

American Folk Medicine

A Symposium

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The Role of Animals in Infant Feeding

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Maternal nursing is an instinctive mammalian characteristic, even though it is shunned by some women for various reasons. When a replacement for the mother is used to suckle the child, the substitution is called wet-nursing. This is a practice commonly found in all times, places, and strata of society. It even occurs among animals. Often animals, instead of women, are employed to act as wet nurses, and the infants are placed directly at the animals' udders to suck. This was done in antiquity as it still is today. An ancient Egyptian representation shows a boy kneeling under a cow beside a newborn calf, both sucking at the udder;¹ and there is an ancient Mesopotamian wall relief also showing children nursing directly from the cows' teats.²

Cow's milk was relished from dim antiquity, and the cow was deified as a symbol of joy and love. Through her milk, the physical, moral, and intellectual qualities of the gods could be acquired by children. The Romans, however, although they may have admired the ferocity of the bull, were not so enamored of the docile traits of the cow and insisted that mothers nurse their own children. Children nursed by other animals appear in mythology, art, and literature as well as in common folk practice. Romulus and Remus are a familiar example. They are figured on coins, statuary, paintings, mirrors, helmets, and gravestones and appear frequently in Roman literature. Suckled by a wolf, the twin offspring of the war god Mars and earth mother Rhea symbolize Roman survival and prowess. Ovid also described the woodpecker's officiating at the nursing of the infants. Sacred to Mars, this bird apparently

endowed them with brute strength by bringing them additional food.

The belief that mental, emotional, and physical characteristics, as well as disease, can be transmitted through milk was universally accepted until quite recently.³ In the nineteenth century Brouzet in France even went so far as to recommend a law to prevent disreputable mothers from nursing even their own children, lest they communicate immorality as well as disease to them. Transference of animal qualities to humans could take place in other ways, too, such as ingestion, inunction, or even inhalation. Thus, chameleons' eyes fed to South American Indian boys make them sly; tails of jaguars, make them strong in battle; certain animal brains convey wisdom; and the heart of a fierce, feared animal in the diet gives strength and courage. In Finland little boys eat ants in the spring to make them grow strong. The flesh of a certain bird given by inoculation to young Carib warriors makes them brave and hardy, and Arabs in eastern Africa rub lion fat over the body to absorb boldness. Inhalation is practiced by the Kaffirs, who transmit desirable characteristics by burning things like leopards' whiskers, lions' claws, or other materials while the infant, wrapped in a blanket, is held over the burning substance to inhale the smoke.

Some food taboos are based on this belief. Although wet nurses are acceptable to Muslims, animal milk in a baby's diet is frowned upon by the Koran on the grounds that it communicates animal traits. Children suckling the same nurse are called milk sisters and milk brothers, and since milk is considered to be altered blood, they become blood relations and are not permitted to marry because of the antipathy to consanguineous marriage.⁴

The Israelites had few cows, so goats' milk and sheeps' milk were generally used.⁵ A symbol for whiteness and purity, milk also denoted abundance. It was praised as a food in rabbinical literature, and the Hebrew sages suggested that if you want your daughter to be fair, feed her in her youth on milk and young birds. To the Jews any substance separated from the living body is taboo. Blood is in this category, and milk would be as well but for a *hiddush* which determined that milk is an exception from this general prohibition against eating anything cast off from the living body. The milk of a ritually unclean animal, or from an animal suffering from any disease that makes it unclean, or a ritually slaughtered animal that suffered from such a disease within three days of its death is taboo. The Hindu laws of Manu, like those of the Jews, interdict milk of one-hoofed animals, and the laws of Apas-tamba forbid, besides one-hoof animals, village pigs and cattle as

food. There was an opinion among the Arabs that Jacob forbade eating the camel because he believed it caused sciatica;⁶ and in the northwest Amazon region travelers reported that the bush-deer was tabooed as a food for married women because it supposedly would make their infants deformed, and no greater disgrace could befall a woman there than to be the mother of a deformed child.⁷ There were many other food taboos for pregnant women intended to prevent various defects in the child. Indeed, the food taboos to protect the unborn child extended even to the father. While there have been logical hygienic grounds for these taboos, the spirit of totemism, a feeling of kinship with closely related animals, may also have been the underlying reason. Nevertheless, the Talmud rules that children are permitted to suck the teats of animals, even of those prohibited by ritual law, such as the ass or camel, if the child's welfare demands it.⁸

A large variety of animals served abandoned children as foster parents. The Persian Cyrus, raised by Cyno, a bitch, was thought to derive his name from the dog. Hiero of Syracuse was fed sweet foods by apes; Semiramus was fostered by birds; Midas was nourished by ants that put morsels of food into his mouth. Habia, king of the Tartessians, and Telephus, son of Hercules and Pelias in the Greek myth, were both suckled by deer; Paris and Orion, by bears; Aegisthus, by a goat; Rursus Sandrocotto of India, by a lion; Gordius of Lydia, by birds. Recently delivered mares refreshed the infants Croesus, Xerxes, and Lysimachus. These extraordinary foster parents were portentous omens of future greatness.⁹ The city of Damascus is said to derive its name from Ascus, who was nourished by Dama, a doe, but this story likewise may be symbolic, since Ascus was a giant and the giants were nourished by Dame Mother Earth. In the Bible the deer represents maternal affection as well as timidity. In America in 1521 an Indian slave told his Spanish masters that the natives of Carolina had domesticated deer which furnished them with milk and cheese, but his story is questionable.

The goat, one of the earliest domesticated animals, served frequently as wet nurse to gods and heroes. Zeus and his offspring Dionysus, Asklepios, the god of medicine, and Aegisthus, slayer of Agamemnon, are only a few of these. The goat symbolized copious endowment with the good things of life, and Zeus rewarded the nymphs who took care of him with one of the horns of Amalthea, the goat that nourished him. This is the *cornu copeia*, "horn of plenty." The Bedouins of Israel still resort to the use of goat or sheep when a human wet nurse is needed but not available, and the

goat tribe Anazeh derives its name from the fact that its progenitor was reared on goat's milk.¹⁰ The Hebrew Talmud ascribes strength, endurance, and pluck to the goat and believes milk fresh from the goat's udder relieves heart pains and milk from a white goat possesses special curative properties.¹¹ Goats as wet nurses have been observed worldwide. One observer saw how devoted such a goat became to a Basuto child; another described how Hottentots tied their nurslings under the goats' bellies so that they could feed there.¹²

Because milk does not keep well once it is separated from the animal and because the act of suckling was believed to aid digestion in infancy, medical writers beginning in the eighteenth century began to advocate nursing children directly at the udders of goats. Goats were easier to obtain and cheaper than human wet nurses; they were safer from disease and were better in many other respects. Although cows' milk was almost exclusively used in early American infant feeding, William Potts Dewees, who wrote the first American pediatric treatise in 1825,¹³ called attention to animal milks and pointed out that the English praised asses' milk; nevertheless, he preferred milk of goats. He then compared the chemical constituents of milk from cows, women, goats, asses, sheep, and mares. In 1816 Conrad A. Zwierlein, after listening to women at a fashionable European resort deploring their difficulties with wet nurses, wrote a book called *The Goat as the Best and Most Agreeable Wet Nurse*, which he dedicated to vain and coquettish women, as well as to sick, tender, and weak ones. Goat feeding then became very popular for a while until it was attacked on various grounds and fell into disfavor. In 1879 it was revived in the children's hospitals of Paris, especially for syphilitic infants.

Asses were also favored as animal wet nurses. These reduced infant mortality in the Parisian hospitals even better than goats.¹⁴ Besides, since they had a better moral reputation than goats, the children were less apt to acquire a libidinous character. Nothing was more picturesque than the spectacle of babies, held under the bellies of the asses in the stable adjoining the infants' ward, sucking contentedly the teats of the docile donkeys.¹⁵ Asses' milk, strenuously recommended by the ancient physicians, was esteemed as of sovereign benefit in rooting out most grievous distempers. It was recommended not only in the diet, but as a component of many remedies as well. A sacred anchor with divine qualities, it was considered the best antidote against poisons. Hippocrates, Galen, Aretaeus, Alexander of Tralles all praised it, especially for consumption. Galen believed that milk should be consumed instantly

and so ordered the animals brought to patients' bedsides. He taught that its nature, like that of semen, is altered at once by open air. Friedrich Hoffman, whose opinion was highly regarded in scientific circles of the eighteenth century, explained that milk, like other liquids, possesses a subtle spirit with a strengthening or invigorating quality which should not be allowed to fly off with its warmth.¹⁶ These ideas, once scientific, are still carried over into folklore. It was always a mystery how the body heat was maintained; so vital qualities were accorded to animal heat. Not long ago a patient of mine told me that when she was a baby, she used to drink milk right from the cow "with the animal heat still in it." Once cold, the milk was not wholesome.

Pigs, too, were domesticated at an early stage of civilization. They also served frequently as wet nurses, but the pig was socially persona non grata. A Breton peasant woman discovered about the year 1900 that babies thrived when fed directly from sows and tried to induce the medical profession to use them, but without success.¹⁷ In 1748 William Cadogan derided as an insult to the honor of womankind the prevalent custom of giving a little piece of roast pig to the newborn to suck in order to cure it of its mother's erratic longings. Emblems of filthiness, swine and even swinebreeders were always social outcasts. The pig, being sacred to Osiris and the moon, was taboo to the ancient Egyptians; leprosy was the lot of humans who sinned against this dietary restriction.¹⁸

In Arequipa, Peru, children are fed, in addition to mother's milk, milk from goats, mares, and other animals. The milk from a black burro is a good tonic, and dog's milk gives a good stomach. Twin myths reminiscent of Romulus and Remus are widespread throughout South America. The Campa of ancient Peru had such a legend in which the twins, the sons of the creator, were brought up by jaguars. One of these twins, Chaingavane, became a great culture hero.¹⁹ Tiri, a similar divine hero of the Yuracares of Bolivia, likewise suckled a jaguar.²⁰

Occasionally, a North American Indian father had to bring up an unweaned infant. In 1830 such a Cheyenne father killed buffalo cows that were nursing calves and, cutting off the udders, gave them to his child to suck as if they were nursing bottles. Female deer and antelopes served the same purposes. A similar incident was related about an Arapaho chief.²¹

In art an ancient painting at Herculaneum depicts Telephus sucking a hind, and there are many representations from different periods of Zeus nursed by Amalthea. There is a beautiful French painting entitled *The Soldier as Nurse*, which shows a sheep acting as

wet nurse with a tenderhearted soldier holding the animal so that a small child can suck greedily at the udder. Authors also used the theme effectively: Vergil in his description of Romulus and Remus in the *Aeneid*; Longus in the fifth century *Daphnis and Chloe*; Ibn Tophail in a twelfth-century Arabic tale called *Hai Ibn Yokhdhan*; and many others before and since. Fairy tales also introduce the theme—for instance, the suckling of Genovesa by a deer. The story so often retold about the wolf child is best exemplified by Mowgli in Kipling's *Jungle Book*. Only one example of a dog as wet nurse has been found in the literature.²²

Not only were children nursed by animals, but animals were nursed by women. This was done for many different reasons: to feed young animals; to relieve the women's engorged breasts; to prevent conception; to promote lactation; to develop good nipples; and for other health reasons. The custom occurred among the ancient Romans and Persians, as it still occurs among Neapolitans and roving Gypsies of Transylvania and in Germany, the Society Islands, New Zealand, Australia, Sumatra, Thailand, Japan, and South America. Travelers observed women in British Guiana nursing not only their own children of different ages, but also their four-footed brethren just as obligingly and with equal tenderness. So, too, among the Macusis and Arcunas; the latter brought up children and monkeys together. The monkeys were like members of the family. Other four-footed animals that were nursed were opossums, pacas, agoutis, peccaries, and deer. Sometimes when there were too many children born in rapid succession, grandmothers were impressed into nursing duty, and the older women suckled young mammals of various sorts as well as children. According to report, the Kamchadales of Kamchatka brought young bears into their homes in order to have the women nurse them. The purpose was twofold: to profit from the bear meat when the bear was grown and to profit from the sale of the bear's gall, which was highly prized as a medicine.²³ Dr. Richard Beaudry, who lived among the Ainu for a time, relates that the Ainu have an annual bear festival at which a bear is sacrificed. They capture a bear cub that is then suckled by the Ainu women, for the animal must be raised thus to be suitable for sacrifice.²⁴ About thirty or forty years ago a book entitled *Ursula* appeared. It is a true story of a family living in a Canadian lumber camp where a she-bear was killed and her cub found. Since there was no milk available, the foreman's wife nursed the bear cub with her own little daughter, and the latter was named Ursula.²⁵

Among numerous tribes the dog was the preferred adoptee, and

even in Canada Indian squaws often suckled young dogs. As a matter of fact, although the dog did not serve as wet nurse as often as other animals, it seems to have been the favorite animal used to suck the breasts of women. One observer remarked that the Pima Indians withdrew their breasts sooner from their own infants than from young dogs.²⁶ In Siberia in 1821 a pestilence wiped out all the animals except for two tiny puppies so young they had not yet opened their eyes. A woman nursed them at her own breasts along with her children and had the happiness to see the dogs become the progenitors of a new canine race.²⁷ In the South Sea islands puppies and piglets seemed to predominate as milk siblings. In Persia and in Turkey young dogs were put to the breasts to toughen the nipples to make them better for the infant to suck on, and nurses in Turkey used suckling puppies to maintain their milk supply when they had to travel by sea from distant villages to the capital. In Dauphiné, France, where children were nursed two and a half to three years to prevent another pregnancy, if the child died too soon, the mother suckled either another child or a puppy for the same purpose. A doctor there discovered that the puppies developed rickets, which was cured when they received canine milk again, and he consequently recommended dog's milk as a cure for rickets in children.²⁸ I have known midwives who advocated the use of puppies to suck the breasts of mothers for one reason or another in my own practice in Philadelphia. Popular home medical books such as Aristotle's famous *Experienced Midwife* and the *Women's Secrets* of Albertus Magnus, reaching back in origin as far as the sixteenth century and reprinted in America from 1753 to the present day in many English and German versions,²⁹ recommended a woman or a puppy to "draw" the mother's breasts, especially when a golden necklace or small steel ingot worn between the breasts during pregnancy had failed to prevent "curdling" of the milk from too much blood accumulating in the breasts. In 1799 Friedrich Osiander reported that young dogs were suckled by women in Göttingen to disperse obstinate breasts nodules,³⁰ and Dewees, the first American pediatric author, in 1825 advised regular application to the breasts of a young but sufficiently strong puppy immediately after the seventh month of pregnancy to harden and confirm the nipples, improve breast secretion, and prevent inflammation of the breasts. The puppy's sucking efforts, if started early enough, prepared the nipples for the future assaults of the child. For women too modest to make use of a puppy and so unfortunately organized as to lack nipples altogether or have them very short or sunken in, he recommended drawing them out daily with a large

tobacco pipe. By 1847 general aversion to the use of sucking animals must have been manifest to him because that year, in the ninth edition of his treatise, he conceded that the mouth of a puppy to draw the breasts was no better than that of a nurse or other person skilled in this operation. A skilled woman could regulate the force necessary in sucking the breast, but a pup was more easily procured. He then reported a case in which bleeding, purging, fasting, and hot vinegar fomentations had been needed to prevent breast abscess in a newly delivered woman, while the child itself had been wet-nursed; however, the next time the same woman became pregnant, a pup drew her breasts several times a day until after she was delivered, so that by the time the child needed her breast, there were good nipples for it to take hold of.³¹

Piglets and little lambs were also used in this country. There was an old Negro granny in Tennessee who had a reputation for drawing breasts at a nominal fee, but when such a skilled professional was not at hand in that area, mothers suffering with "caked breasts" whose infants were unable to empty the engorged organs employed a small baby pig or a puppy for this purpose. In one case, the piglet, squealing for its milk, followed the woman in and out of the house.³²

The dog served womankind in many other ways. The living dog just laid upon the painful breasts could do good service. Cut up and bound to the head of a melancholy woman, it could cure her depression; and a suckling dog cooked with wine and myrrh was a help against epilepsy. Cooked dog meat could also make sterile women become fertile.

There is a Rowlandson political cartoon showing the celebrated statesman Fox, candidate for office in the Westminster election of 1784, as a fox fostered at the breast of his sponsor, the Duchess of Devonshire.³³ It is called *Political Affection*. This striking caricature played upon what must have been a familiar image to the voting public by showing that crafty animal nursed by a woman. Even more curious is the story told by Lucian of Samosata in Syria in the second century A.D. about a breed of serpents at Pella in Macedonia so tame and gentle that children took them to bed, women made pets of them, and they would draw milk from women's breasts like infants.³⁴

There is also an Italian fable that attributes wasting in nurslings to a snake's sucking the mother's breasts dry at night while putting its tail in the infant's mouth to keep it from crying. The Slovaks believed that if no milk formed in the mother's breast, she was hexed, a word derived, perhaps, from Hecate, Greek goddess of

witchcraft. In such a case the child, along with its mother, was placed under a cow which had just recently borne a calf, a few drops of milk were squirted on the child's face, and then the child, its face still wet, was put to the mother's breast, which had first been smoked and washed with brandy and milk.³⁵ Hecate, as Artemis or Diana, the wild huntress, was worshiped by the Laconians on Taygetus, where she milked lionesses for the gods.³⁶ The nymphs on Cretan Mount Ida, a mountain associated with the great mother goddess Rhea, fed Zeus on honey and goat's milk. Honey and milk then became symbolic of immortality.

This study of the folklore of animals in infant feeding may help to unravel the mystery in some of the traditional beliefs and behavior often met in modern medical practice. To take an example from my own practice, a mother was plagued recently by an infant with digestive problems and constant fretting. An allergist might have placed the child on a modern hypoallergenic formula, very likely without any relief. When the grandmother recommended goat's milk, I immediately acquiesced, with the happiest result. The child is now content, and the parents sleep well at night. Although the child obviously is not allergic to the goat's milk, I am convinced that the element of family faith in the traditional curative value of goat's milk was a determining factor in bringing about the child's contentment and a happier family.

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