



Human termitophagy in Africa

La termitophagie humaine en Afrique

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Résumé: La consommation de termites par l'homme en Afrique est un comportement fréquent et ancien. Il a même été abordé concernant les ancêtres de l'homme dans quelques articles. Le présent article se propose de dresser un inventaire aussi complet que possible de la « termitophagie humaine » en Afrique. Après avoir défini ce terme, comme cela a été suggéré et avoir rappelé les qualités de l'ouvrage incontournable d'IROKO (1996), à savoir « L'homme et les termitières en Afrique », qui fait entre autres parfaitement le point sur ce thème jusqu'à sa date de parution, sont encore signalés, le chapitre de DOUNIAS (2006) « Des moissons éphémères – L'art de collecter et de consommer les termites sous les tropiques » et également l'article de MALAISSE (2019) « Termites and termite mounds --- Some observations ». Une liste aussi complète que possible signale plus de 275 références. Elles sont présentées par ordre chronologique d'une part, par ordre alphabétique des auteurs d'autre part. Cette information est analysée et commentée.

Mots-clés : Termites, Afrique, Consommation par l'homme, Termitophagie.

Abstract: Human consumption of termites in Africa is a frequent and old behaviour. It has even been taken up concerning the ancestors of man in some papers. The present paper intends to set up an inventory as complete as possible of « human termitophagy » in Africa. After having define this term as it has been suggested and having mentioned the qualities of the inescapable book of IROKO (1996), namely « L'homme et les termitières en Afrique », which makes between others perfectly the point concerning this thema until its publication date, are stil point out, the chapter of DOUNIAS (2006) « Des moissons éphémères – L'art de collecter de consommer les termites sous les tropiques » and also the paper of MALAISSE (2019) « Termites and termite mounds --- Some observations ». A list as complete has possible points out more than 275 references. They are presented in chronological order on the one hand, in alphabétic order of authors on the other hand. This information is analysed and commented.

Keywords: Termites, Africa, human consumption, Termitophagy.

INTRODUCTION

The utilization of insects as a sustainable and secure source of animal-based food for the human diet has continued to increase in popularity in recent years (SHOCKLEY & DOSSEY, 2014). Nevertheless as pointed out by EVANS et al. (2015) in « Entomophagy : an evolving terminology in need of review », it is suitable to good define the terms used.

Such a problem has recently be tackled regarding the Lepidoptera consumption and the various appellation used (MALAISSE & LATHAM, 2014). The same concerns the termites. Indeed termites, long ago called « white ants » or even « ants » by the first explorers, and not a long time ago « Isoptera », recently became a Suborder, namely the Isopteroidea of the Blattoptera Order. Today it is suggested that they belong to the Epi-family of Termitoidea. Some 3,106 species are currently described, with a few hundred more still to be described (BIGNELL et al. 2010). For Tropical Africa (North Africa and Madagascar excluded) 5 of the 7 families, 112 of the 280 genera and 669 species have so far been listed (DELIGNE, pers. comm.). EGGLETON (2000) gives a value over 660 species. In any case it becomes possible to speak about “termitophagy” or “isopterophagy”. We have choosed “termitophagy”.

As far as termites are concerned, and more precisely concerning Africa, their consumption by Man is frequent and old. Even termites' consumption by prehomianian has been approached in several papers (notably LESNIK, 2014).

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Some tremendous studies have to be quoted when considering « termites ». The book of IROKO (1996) comes in first position. He offers a synthesis of all the items related to termites. Impossible to write about termites without checking all what he has assembled for this subject. For the last twenty years the same work may be evidently carried out, but until 1993 the summing up is impressive.

For the last years, the chapter « Des moissons éphémères. L’art de collecter et de consommer les termites sous les tropiques » of DOUNIAS (2016) is outstanding. Like the English translation of the title suggests « Ephemeral harvests. The art of collecting and consume termites under the tropics », the author approaches such subject during 66 pages producing finally a paper with a transcendent richness, an outstanding documentation. More simply, a lot of observations related to termites and termites mounds have been recently presented in a synthetic approach by MALAISSE (2019).

Looking to the references dealing with termites consumption by human in Africa, at least 275 data have been quoted (Figure 1). For the six last decennies about 25 quotations have each time be noted. But the ongoing period 2010 to 2019 indicates that termitophagy is still a subject holding more and more attention.

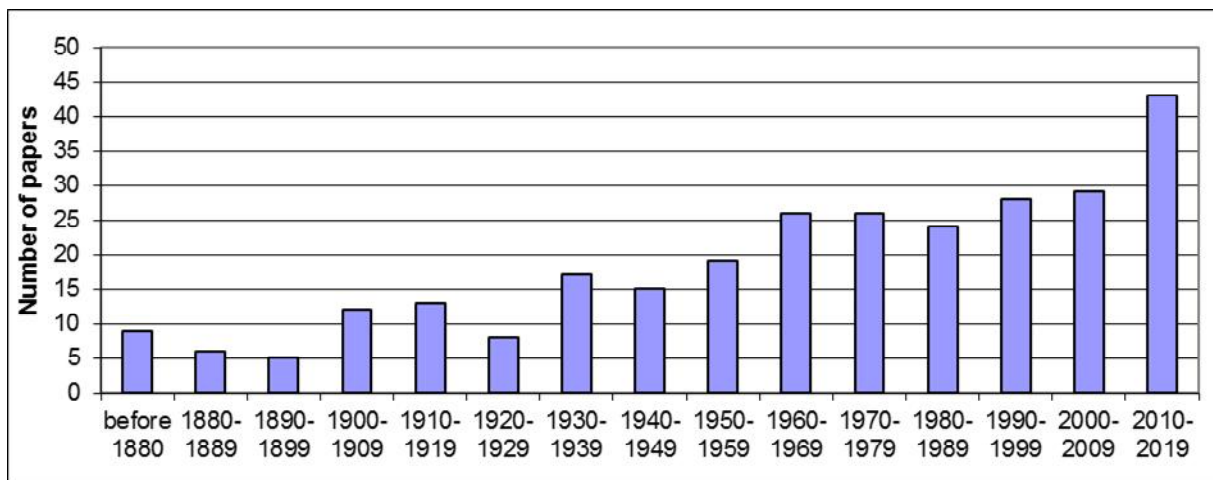


Figure 1.- Number of books and papers dealing with human consumption of termites in Africa.

LIST OF PAPERS AND BOOKS TAKING UP THE THEME OF HUMAN CONSUMPTION OF TERMITES IN AFRICA

1732

Labat J.B. (Rév. P.), 1732. *Relation historique de l’Éthiopie occidentale contenant la description des Royaumes de Congo, Angolle, et Matamba*. Traduite de l’italien du P. Cavazzi et augmentée de plusieurs relations pratiques des auteurs. Paris, Carles Jean-Baptiste Delespine.

1781

Smeathman H., 1781. Some accounts of the termites, which are found in hot climates. *Phil. Trans. Roy. Soc.*, 71:139-192.

1826

Denham D., Clapperton H. & Oudney W., 1826. *Voyages et découvertes dans le Nord et dans les parties centrales de l’Afrique, au travers du grand désert, jusqu’au 10^e degré de latitude nord, et depuis Kouka, dans le Bornou, jusqu’à Sackatou, capitale de l’empire des Felatah, exécutés pendant les années 1822, 1823 et 1824*. Paris (France), Librairie Artus Bertrand.

1857

Livingstone D., 1857. *Missionary travels and researches in South Africa; including a sketch of sixteen years' residence in the interior of Africa, and a journey from Cape of Good Hope to Loanda on the West Coast, thence across the Continent, down the river Zambezi, to the Eastern ocean.* London (England), John Murray.

1860

Barth H., 1860. *Voyages et découvertes dans l'Afrique septentrionale et centrale pendant les années 1841 à 1855.* Traduction de l'allemand par Paul Ithier. Paris (France), A. Bohné ; Bruxelles (Belgium), Fr. Van Meenen et Cie, Tome III.

1875

Chaille-Long Bey C., 1875. Voyage au Lac Victoria-N'Yanza et au pays Niam-Niam. *Bull. Société Géographie*, sixième série, tome 10.

Monteiro J.J., 1875. *Angola and the River Congo.* London, Macmillan and Co.

Schweinfurth G.A., 1875. *Im Herzen von Afrika.* Leipzig (Germany), F.A. Brockhaus.

1878

Cameron V.L., 1878. *A travers l'Afrique : voyage de Zanzibar à Benguela.* Paris (France), Librairie Hachette.

1880

Kranz A., 1880. *Natur- und Kulturleben der Zulus.* Wiesbaden (Germany), Julius.

Pogge P., 1880. *Im Reiche des Muata Jamwo.* Berlin (Germany), D. Reiner Coll., 3 hft.

1881

De Serpa Pinto A.A. de R., 1881. *How I crossed Africa.* London (England), Sampson Low, Marston, Scarle & Rivington. 1881.

1887

Baumann O., 1887. Beiträge zur Ethnographie des Congo. *Mitteilungen der anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien*, 17.

1888

Drummond H., 1888. *Tropical Africa.* London (England), Holder & Stoughton.

Emin Pacha (Dr. Schnitzer), 1888. *Emin Pacha in Central Africa, being a collection of his Letters and Journals.* London (England), George Philip.

1891

Casati G., 1891. *Ten years in Equatoria.* London (England), F. Warne.

1892

Binger G., 1892. *Du Niger au Golfe de Guinée par le pays de Kong et le Mossi (1887-1889).* Paris (France), Hachette.

1894

Stuhlmann H., 1894. *Mit Emin Pasha ins Herz von Afrika*. Berlin (Germany), Geographische Verlagbuchhandlung Dietrich Reimer.

1895

Foà E., 1895. *Mes grandes chasses dans l'Afrique centrale*. Paris (France), Librairie de Firmin-Didot et Cie.

1899

Foà E., 1899. *Chasses aux grands fauves pendant la traversée du continent noir, du Zambèze au Congo français*. Paris (France), Librairie Plon.

1900

Courtois V.J., 1900. *Elementos de grammatica tetense, lingua chi-nyungue*. Coimbra (Portugal), Imprensa da Universidade.

Sanderval O., 1900. *Les Rives du Konkouré. De l'Atlantique au Foutah-Djalon*. Paris (France), Augustin Challamel.

1901

Largeau V., 1901. *Encyclopédie pahouine*. Paris (France), Édit. Leroux.

1902

Colrat de Montrozier R., 1902. *Deux ans chez les anthropophages et les sultans du centre africain*. Paris (France), Librairie Plon.

Johnston H.H., 1902. *The Uganda Protectorate*. London (England), Hutchinson.

1907

Hendle P.J., 1907. *Die Sprache der Waporogo*. Berlin (Germany), Reimer.

von Berensberg H.P., 1907. Use of insects as food, delicacies, medicines or in manufactures. *Natal Agric. J. Ministry Records*, **10**: 757-762.

1908

Foà E., 1908. *Résultats scientifiques des voyages en Afrique*. Publié sous les auspices du Museum national d'histoire naturelle. Paris (France), Imprimerie nationale.

Wessmann R., 1908. *The Bawenda of the Spelonken (Transvaal): A contribution towards the psychology and folklore of African peoples*. London (England), Greenwood Press.

1909

De Calonne A., 1909. Les Ababua. *Mouvement Sociologique International* (Bruxelles), **10**.

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Ménard E., 1909. *Dictionnaire français-kirundi, kirundi-français*. Roulers (Belgium), Impr. Des Missionnaires d'Afrique (Pères-Blancs).

1910

Rehse H. 1910. *Kisiba Land und Leute*. Stuttgart (Germany).

Stannus H.S., 1910. Notes on some tribes of British Central Africa. *J. R. Anthropol. Inst. Great Britain Ireland*, **40**: 285-335.

Tönjes H., 1910. *Wörterbuch der Ovambo-Sprache Osikuanjama*. Berlin (Germany), Georg Reimer Verlag.

1911

Endemann K., 1911. *Wörterbuch der Sotho-sprache*. Hamburg (Germany), Friedrichsen.

Roscoe J., 1911. *The Baganda*. London (England), Mac Millan.

1912

Carbou H., 1912. *La région du Tchad et du Ouadaï. Tome I, Etudes ethnographiques Dialecte Toubou*. Paris (France), Ernest Leroux.

Moda (Capt.), 1912. *Une tournée en pays fertit*. Paris (France), Publications du Comité de l'Afrique occidentale française.

Schmitz R., 1912. *Les Baholoholo (Congo belge). Sociologie descriptive*. Bruxelles (Belgium), Dewit, Collection de Monographies ethnographiques, Vol. IX.

1913

Colle P., 1913. *Les Baluba*. Bruxelles (Belgium), Albert Dewit.

Madan A.C., 1913. *Lala-Lamba-Wisa & English, English & Lala-Lama-Wisa Dictionnary*. Oxford (England), Clarendon Press.

1914

Dinkelacker E., 1914. *Wörterbuch der Duala-Sprache*. Hamburg (Germany), L. Friederichsen (Abhandlungen des Hamburgischen Kolonialinstituts, Bd. 16).

1916

Meyer H., 1916. *Die Barundi. Eine völkerkundliche Studie aus Deutsch-Ostafrika*. Leipzig (Germany), Otto Spamer.

1917

Tauxier L., 1917. *Le Noir du Yatenga : Mossis – Nioniossés – Samos – Yarsès – Silmi-Mossi – Peuls*. Paris (France), Émile Larose.

1921

Bequaert J.C., 1921. Insects as food. *J. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, **21**: 191-200.

1922

Callewaert R., 1922. Witten mieren in Kasai. *Congo* **2**: 335-355.

Hegh E., 1922. *Les termites. Partie générale. Description. – Distribution géographique. – Classification. – Biologie. – Vie sociale. – Alimentation. – Rapports avec le monde extérieur.* Bruxelles : Imprimerie Industrielle et Financière.

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Tauxier L., 1924. *Nègres Gouro et Gagou (Centre de la Côte-d'Ivoire).* Études soudanaises. Paris (France), Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner.

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Torday E., 1925. *On the trail of the Bushongo.* Philadelphia (USA), Lippincott.

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Junod H.A., 1927. *The life of a South African Tribe.* London (England), Macmillan.

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DISCUSSION

The information put together in the present synthesis brings diverse thoughts and comments. In a first time, we envisage the contents of the publications during the diverse times. The older works are explorers' accounts. They often confine on to quote the consumption of termites, indeed even to ants, in fact of « white ants » by opposition to « black ants », its to say Formicidae.

This consumption surprises the traveller and is of course dismissed of the insects consumption expressed in the « Bible » ! Indeed at that time, the following sentences were written (Matthieu 3, Second 21) : « At that time, Saint John the Baptist preached in the Judaea desert. He was saying « Change of attitude, for the heavenwards kingdom is near ». John was the person that Esaïe prophet had announced, when he was saying : « Its the voice of the one who is crying in the desert : prepare the way of the Seigneur, renders the sentiers right ». John was wearing a coat of camel hairs and around the waist a leather belt. He was feeding of grasshoppers and wild honeys. The inhabitants of Jerusalem, of all the Judée and of all the Jurdain Region were coming to him. Recognizing publicly their sins, they were christened by him, in the Jordan river waters.

Ten insects have from now on received authorization from the AFSCA to be marked in Belgium. This organization, AFSCA, or « Agence fédérale pour la sécurité de la chaîne alimentaire » of Belgium (contact : publiresul@afscab.be). The only condition is that the legislation in force should be respected in terms of hygiene, of broad outlines, of obligatory notification, of a labelling, as the putting of a auto-checking system. These ten species or subspecies are: *Acheta domesticus*, *Locus migratoria migratorioides*, *Zophobas atratus morio*, *Tenebrio molitor*, *Alphitobius diaperinus*, *Galleria mellonella*, *Schistocerca americana gregaria*, *Grillodes sigillatus*, *Achroia grisella* and *Bombyx mori*. No termite is present in this list ! But this do not imply for all that thinking about termites' human consumption and notably their appropriate management are not justified. The taking into account of the number of quotings per decennies confirms, with repetition of values around 25, and even above 40 for the still going on period 2010-2019 the pertinence of our analysis.

If we analyze the number of high termites mounds being active in the diverse region of Africa, it is obvious that their number reduces in an important strong significant manner according to the environmental strains so much in periurban belts as in the areas submitted on an extension always more important of agriculture.

The references quoted may be put together according to diverse preoccupations, among others a simple allusion to their consumption by man - this is the case for the first explorer's accounts -, until very detailed chemical analyses, frequent during the two last decennies.

It is still necessary to specify that the subject of termite oil, a particular aspect which need a own study, is not broached in the present paper, as, in the same way, termites as feeding products. Termites are still not taken into consideration in recent books, such as CAPPAROS MEDIGO et al. (2014).

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Appendix 1.- Author list and corresponding year(s) of publications

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