

Commission on Nomadic Peoples

“Afterword: reflections on the pastoral land crisis”

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Afterword: reflections on the pastoral land crisis

Philip Carl Salzman

The ongoing loss of territory suffered by pastoral peoples in Eastern Africa has been precisely delineated and eloquently assessed in this collection of essays by distinguished researchers of and from the area. I will not attempt here to summarize their findings or to venture global conclusions. Rather, I offer some remarks about several partially submerged themes in the papers, allowing myself reference to other geographical areas, as well as suggestions of phenomena worthy of further attention.

'Free land'

Pastoralism is much more extensive in land use than agriculture. Pastoral land use — responding to annual and multi-annual cycles of climate, disease, demography, economics, and politics — requires occasional and 'sporadic' occupation and exploitation of particular tracts, areas, and regions. Pastoral land is thus in use, as part of a seasonal or multi-annual regime of adaptation, resource exploitation, and production, even when no pastoralists and no livestock are present.

To non-pastoral peoples, land not continually occupied, without a permanent human presence, can be seen as 'empty', 'unused', and 'unowned', even if it is known that some people are sporadically present and that these people claim some kind of ownership. This is exacerbated by the fact that pastoral

land use does not usually leave obvious physical evidence, such as built structures, as signs of human presence while the pastoralists are absent, and thus appears to be 'untouched' and 'natural' landscape. This issue of perception, definition, and self-interested rationalization in conceiving the nature of a particular territory, is a widespread phenomenon, wherever a more intensive form of land use borders on a less intensive form. It can be seen in suburban areas, where the city meets the countryside and its agricultural land use. In this case, there is a strong tendency for agricultural land, sometimes irreplaceable, to be defined in urban terms as 'empty' and 'available', which of course it usually is in economic terms. But our particular problem, the perception and definition of pastoral land, is also present around the world, wherever more intensive forms of land use border on pastoral territory. For example, in central Sardinia¹, home of pastoral shepherds whose *formaggio peccorino* sheep's milk cheese, marketed internationally as *Romano*, is world famous, the vast tracts of high plateau and mountain pastures are seen as 'untouched', 'unoccupied', and 'nature' by Sardinian lowlanders and mainland Italians. In fact, these areas have been occupied by Sardinian shepherds for at least a thousand years, are known and named by geographical feature and historical event, and are

owned, often as communal land, and allocated to the shepherds by the municipalities, *comuni*, in which the shepherds live. Any territorial issue arising between Sardinian pastoral communities and outsiders is likely to be worsened due to these quite different conceptions.

Today, the perception and definition of pastoral territory as 'nature' and 'empty' can cut against the interests of pastoralists in two ways. One way is for land-starved cultivators, entrepreneurs, or building contractors to target 'empty' pastoral territory for their use. Demographic and political pressures from these sectors often lead to encroachment in pastoral areas. The other way is for ecology groups and tourist interests to target 'nature' areas as requiring 'protection' from alteration and degradation by pastoralists, whose activities are to be restricted or who are to be barred entirely from the territory. In Sardinia, the World Wildlife Fund and Sardinian tourist interests have led the fight to establish, against the vigorous opposition of local inhabitants, especially shepherds, a national park in most of central Sardinia. Such debates will be very familiar to those following the development of game parks² in Eastern Africa and national parks elsewhere.

Ecologically-defined versus politically-constituted territories

As we observe pastoralists using their territories in managing their herds, we come to appreciate the environmental sensitivity required to succeed in the pastoral enterprise. The pastoralist strives to find an adequate ecological niche in which to pursue pastoral production. However, we must not imagine that pastoral territories are constituted solely or even primarily by the ecological exigencies of pastoralists and their herds.

Rather, pastoral territories are shaped and maintained or transformed by political forces: One is inter-group and inter-ethnic conflict, and military expansion/contraction of the group. A second is colonial or state imposition of boundaries and appropriation of territory. A third is electoral politics favouring numerical majorities, seldom pastoral, which fill legislatures with representatives insensitive or hostile to pastoral interests.

Consequently, ecological adaptations of pastoralists are determined as much by political forces as by the opportunities and constraints of the environment. To put it another way, the opportunities and constraints of the environment, to which the pastoralist must adapt, are themselves determined by the nature of the available territory, which is delimited by political processes.

What this means is that any criticism of adaptational activities and production practices of pastoralists, such as regarding alleged environmental degradation, is itself political, for it takes, as given, parameters which have been politically defined. For example, pastoralists working in shrunken territories, due to state appropriation of their land, can hardly be blamed if their remaining land is overstocked.

Cultural hostility

The difficulties of pastoralists are often overdetermined, that is, caused by several factors all of which contribute to the same force. In addition to the more straight-forward material conflicts of interest over such things as land rights, there are three cultural factors which militate against pastoralists.

One factor is the fear of 'warrior pastoralists', who before strong state presence, could raid surrounding peoples,

chasing them from their land, carrying off their valuables, and injuring or killing. While actual threat from pastoralists is not nearly as great as it once was, hatred of pastoralists often remains strong. Furthermore, any mobile people are seen as a threat by sedentary ones, for the mobile people can perpetrate crimes today or tonight and be gone tomorrow. This factor is as prominent in the Far East and the Middle East as it is in Africa, and it is far from unknown in Europe.

A second factor is disapprobation of the way of life of pastoralists, seen by others in their larger social fields as primitive, dirty, and uncivilized. Shepherds in Sardinia are wrongly said to smell of sheep even after they have bathed and changed clothes. Spatial mobility of pastoralists is seen as 'wandering' rather than a purposeful and productive strategy. Above all, today, pastoralists are seen as being behind the times, as not being 'modern', 'progressive', and 'forward-looking'.

A third factor is ethnicity, for many pastoral peoples are 'ethnically' different from settled agriculturalists and from most urbanites. The pastoralists often speak a different language, dress differently, and have different beliefs and ritual practices from the majority of the population. In Iran, for example, pastoral nomads, such as the Kurds, Lurs, Qashqai, Turkmen, and Baluch, speaking distinct Iranian or Turkish languages, surround a large central core of Persian (Farsi) speaking peasants and urbanites. Some of the pastoral populations in Iran adhere to Sunni Islam, rather than to the Shi'a Islam of the Persian majority. Similar ethnic patterns are also common in Eastern Africa, such as in Ethiopia and Kenya.

The concurrence of these three cultural gaps between pastoralists and non-pastoralists often results in a chasm

of distaste and disapproval, which may greatly inhibit a balanced, realistic assessment of the pastoral population by others, including those holding state power. This can be particularly costly where, as is almost universal, pastoralists make up a small minority in a large polity.

Local knowledge

The disdain for pastoralists that is so widespread in the non-pastoral population is exacerbated by the institutionalization in the 'modern' sector of 'experts' in livestock production, from range managers, veterinarians, agronomists, and hydrologists, to economists, planners and project directors. There is a widespread belief among state functionaries, and also among these 'experts', who should know better, that pastoralists are ignorant, do not know what they are doing, and need to be 'organized' and 'improved' by experts.

I travelled in India with a highly educated officer of the Sheep and Wool Service, who was serving as project director of a World Bank sponsored, pastoral development project. This officer, who kindly took me around with him and translated for me, looked down on the sheep breeders he was working with, both because they were 'ignorant' and because they were of a lower caste (equivalent to a different ethnic group). This officer and I had some lively discussions after I suggested to him that the pastoralists, having devoted their lives to their occupation, and having drawn upon a well established pastoral tradition, were the real experts and probably had quite a lot to teach us. Now if my arguments did not sway this officer's views, the total failure of the development project he was overseeing might have suggested to him that

'experts' from the modern sector did not necessarily have a lot to teach local producers, or, at the very least, that it might be prudent to acquaint ourselves with local knowledge based upon experience in the local setting, before we import ideas, models, and projects based upon experience elsewhere. It is not only a question of showing appropriate respect for people in their own homes, but it is simple good sense to learn from people who have a stronger basis of knowledge in the local environment than we do.

Mass media

If, as was suggested in the previous section, pastoralists are often a despised minority, what avenues are open to them to advance their interests? Two complementary strategies that could strengthen their position are (1) increasing solidarity among themselves, and (2) improving their image in the general public opinion of the larger population. In both strategies, the use of the mass media can play a significant part.

Mass media can serve to inform pastoralists of current developments that affect them, draw attention to their shared and common interests, and provide them with a channel of communication amongst themselves and with their leaders. That this is already happening is illustrated by several instances reported in this collection.

Local print media, such as newspapers, are very important, and become more important as literacy spreads, but electronic media, such as radio, are more readily available to those who are illiterate or uncomfortable with print, or those, out in the pasture, for whom hard copy is inaccessible. The increasing availability of electronic broadcast technology (e.g. video equipment) and receivers (radios, televisions, and

video recorders) makes communication via these modes ever more significant. Local and 'indigenous' media are increasingly engaged in 'narrowcasting', addressing local populations and their particular needs. The media could become a major site of political mobilization and contestation for pastoral peoples.

The mass media can and does, to some degree, provide channels of representation, if not yet communication, between different populations, such as pastoralists and non-pastoralists, in large societies. The media is potentially a source of challenge to negative stereotypes of pastoralists, and can be used to show the positive side of pastoralists and pastoral life, and also to stress the commonalities and common interests of pastoralists and non-pastoralists as neighbours and fellow citizens. In short, the media can be used to promote positive propaganda, to influence public opinion where the opinion of the majority may have as much or more weight than the interests and rights of the minority.

As empirical researchers, we must be alert to, and include in our ethnographic reports, the use of the mass media by the people we study, in order to see how they are innovating in their political struggles. As advocates, we may wish to consider the power of the media and how it might support the legitimate interests and rights of the pastoral peoples with whom we work.

Notes

¹ As I have carried out research among pastoralists in Baluchistan (Iran), Rajasthan and Gujarat (India), and Sardinia (Italy), parallels to the problems of pastoralists in Eastern Africa readily come to mind. So I shall use some examples from these far flung locales, to illus-

trate the widespread nature of the problems seen in the Eastern African cases discussed in this collection.

² Even though pastoralists, their herds, and wildlife have coexisted comfortably for centuries in Eastern Africa, and apparently are symbiotic to a degree, there is a tendency among those organizing game parks to exclude all 'non-natural' populations, including pastoralists and their herds. Even leaving aside the peculiar notion of 'nature' as exclud-

ing human populations, and the moral dubiousness of throwing pastoralists out of their traditional home territories, the commercial wisdom of disposing of pastoralists is doubtful, since there is a substantial cost in lost pastoral productivity, for which everyone must pay. Pastoralists, performing their pastoral activities within parks and reserves could at the same time be instructive for tourists, to the benefit and edification of all.

Philip Carl Salzman, a professor of Anthropology at McGill University, was in 1987 responsible for founding the Commission on Nomadic Peoples (International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences) and served as chairman until 1993; in 1980 he founded the journal *NOMADIC PEOPLES* and served as editor until 1990.