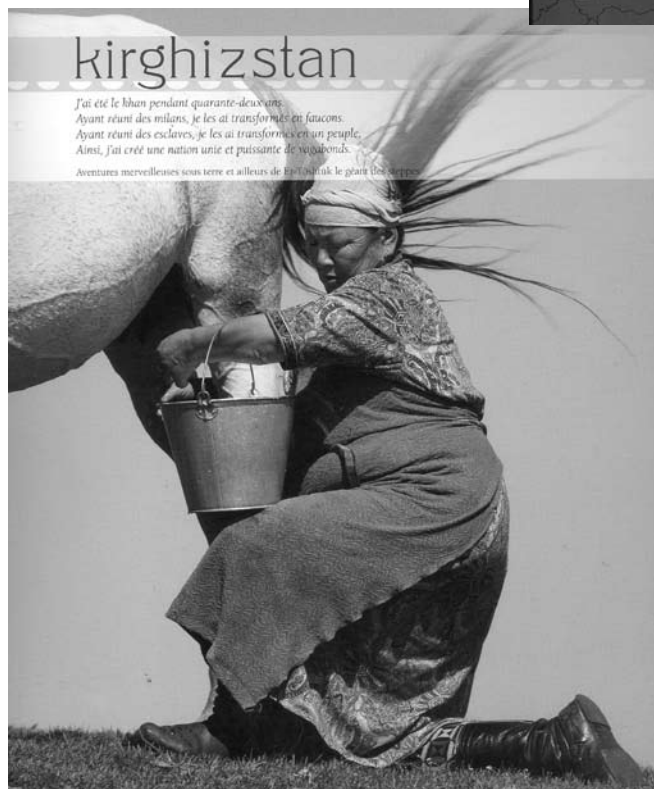
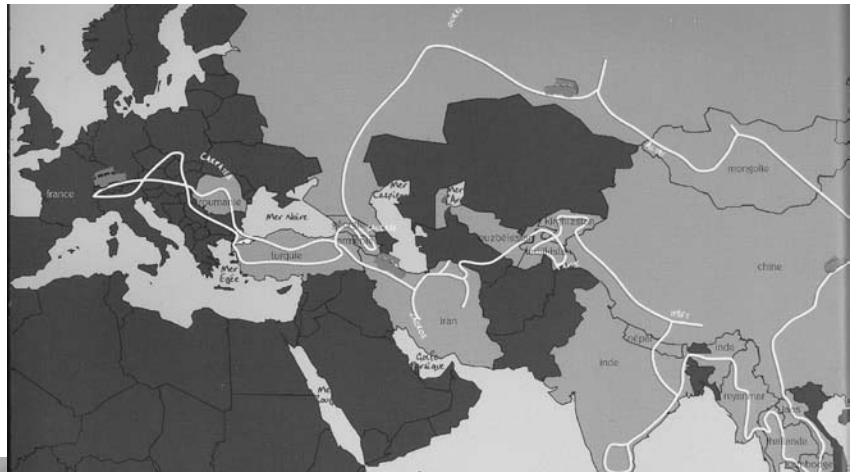
Where there is grass there are livestock, and usually the most efficient way for humans to derive a living from herbivores is to milk them. Right across this Eurasian expanse are subsistence cultures reliant on the ability to coax milk from the environment and transforming it into a variety of foodstuffs that won't go off in the summer heat and can sustain a family through a harsh winter.

In 2013 -2014, Colette Dahan and Emmanuel Mingasson drove from France to China in a camper van, and back again, studying how the inhabitants of different regions along the route make a living from dairy animals and how they process milk. *Voix Lactées* is a record in text and colour photographs of that journey

On one hand, the book is a testimony to the versatility of milk. Every country, if not every locality, has its preferred methods. In India they reduce milk for hours to make intense fudge-like sweets. In Russia they stick it in the oven overnight to make a fermented drink called *riajenka*. In Armenia they crumble up brined cheese, mix it with herbs, and stick it in a jar that they bury upside down in the ground. In Mongolia they ferment milk and then distil it to make an alcoholic spirit, called *arkül*. In Georgia they spin mozzarella-like curd into threads as



Above: cheeses drying in Tadjikistan. Below: the route taken by the authors of *Voix Lactée*. The Milk Road is not far off the Silk Road.



Milking a mare for *koumiss* in Kirghizstan.

thin as knitting wool, bundle it all up, soak it in condensed cream and stuff it into earthenware jars.

On the other hand, milk, be it from cows, goats, sheep, yaks, buffalo or horses, obeys the same laws of chemistry everywhere. Diversity arises from the application of processes as recognizable to an Iranian or Kyrgyz nomad as they are to an Indian dairy maid or a Mongolian yakherder — skimming, churning, fermenting, clabbering, draining, heating, kneading, pressing, salting, drying. The ultimate goal of this lactic alchemy is often the precious clarified butter — *rowqan* in Iran, *sari mai* in Kirgizstan, *sar tos* in Mongolian, *ghee* in Hindi.

The people that Colette and Emmanuel meet on the *route du lait* are almost unfailingly hospitable, happy to open up their dairies and their hearths to the curious visitors. They and their often spectacular surroundings provide the material for many fine photographs, whose colours, regrettably, are not reproduced here.

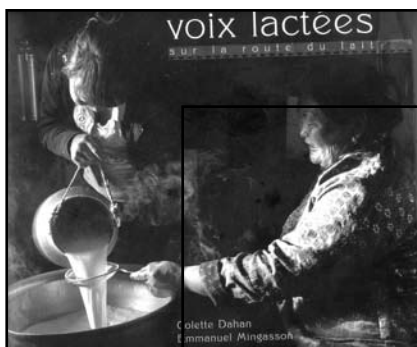
Despite the welcome and the landscape, the authors avoid idealizing the lifestyles they encounter or arguing in their defence. They do not shrink from describing, when they meet them, filthy conditions, miserably small yields, and grinding poverty. The repeated refrain from people they meet in the former Soviet bloc is that things were much better before the collapse of communism, when there was full employment and social security. Traditional dairying may be poorly recompensed, but it offers a subsistence opportunity to people near the bottom of the economic pyramid who are lucky enough to have access to land.



Above: Cheesemaking in an Iranian shepherding family's home.

Left: Odbayar, Mongolian yak farmer, and producer of high quality milk liquor.

Below: Milla, at her shieling in Georgia, making *chechili* cheese from the milk of her cows.



The photos reproduced here are a selection from over 200 colour photos in the book *Voix Lactées: Sur la Route du Lait*, written and published by Colette Dahan and Emmanuel Mingasson, 2016, 204 pages.

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