

COMMENTARY: PART I and II

Transformation of the Pastoralist World View

The various projects represented in the Workshop revealed the kind of flexible and pragmatic thinking that goes on as herders learn and adopt new systems of production. In many areas the changes they are adopting are quite revolutionary, but the revolutionary character of the innovation does not become apparent until we view them against the background of the firmly held beliefs, attitudes, and taboos that form the cultural foundations of pastoral life. In other areas, it is a process of incremental adjustment based on a thoroughly experimental approach. "Experimental" sounds unduly technical. It means simply that they try out new tools, methods and techniques. If they work, they adopt them; if they do not, they reject them.

A very new economic activity for herding communities in general is the keeping of poultry. Brought up in the presentation of Mme. Hawoy Baby of the Agro-Nord Project, there was very strong reaction to the notion of chicken-raising in the middle of the Sahel by Moorish, Tamachek, and other pastoral communities. The raising, consumption, and marketing of chicken is a most important innovation among pastoral nomads. Most East African pastoralists have resisted the introduction of chicken for decades.

In both East Africa and the Sahel, there is a widespread taboo against eating chicken. This is part of an even wider taboo against all fish and fowl. The fact that the Tassaqt group and the Agro-Nord group have begun to raise, consume, and market chicken is, therefore, an important event. On one occasion they were asked by a Tanzanian official who happened to be Maasai: "I wonder why you eat chicken, because most of the nomads don't eat chicken?"

Mme. Hawoy Baby, Agro-Nord, Mali, response:

It is true that in our zone the nomads don't eat fish or chicken. There are two reasons why we have started chicken-raising. For one thing, now we raise our (usual) animals more intensively. We have much fewer sheep and goats. Nevertheless, when a visitor comes, we have to be hospitable; we have to kill a goat. We cannot afford to do that anymore, it is too expensive. So, now, we have to kill a smaller animal. When you come to visit us, we can kill you a chicken and have a nice meal for you. It allows us to have meat for our visitors, and also we have found that it is a good way to make money.

Part of the nomadic self-image includes this taboo against eating fish or fowl. The pioneers who take the first steps to break this taboo during periods of extreme drought are likely to run into difficulties in their relationship with their more traditional kinsmen. Conversely, if they endure in this activity and its commercial success, nutritional advantages, and its contribution to the rehabilitation phase is fully realized, the taboos may give way to a more pragmatic attitude such as those which have emerged in the Agro-Nord and Tassaqt groups.

Numbers and Herders

Finally, it is significant that Macao bii Gao of Niger was still not willing to divulge the exact number of beneficiaries in the project community. Conscious that the number had surpassed the planned population, he shows the nomad's reluctance to share detailed, specific, information about his community with the outside. Nevertheless, this reluctance was not perceived by his fellow herders as a drawback to the presentation. It did, however, elicit other questions related to project execution. In particular, other participants were curious to know how animals were distributed to people, and what criteria were used for participation.

Attachment to Livestock

Part of the attitudes that emerged in the Workshop was that some of the nomads were beginning to de-emphasize the mystical bonds with their livestock and beginning to think of them in practical terms. They were starting to view them as a resource that must be managed carefully, as a resource that must be balanced against other resources (ecological), as a resource that does not confer either security or benefits above certain levels of herd size. In this regard, the mixed farmers and the integrated projects were much more materialistic and pragmatic in their orientation than the nomads. Some sentiments were expressed by Maasai and Somali that suggest that the age-old attitudes of sacralizing livestock and attributing virtue to the "love of livestock" were still present. At the same time, however, even among conservative nomads like the Wodaabe, the diversification of the economy as a method of making pastoral nomadism less vulnerable to drought, was a well developed idea.

Only among the Maasai participants did we find little evidence of interest in new methods of making pastoralism less vulnerable through economic diversification. The Maasai elders' main concern was with ways of making their pastoral economy better by securing more reliable sources of water and protecting the health of their livestock through the use of cattle dips. In other words, it appeared that the Maasai participants were less prone to venture out much beyond their traditional pastoral nomadic economy and beyond the most minimal modern inputs into their traditional practices of animal husbandry. Part of the reason for this may, of course, be the fact that, of all the groups in the Workshop, the Maasai were the community whose subsistence economy was least disrupted by drought and famine. This then raises the critical question: have drought and famine been the cause of economic development among societies who might otherwise be unreceptive to economic innovations?

Drought and Famine As Stimuli for Development

The Maasai of Albalbal, Tanzania, who took part in the Workshop are the epitome of nomadic conservatism. They are willing to try methods of increasing their herds and protecting them from parasites and diseases, but reluctant to part with their animals, even for the purpose of funding water projects that are useful for their livestock. They are proud of their large herds, but unable or unwilling to convert their considerable wealth into other types of economic enterprise. Even the idea of selling a major part of the herd as drought intensifies for the purpose of protecting their wealth, is a strange idea that required the terrible demonstration of the drought before it took hold.

By contrast, the nomadic groups who are most receptive to new ideas are those who, like the people of Agro-Nord and the Niamey Herders' Cooperative, have experienced the ultimate economic disaster -- the complete destruction of their herds. They have commercialized their jewelry production, opened a dry goods store, initiated an irrigation scheme, and introduced a bilingual literacy program. It is, therefore, not cynical to say that drought and famine opened up new demands for development for certain communities.

The same is true of the pastoral Wodaabe, who were, perhaps, as conservative as the Maasai before their way of life was so severely challenged by the drought. Today, they are casting their net much wider than they did in the past, and they are experimenting with trade and craft production in ways they had not done before. Whether or not these are enduring changes in their economy or merely stop-gap measures adopted for the duration of the current crisis, remains to be seen. The fact that they are having difficulty keeping the sedentary groups sedentary, and that the expected rotation between the sedentary and nomadic groups has not been put into effect in some groups, suggests that there are residual problems to be ironed out before the current innovations can become enduring economic arrangements.

Sahel/East African Comparisons

The dialogue between Sahelian and east African pastoralists produced some insights about the character of the crisis in the two regions. Nomads from eastern Africa had some difficulty understanding the constraints under which the western nomads currently practice the pastoral way of life. For the herders of the east, geopolitical boundaries and national frontiers were, perhaps for the first time, seen as real constraints to herd management, as they listened to problems of accessing dry season pastures.

Those of the West did not feel any less nomadic (culturally) as a result of the fact that they no longer traveled the extensive, transhumant routes which they traveled before the two last big droughts. Nevertheless, for the nomads from the West, meeting the Maasai who lived near the Serengeti Game Reserve brought a new perspective to the "ideal world without farmers." They realized, through observation and discussion, that the absence of farmers and their settled communities could also mean the absence of markets and government services.

One of the most significant differences between the Sahelian region and east Africa is the fact that the rangelands in the West are a relatively narrow band that span across the whole of west Africa. By contrast, the east African rangelands are a wide band of territory that stretches from southern Ethiopia down to Zambia and beyond. The severest droughts generally tend to occur in horizontal bands of territory across the whole continent. As a result, the long-term migrations that occur in response to extreme drought tend to be north-south movements; this is true both in east and west Africa. When Sahelians effect long distance migration, they find themselves entering unfamiliar ecological environments as they move in a southward direction to escape the drought. When they do so, their animals are exposed to environments to which they are not adapted.

By contrast, the east African nomads can migrate great distances in a north-south direction, and always remain in rangelands. As a result, the same meteorological

phenomenon has fundamentally different consequences in the two regions. One of the reasons, therefore, that the Sahelians find themselves hemmed in, is not so much with the severity of the drought, as with the geographic configuration of the vegetation zones. It was not easy to explain these ecological differences to the Workshop participants. Nevertheless, they were acutely aware of the fact that the crisis took very different forms in east and west Africa, and they spent much time searching for an explanation for the differences.

Gender Roles

In most African pastoral societies the position of women is marginal, in the sense that they rarely own or inherit livestock. As a result, much decision-making concerning livestock development is the domain of males.

It is, therefore, a paradox that one of the most articulate project leaders in the Workshop was a woman, Mme. Hawoy Baby, who gave a most impressive presentation. She is the leader of an aggregate of more than ten pastoral groups in the Gao region of Mali. During the meeting with donors, she was the only project leader who came with a well-developed proposal of which multiple copies were made available for all the potential donors present in the meeting. She was a brilliant exception to the rule. She received both admiration and respect from her fellow conferees. She is able to achieve such a position because of her education, which allows her to create a new role for herself, a role that is outside of the traditional array of roles available to women. Both Mme. Pame of the Dialambere Project in Senegal, and Mme. Ahmed Hassan of the Somalian Daryeel Project, were examples of the successful expansion of women's social roles through education.

Nevertheless, when other pastoral groups in the Workshop were asked why women were not present in their meetings, or why women did not play a significant role in their development activities, they gave some rather questionable explanations. The Maasai project leaders from Albalbal said that it was out of respect for the men that the women did not take part in the Workshop.

This, in fact, may represent a demonstration of the practice of public avoidance between sexes, which is also common among the Wodaabe of Niger, also a nomadic group. The Wodaabe project leaders from Dakoro also had difficulty dealing with the role of women in their projects. Macao bii Gao of Dakoro suggested that men and women have just about the same tasks in his community. He was then asked by Mme. Hawoy Baby how many of the 74 families who took part in the project are headed by women. To which Macao answered, "We do not have women listed as women, we just put the head of the household, which to us are men, even if they are women." This exchange is indicative of the officially unrecognized roles that women play in pastoral economic development.

Revolution in Social Relations

From Communal Labor to Hired Labor

In the Albalbal Project, a most interesting shift occurred from the thoroughly traditional method of remunerating volunteer workers by slaughtering livestock to feed them, to selling livestock and paying cash to hired laborers. The shift took place in the middle of a project. Unfortunately, they were not able to maintain the payment of the wage laborers, and had to appeal to the Conservator for



(Gender Roles) Mme. Hawoy Baby (left) discusses notes with co-leader Mohammed Ag Mohammed (center).

additional funds. Nevertheless, the story captures the character of the experimentation that occurs in the projects, experimentation not only with new technologies and methods of production, but also with new types of social and economic relations.

Artisan Castes

Many nomadic societies have a pattern of occupational stratification which is an ancient feature of their social organization. Artisans who specialize in the manufacture of particular crafts are often endogamous groups,* who are bound to pastoral communities as their traditional clients. In the Tassaqt presentation concerning the crafts they brought for display, they mentioned that they were once the exclusive consumers for crafts made by a dependent community of smiths. However, the market has now widened far beyond their sole patronage to government workers, other ethnic groups and tourists.

The phenomenon of artisan castes is also common throughout the pastoral zone in eastern Africa. This was a restricted patron-client relationship which has been altered by the monetization of the economy and the entry of such communities into a wider market. This too is a major shift in the structure of pastoral societies and economies. Because of the history of this restricted patron-client relationship, the nomads in the Workshop were hesitant to learn from weavers. When they realized that the weavers had never been nomads, there was some question as to whether this activity could be viable in a pastoral economy.

Ecological Awareness

Yet another change in outlook that is occurring among pastoralists is the “thrifty outlook,” reflected in the story of the Mini Mini community. They have come to realize that large herds do not offer any protection to the owners, and that they would be better off selling their surplus animals. They have also come to realize that large herds have the capacity to “destroy the environment,” and weaken the very habitat on which they and their livestock depend. To ensure that their herds will be “in balance with nature,” they have initiated a rigorous regime of culling the herds. That is a very novel approach to pastoralism, and constitutes an important departure from the traditional outlook of African herders.

Technological Innovation

New technologies can be a blessing or a curse, depending on the manner of their introduction. There are hardly any technological horror stories in any of the projects represented at the Workshop. The reason might be that the communities have had a major say in the choice of the technologies that have been introduced. As a result, the communities tend to import only the technologies they can control. The example of the water pipeline in Albalbal is instructive. The first time it was introduced, it broke down, and, lacking the means and know-how to repair and maintain the pipeline, it was abandoned. The ADF-sponsored project has re-established the pipeline, and has trained resident technicians to maintain the whole operation. Technology seems to be appropriate only when it can be mastered by the local community.

**Endogamous groups are those groups where social custom restricts marriage to group members.*

A wide range of technological innovations have been introduced in the projects discussed here, including solar panels; various tools and techniques in the construction of classrooms, stores, irrigation canals, wells, and water and grain storage facilities. Surprisingly, there was little discussion of these technologies in the Workshop. They seemed to take it all in stride. They were not particularly disturbed by the new tools, methods and techniques. Here, as in the case of traditional and modern knowledge, perhaps it is western social science that has chosen to see technology and tradition in adversarial terms, an approach that does not seem to correspond to the way the herders view the situation.

Learning to Work with Organizations

In the western Sahel, nomads learned about the existence of donors through the experience of the drought. The hundreds of private voluntary organizations (PVO's) that fanned out across the entire region performing famine relief work, brought nomads face-to-face with another world. This encounter, although a painful one, introduced the nomadic community to the concept of funding from the exterior. As such, many of them learned how projects are developed by observing or working in low-level positions for organizations that provided services in their countries. Once these relief workers returned home, nomads were forced to ask themselves whether any opportunity might not be found in this new situation created by disaster. Herders reflected that such organizations might assist their rehabilitation and future development. Receiving relief is a distasteful experience for the nomads. Through news gathered at markets and local agricultural extension offices, many herders tracked the departure and arrival of various funding agency representatives.

There is another element that was significant. Large ranch projects were established in the region not long after the 1974 drought, through such large agencies as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These projects which were multi-lateral or bilateral (government to government) did not include community participation in their design. Most were aimed at improved veterinary services, establishment of pilot ranches, and the creation of herders' cooperatives. Herders, therefore, observed them or were marginal participants. Such projects have most often been pilot projects or have focused on demonstration activities. Proximity to such projects without direct access to benefits, spurred nomads to search out small donor agencies; they were afraid of being left out of development in their home regions.

ADF quickly became popular because of its responsive style. Since ADF had received publicity on radio, word got around that this might be a possible source for funding. Once herders understood this, they submitted their ideas to ADF. Accordingly, the element of apprehension and fear about being left out was greatly reduced.

It should also be noted that ADF seeks to enhance the process of empowerment at the grassroots level. In the pastoral zone, this has often meant encouraging new kinds of relationships with local government authorities and technicians. Direct funding assistance has played a significant role in encouraging collaboration between grassroots groups and local government. With authority for decision-making and use of funds in the hands of nomadic groups seeking change, dialogue progressed quickly. Instead of awaiting fuel cost reimbursement from a national office in the capital, rural extension agents knew that their costs would be covered by project leaders. This created a new atmosphere of respect for the nomadic communities described above, and led to healthy curiosity on the part of government technicians about these communities.

As Ahmoudou Mohamedoun of the Mini Mini Project stated, “We decided to go back to pastoralism and see if we could improve it in some way ... We actually sat down and designed the project. The authorities approved the project ... I went on to Niamey in search of donors, whether government or private. At this time, I met N’Gade Amadou, who then talked to me about the ADF strategy and way of financing.”

In the more densely populated Savannah zones, many farmers learned of ADF through local peasant organizations. Such organizations are linked with regional federations in Senegal, for instance, where they assist member groups in learning about donor organizations. Often, village committees such as that of Keur Boumy make an effort to maintain such information networks. The drought spurred the Keur Boumy Committee to seek a donor. As they stated in their presentation. “We had to find other ways of making, money or living in our communities; we thought we would try agricultural projects and do gardening; and we planned a project or gardening that we took to different donor agencies like ADF.”

The Stigma of Poverty

The diversification of the economy to include poultry-raising activities has assisted the “pioneer” nomads of the Sahel to build their way out of the often humiliating condition of poverty and dependence in which they found themselves following the drought of 1984-85. The stigma of becoming, in many cases, virtual wards of the state as whole communities were temporarily resettled for disaster relief, was traumatic for the Sahelian herders. New income-generating activities allowed such communities to broaden their economic base, and begin, in a small way, the road back to independence and self-reliance. It also provided a means by which they could demonstrate to the larger society their willingness to experiment with new production activities, to direct change in their communities, and a means by which they might return to a status of contributing to national development, rather than being dependents of the state or beggars.

Nomadic communities who have lost all of their animals are often labeled as “poor people.” This labeling may be done by the very donors who are seeking to save their lives. Sometimes the stigma endures long after they have become economically viable. Among the pastoralists in the Workshop, there was a strong indication that they had survived the crisis with a considerable sense of pride and with their communal loyalties intact. We must assume that ADF’s grassroots philosophy is, in part, responsible for making this transition possible.

The statement made by a Wodaabe participant earlier indicates how the sense of pride was preserved, “Before, when we lost our animals, whenever people looked at us, they looked at us with pity. Now that our lives have improved and we have animals, people look at us in a friendly way and with respect, sometimes even asking us to help them create a project for them.”

It is often possible to get some sense of the self-image of a community by the kind of name that it adopts for itself or is ascribed to it by others. Some of the communities of drought victims in Africa who settle in peri-urban areas have horrible names. One such community in Northern Kenya, outside of Marsabit town, is named Olla Hiyeyessa, or “the village of the poor.” Today, 15 years after it was established, it is still called “the village of the poor,” in spite of the fact that it is now economically viable. None of the communities represented in this Workshop have names that reflect an enduring stigma of poverty. On the contrary, they have realistic names like “Dakoro Herders’ Project” that suggest where they are and what they do. Occasionally, the projects have names like “Mini Mini,” which means “the pulsating star.” It, too, is a name that suggests hope, not despair.



(Left to right) CLO Joe Kuria; Ali Boly; Percy Wilson, former ADF Vice President; and Naomi Kipuri enjoy a moment with the Maasai.