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Pastoralism at Crossroads: Changing Features of Climate, Livelihood and Social Organization in East Africa

By Kelemework Tafere Reda
Mekelle University, Ethiopia

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PASTORALISM AT CROSSROADS CHANGING FEATURES OF CLIMATE, LIVELIHOOD AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION IN EAST AFRICA

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Pastoralism at Crossroads: Changing Features of Climate, Livelihood and Social Organization in East Africa

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Abstract - Pastoral resilience in East Africa demonstrates its suitability to the arid and semi-arid environment which is characterized by low, variable rainfall pattern, high temperature and uneven distribution of grazing land and water points. Pastoralists have long developed successfully tested adaptive strategies against environmental shocks through effective management of their resources. Adaptive strategies include the establishment of strong economic and social support networks, herd splitting, and herd diversification. More recent strategies include resort to agriculture and sedentary life, trade and wage labour migrations. However, current trends in climate change have made pastoralists more prone to ecological calamities. Drought has never been new to the Afar pastoralists but its frequent occurrence has incapacitated pastoral innovation on adaptation and coping among the Afar. This is further complicated by other Social, economic, demographic and political factors such as agricultural encroachments, conflict with neighboring groups, government marginalization or policies that favor sedentary agriculture and the values associated with it. Sedentarization of Afar pastoralists would undoubtedly open a window of opportunity for a better access to social provisions such as education, health and potable water supply. Besides, Sedentarization of the Afar facilitates permanent relations with neighbouring agricultural ethnic groups in the Tigray highlands, thereby reducing the extent of violent inter-ethnic conflicts. On the other hand, however, the decline in the pastoral mode of production has had a negative impact on social relations within the Afar as it leads to the fragmentation of existing norms and value systems. Besides, as livestock products constitute the bulk Ethiopia's export items, a weak pastoral sector is likely to damage the volume of the GDP.

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I. BACKGROUND

Nearly 50% of the world's pastoralists are found in Africa. There are over 21 million pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in the continent (Fratkin, 2001) Pastoralism occupies 60% of the land in Ethiopia; 70% in Kenya; 50% in Tanzania, and 40 % in Uganda. The geographical area they inhabit is large compared to their population size. There are many pastoral groups in East Africa. These include, the Massai who are about 450,000 in number and are found in Kenya and

Tanzania), Samburu with a population size of about 75,000, Turkana (200,000), Boran and Orma (75,000), and Karimojong, Dodoth, Teso, and Jie peoples in Uganda (total about 200,000). Other pastoralists include Gabra (25,000), Rendille (25,000), and Somali (ibid, 2001)

The Livelihoods of pastoral people mainly depend on livestock husbandry. Multispecies livestock such as cattle, camels& donkeys, and shoats are raised for various purposes including milk and meat production, trade and transportation. Livestock are have also socio-cultural and cosmological values in pastoral societies as they are the medium through which important social and economic support networks are established. Pastoralists occupy marginal lands in the Arid and Semi-arid areas of Africa which is characterized by high temperature, low and unpredictable rainfall. Land is communally owned and they keep large herd size although their conditions are poor. Herd maximization and diversification are traditional risk-averse behaviours aimed at staying the pastoral system intact. Many of the pastoral groups have taken up marginal agriculture in order to augment declining pastoral income.

II. EAST AFRICAN PASTORALISM

It is estimated that more than 50 million pastoralists currently live in sub-Saharan Africa. A significant proportion (nearly 20 million) are found in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya and Uganda (Markakis, 2004). Pastoralism is a very old mode of livestock production in the lowlands of the Great Rift in eastern Africa and the Horn. The characteristic features of these territories are a climate that ranges from semi-arid to arid, high temperatures and low elevation. Aridity occurs where the rainfall is insufficient to replenish the loss of moisture: less than 500 mm a year makes for aridity, 500 mm to 750 mm for semi-aridity. According to this criterion, the entire coastal area of the Horn is arid (Markakis, 2004)

This pastoral mode of production bases itself on mobility, which is aimed at the extensive use of grazing lands. Pastoralists in this region live in a situation, which does not support continuous crop cultivation and cannot sustain large population

*Author : Asst. Prof. of Social Anthropology Department of Sociology
Mekelle University, P.O. Box 175, Mekelle, Ethiopia.
E-mail : kelem40@yahoo.com*

numbers. The free movement of people and herds over vast tracts of land is central to the pastoral system. In the arid region, livestock production requires constant or periodic movement in search of pasture; a factor that differentiates this form of livestock production from those practiced by farmers and ranchers. A wide variety of forms of pastoralism are practiced in eastern Africa and the Horn. They range from pure nomadism without settled habitation or cultivation, now increasingly rare, to the settled mode of communities who live in homesteads and villages and combine transhumance with cultivation. (ibid, 2004)

In general East African pastoralists now face ecological and socio-economic crises due to desertification and encroachment by peasant farming, mechanized farming, and game reserves. The countries of eastern Africa and the Horn also have high reported rates of population growth without a corresponding increase in productivity or a change in the means of production. This results in the increase in population density on cultivated land ultimately causing resource fragmentation and low productivity- a demographic trend throughout eastern Africa and the Horn (Markakis, 2004)

Efforts of national governments to protect forests, important species of plants and animals and as well as wildlife has resulted in further encroachments into the pastoralist zone. The establishment of shelters for animals, controlled hunting areas, game parks and reserves, nature reserves, protected forests and 'wildlife corridors' spread wildly. In Ethiopia, for example, there are nine national parks and 10 game reserves and sanctuaries, nearly all of them in the lowlands (Markakis, 2004)

The cumulative impact of land loss has been to render pastoralism unsustainable in its pure form in many areas. There is simply not enough land or water, nor the required variety of pasturage and forage, to maintain a herd of the size and quality needed by the average household.

Drought haunts the east and horn of Africa region frequently creating problems in livelihood patterns. Recorded evidences from the previous century show that that major drought incidents occur every 10 years. Anecdotal evidence suggests that drought cycles have shortened from five to 10 years in the past, to three to five years at present (Markakis, 2004). Droughts periods in this region are often followed by famine. As a result, agricultural production using locally available technology is unreliable and not efficient enough to support the lives of many people in the arid region. Nevertheless, in spite of its precarious nature, pastoralists in the area are still exercising opportunistic farming in order to augment the declining pastoral income.

The nature of the land in eastern Africa has compelled pastoralists to devise coping mechanisms to

sustain their lives as an adaptation to the environment.. As Markakis (2004) put it "The people tilled the land where it was possible to do so and herded livestock where it was not, often managing to do a bit of both. By and large, this is still the way things are done. Mobile livestock production occupies a distinct ecological niche in this region of Africa. Pastoralists lived and thrived in this environment since 'God created the world' as they say, making the most out of nature's meagre endowment."

Pastoral communities in the East and Horn of Africa region have never had states of their own; but they lived in a forceful equilibrium with centralized governments created by agricultural societies, which held a violently protected state of independence (ibid, 2004). As a result the pastoral nomads are being increasingly marginalized in their social, economic and political standing in the larger national systems in which they live.

In light of the ever growing environmental pressures that surround the pastoral mode of production, East African herders have continued to devise several forms of adaptation in order to maintain viable livelihoods. These include, remaining in the region and become increasingly dependent on cultivation while retaining a depleted herd, migrating to a neighbouring district where land is available so that they can engage themselves in cultivation, or becoming wage labourers in commercial farms.

Sedentarisation via cultivation, that is, conversion to agro-pastoralism, is a rapidly advancing phenomenon throughout eastern Africa and the Horn,. The extent of it is difficult to gauge and, of course, it varies among regions and groups. In Ethiopia, a government statement claims that 20 per cent of Afar and 30 per cent of Somali in that country are already settled.

Pastoralists are currently influenced, encouraged or even forced by factors outside the pastoral system to take up sedentary cultivation. In some cases, the pressure comes from governments ostensibly seeking to make pastoralists benefit from social services such as education, health, and veterinary services'. However as Toulmin (1983) pointed out forcible sedentarisation of pastoralists by governments is often aimed at gaining greater political and economic control over them.

Whatever the causes may be, the process of sedentarisation has some consequences to social relationships within the pastoral system and with neighbours who derive their subsistence from cultivation. Baxter (1975), for example, pointed out that sedentarisation narrows the range and alters the texture of social relationships within a given pastoral system. He further stated that this process tends to generally sharpen differences in wealth and life style and decreases any homestead's range of effective social

relationships. However, as far as relations with neighbouring cultivating groups are concerned, the situation varies. With sedentarisation, Baxter argues, contacts between pastoralists and cultivators become more permanent, often leading to a high level of integration between the two groups.

To sum up East African pastoralism is currently under profound pressure so much so that it has become incapacitated to bear even the basic needs of human existence. This miserable situation is the outcome of many interrelated factors such as population growth, recurrent drought, conversion of rangelands into other uses, weak governance, increasing insecurity, political and economic marginalization, policy and program related constraints (Mkutu 2001). Thus, pastoralists in the Horn of Africa region have long been adversely affected from natural and manmade disasters such as drought, political isolation, conflict due to competition for natural resources and declining per capita income. Furthermore, improper aid schemes and development programs have had negative impacts on the pastoral mode of production throughout the region (Helland 1990).

III. EXPERIENCES FROM THE PASTORAL AFAR OF ETHIOPIA

The *Afar* have gone through a situation very similar to that of other pastoral groups in the horn. Research reports contend that the *Afar* had until recently been outside Ethiopian state administrative control. Prior to their political incorporation into the Ethiopian state was accomplished in 1905, the *Afar* are said to have lived in self-contained and self-supporting communities (Getachew, 1997). *Afar* land remained outside the effective control of the Ethiopian State until 1944. In fact, Ethiopia as a whole did not have a centralised administration before the end of Italian rule in 1941, when attempts were made to set up a civil and military bureaucracy (Gamaledin, 1993).

After 1941, the Ethiopian government began to recognise the political and economic importance of *Afar* territory due to its location at the entrance to the Red Sea and its agricultural potential in the Awash Valley (Pastner, 1979 cited in Gamaledin 1993). In 1962, the Awash Valley Authority (AVA) was created with the responsibility of managing development activities in the area, including large scale mechanised enterprises run mainly by foreign investors in collaboration with the state (Ali, 1994). The formation of the Awash Valley Authority was followed by the establishment, in the Middle Awash, of a National Park in 1966 and the construction of the Koka Dam in the Upper Valley. These developments constituted the first initiatives in a consistent process by which *Afar* started to experience a dramatic reduction in the size of pasturelands available to their herds.

The loss of grazing land by the *Afar* pastoralists was exacerbated when the Derg came to power in 1974. The Derg promoted a rapid expansion in state-run irrigation schemes, which brought under crop vast tracts of range land. The demise of the Sultanate of Aussa also led to the weakening of the political strength of the *Afar* (Helland, 1980).

The changes in natural resource use in *Afar* territory have had negative implications for the pastoral mode of production and culminated in resource use conflict (Ali, 1997). These changes have contributed considerably to the vulnerability of the *Afar* to drought and famine and the resultant human and livestock losses. In the great famine of 1973/74 alone, the *Afar* have lost a fourth of their livestock. A third of their population is believed to have perished. Drought frequently affects *Afar* land and occurs every few years (Helland, 1980).

Drought also had another effect on the *Afar* pastoral economy. It disrupted the balance of trade between pastoralism and agriculture. During such periods of disaster, the *Afar* had to sell their drought affected livestock instead of allowing them to die - a situation which created more supply than demand on the local market and hence a fall in the price of livestock (Ali, 1997)

The change in state policies in the Awash Valley did not only create conflict and confrontation between the *Afar* and state bodies, but it also adversely affected inter-clan relations, particularly *Afar* relations with neighbouring ethnic groups. On the social and cultural dimensions, the growth of small urban centres largely inhabited by highland migrant workers has had a serious impact on traditional mode of living. Town life undermined clan solidarity and cultural integration (Ibid, 1997).

The continued growth of the human population is believed to have increased competition for natural resources, particularly land, in recent decades (Helland, 1980). Population growth in the agricultural areas forced people to migrate into marginal lands which are often key grazing areas for nomadic herds. As a result large areas of natural grasslands have been converted into arable lands and settlements. The case of the *Afar* is neither unique nor isolated. Throughout dry land Africa, herders have lost prime grazing lands, particularly in low-lying areas, to make room for flood recession and irrigated agriculture. Population pressure, recurrent drought, ill conceived development policies, encroachment of cultivation and subsequent disruption of traditional institutions are some of the causes of pressure on the *Afar* pastoral system in Ethiopia (Ali, 1997).

As Piguet (2002) pointed out the *Afar* Region is one of the poorest and least developed Regions of

Ethiopia, neglected by national development efforts. It is only in recent years that efforts have been undertaken to provide basic infrastructure such as roads and administrative buildings as well as education and basic health services for each of the woreda.

The current government pledges to allocate more budgets to regions that were otherwise neglected during the previous regimes. Though there are already some visible improvements in some spheres, raising the region to the level that others have reached will take considerable time and effort.

Human and animal health has always been a predicament in *Afar* Region with one of the highest child mortality rates in the country, which is closely linked to the deficiency medication and dire shortage of qualified professionals. The limited number of health workers constitutes mostly highlanders, as they are the ones who got the opportunities for training. The most common diseases are water borne such as diarrhoea and conjunctivitis. Pneumonia and tuberculosis are common and HIV/AIDS prevalence is high due mainly to highland settlers, the truck service economy and presence of military personnel, especially in areas near to the border with Eritrea. Access to veterinary services is also far from adequate (ibid, 2002).

IV. THE FUTURE OF EAST AFRICAN PASTORALISM

There are two opposing views with regard to the whether pastoralism should be pursued as a viable means of livelihood in the arid and semi-arid regions of Africa. Some governments and policy makers as well as researchers have argued that pastoralism has served its purpose in the past but cannot be sustained anymore. They nomadic way of life should give way to sedentary agriculture in which pastoralists take up cereal cultivation and fodder production to raise animals in the context of mixed farming. This move encourages urbanization and increased integration of pastoralists into the market while improving their access to social services such as schools and health facilities. Ethiopia, there are already efforts to settle pastoralists through villagization programmes.

One other hand, there also those scholars (mainly anthropologists) who advocate an extreme optimistic view recommending the encouragement of traditional pastoral mode production along with the norms and values dictated by it. According to them African governments' interventions should focus on revitalizing the conditions for resilient pastoral system such as restocking, safeguarding their rights for mobility both within nations and across borders, access to water and grazing land, recognizing their cultural values and indigenous knowledge systems, and participatory policy making and implementation in a way that ensures the right for self determination (Hogg 1992)

A third group of scholars occupy a lukewarm position stating that a win-win formula could be arranged through a combination of the pastoral and agrarian structure through well established institutions for land management practices, improved access to fodder and veterinary services, access to credit and other social-economic provisions (Coppock, 1993).

V. CONCLUSION

East African Pastoralism is at crossroads. The ever-mounting pressures resulting from population growth, poverty, and climate change and state policies have unbearable consequences to traditional livestock based economy heralding a new beginning for pastoralists. The new face of pastoralism bears its own challenges to traditional social organization and cultural way of life although it also brings opportunities for integration into national economic and political systems thereby empowering pastoralists to participate in important decision-making processes at all levels of society. With current developments in *Afar* and other pastoral areas of Ethiopia, this mode of production and the clanship based social organization entrenched in the system could well be a matter of history in the next few decades.

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