Duhart & Macbeth (editors): *Birds as food: anthropological and cross-disciplinary perspectives*

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This book, co-edited by Frédéric Duhart (historian) and Helen Macbeth (anthropologist), addresses the role of birds as food across the world, through a large range of anthropological, historical, nutritional and environmental perspectives. This publication is the result of a conference organised by the ICAF entitled *Birds as food: cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary aspects* held in Sopron (Hungary) in the summer of 2012 and reaches its ambitious purpose across 14 thematic papers and a rich epilogue. The authors’ specialisations, as anthropologists, historians, but also physical anthropologists, nutritionists and veterinarians, strengthen the multidisciplinary scope of the volume. Case studies from 10 countries are displayed, mostly from Europe and America, but also Oceania (Figure 1), with the mention of no less than 186 birds. Abundant photographs of these birds and culinary preparations illustrate this volume and we can appreciate the presence of two indices at the end, that gather the culinary expressions used on one hand and the bird species and families mentioned on the other hand.
As stated by the editors in the introduction, the birds are just a small part of the animal diversity and they might not seem particularly remarkable or prevailing in their contribution to food supplies when compared with mammals, fish or even insects (p. 3). However, their presence in a large variety of environments, until the most extremes, and the diversity of food resources they can procure, such as meat and eggs, but also the exceptional edible nests, make them a highly valuable object of study. To our knowledge, it is the first book of its kind, offering a wide overview of the role of birds in culinary habits across the world. Indeed, while other books or special issues deal with some specific species (e.g., the hen, Alexandre-Bidon et al. 2017; or the turkey, Ariel de Vidas and Pitrou, in press), the consumption is not addressed as the mere objective and they often cover a limited geographic extant (e.g., Western Europe for the hen and Mesoamerica for the turkey). More than an exhaustive synthesis, *Birds as food* has to be viewed as a panorama of practices.

The consumption of birds and their by-products is obviously the core of this book. The literature review carried out by Schiefenhövel (pp. 19-20) in its introductive chapter traces back the use of birds to Neanderthal and early anatomically modern humans, more than 100,000 years ago, although the first evidence of their consumption would be more recent, about 45,000 to 70,000 years ago (e.g. Blasco et al. 2015; Fiore et al. 2016). This observation stresses the historical dimension and the antiquity of eating birds in human societies, but in the absence of archaeological or zooarchaeological chapters in this volume, the long-term history of bird consumption is not addressed further. The different papers, instead, are focusing on a period ranging from the 18th century to contemporary observations, with a particular interest on late 19th / early 20th centuries.
Several contributions address the question of which birds can or cannot be eaten, by presenting the results of ethnoscientific surveys (Garine et al.) or ethnographic (Schiefenhövel [b]) and historical (Duhart, El-Kareh, Vorovina) observations, including an examination of some food taboos. From the general consumption – and acceptance – of poultry meat to the selective eating of parrots and birds-of-paradise, taste, traditions and nutritional needs are the main factors driving the decision on which birds are considered as edible or not. The evolution and adaptation of these choices are examined through time, with even some prospective on the progressive adoption of ostrich meat in European and North American cultures (Aguilar and Medina; Deraga).

Culinary practices are another important part of this book, because the matter is not only on the kind of bird that is eaten, but also the way it is prepared and the circumstances of its consumption. The history of fried chicken, from a common family meal in South-East USA to its worldwide spread in an international franchise (Ralston), the adoption of the roasted turkey for Christmas in Anglo-Saxon countries (Macbeth) or the tight association between the traditional Mexican turkey (huaxolotl) and wedding celebrations in Central and Southern Mexico (Saucedo Arteaga and Jiménez López) are only a few examples developed here. All along the book, recipes and food preparations are mentioned to sustain the different examples of bird consumption. Nutrient and chemical composition are also occasionally used for the comparison of meat and eggs from different species.

Beyond the consumption of the birds, several authors of this book examine the techniques (lato sensu) associated with their acquisition. The first element is the distinction between wild and domestic animals. As noted by Schiefenhövel (p. 21), the birds were not among the first domesticated species, whether in the Old or the New World. But by controlling the populations and their reproduction, people were able to select specific morphotypes, for example allowing for the adequate amount of meat (Beljak; Duhart [a]). The case of the mule duck, an infertile and artificial hybrid of the common duck and the Muscovy duck is another example of anthropic implication in the creation of the desired bird (Duhart [b]). Husbandry practices of different bird species are described to deepen their integration in the cultural landscape, including the turkey (Beljak; Saucedo Arteaga and Jiménez López), the ostrich (Aguilar and Medina; Deraga) and the mule duck (Duhart [b]). Wild birds can be trapped in different ways, in order to be fattened (Duhart [a]), or attracted with nesting boxes to facilitate the access to chicks and eggs. The case of the artificial nests in Italy also stresses the importance of this architectural feature in the landscape and shows how culinary habits can be reflected in urban management (Ferri). All these examples highlight the close relationship between bird acquisition and consumption.

A last element that is present all along the book is the environmental impact of bird consumption and its sustainability. Human choices have led to the extinction of several bird species, the moa and the dodo being the most famous ones; but the case of the ortolan, mentioned by Duhart (a), offers a concrete example of how species conservation can be challenged by culinary habits. The strict slaughtering rules followed by the artificial nest keepers in Italy is the key to its sustainability (Ferri) and the limited amount of bird species that can be eaten by men in comparison with women and children, in the Eipo of New Guinea, seems to be an adaptation to an environment where animal proteins are particularly scarce (Schiefenhövel [b]).
However, displaying such a wide scope as exploring bird consumption across the world, there are still some grey areas. Regarding the geographic coverage, two continents are not addressed: Africa and Asia (with the exception of a chapter on Russia). Also, as mentioned earlier, the chronological frame ranges merely from the 18th century to contemporaneous observations with few emphases on earlier periods.

Finally, this volume is the evidence of the interdisciplinarity of food studies, showing the close relationship between food, culture, societies and environment. The way it addresses these different lines is original as the focus made on birds allows the authors to compare a wide range of practices and populations. The reader can also appreciate a variety of geographical and chronological focuses. The diversity of examples provided in this volume makes it a valuable read for anyone curious about food habits or interested in the use of birds in different cultures, and the living picture offered by historical and ethnographical examples will be relevant to better understand the archaeological record or to help conservation programs for endangered species. The relative lack of comprehensive details noted earlier only highlights the necessity of more thematic publications on the subject.

APPENDIX: Birds as food, list of chapters

10 DUHART F., MACBETH H. “Introduction”.
11 W. SCHIEFENHÖVEL [a]. “Birds as food: an evolutionary perspective”.
12 DUHART F. [a]. “An ornithological and cultural perspective on birds as food”.
14 RALSTON R.D. “Frying fowl in early and modern America: cultural and home economy aspects of chickens as working people’s food in southern USA prior to global commodification”.
15 SAUCEDO ARTEAGA G. J., LÓPEZ J. J. “Huaxolotl, Guajolote, Huilo or Cocono: a Mesoamerican resident of rural and popular class”.
16 MACBETH H. “Turkeys on the table: a story of many changes and some misconceptions”.
17 BELJAK B. “Turkeys in the Zagorje region of Croatia: a case study from a cult bird to a frozen bird”.
18 DUHART F. [b]. “Confit, foie gras and magret: a short history of the mule duck in southwest France”.
19 AGUILAR A., MEDINA F.X. “Ostrich meat between exoticism and regular consumption”.
20 DERAGA D. “Ostrich as food in Mexico: from livestock production to consumer preferences”
21 FERRI M. “Ancient artificial nests to attract swifts, sparrows and starlings to exploit them as food”.
22 EL-KAREH A.C. “Eating parrots and being Brazilian with pleasure”.
23 VOROVINA T. “Chicken, goose and quail: the tradition of eating birds in Russia”.

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SCHIEFENHÖVEL W. [b]. “Birds for women, birds for men: food taboos and nutritional wisdom among the Eipo of the Highlands of West-New Guinea”

DUHART F. [c]. “Being in the world and eating birds”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. International Commission on the Anthropology of Food and Nutrition

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