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Pastoralism in Africa: A land-based livelihood practice analogous to swimming against the tide

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INTRODUCTION

AFRICA HAS BEEN WRITTEN about from the time of “Explorers,” missionaries, and anthropologists, with several perspectives, narratives and discourses emerging which are often used to characterise and generalise about the continent. Many of these are construed as stereotypes especially among African scholars because of the lack of local context. The existence of pastoralism in nearly all the 54 countries in Africa at some phase of their existence, is arguably the most “correct” about Africa.

Pastoralism is a land-based livelihood strategy that involves keeping livestock through opportunistic utilisation of existing grazing and browsing resources in natural landscapes called rangelands through cyclic movement of herds on communally owned land.¹ This practice is informed by seasonality of grazing and browsing resources that characterise the areas occupied by pastoralists. The movement of herds is a response to social, political and environmental changes.² It is usually regular and seasonal, based on range condition and water, and often determined by climatic conditions.³ Pastoralists can be nomadic, semi-nomadic or transhumant.⁴ Transhumance involves seasonal predictable movement of an entire herd between two relatively distant and ecologically distinct rangeland landscapes that thrive following specific climatic cycles.⁵ Nomadism involves continuous, short-range movements while semi-nomadism involves occasional and relatively unpredictable or opportunistic movements of herds and household members in search for fresh forage for their livestock.⁶ The movement of herds and people in pastoralism usually follows well-established, traditional routes.⁷

Pastoralism has been practiced for thousands of years in Africa.⁸ The Tuaregs, Aarib, Bedouin and Berbers have dominated North Africa with their iconic breeds of cattle and camels in the Sahel and Sahara Desert⁹ while the rangelands of southern Africa have been utilised by mainly the Hottentots, West Africa by the Fulani.¹⁰ On the other hand, the Ma-

sai, Somali, Boran, Karimojongs, Toposa, Turkana, Rendile, Bedawib Beja, have been the dominant groups practicing pastoralism in Eastern Africa.¹¹ Central Africa rangelands are dominated by the Fulani and Hema pastoralists.¹²

Practicing Pastoralism has always been a local adaptation strategy to the historical and contemporary socio-economic, ecological and political dynamics. However, the arrival of colonists and subsequent post-independence governments threatened this practice in most African countries.¹³

Contemporary governments have sustained the negative views on pastoralism including failure to recognise herder traditional ecological knowledge and pastoral customary authorities in the frameworks that govern areas occupied by pastoralists thus increasingly causing erosion of pastoralists' practices and herder knowledge of rangeland management.¹⁴ A few countries that have attempted to recognise pastoralism in their policies, have in practice not implemented what the frameworks provide.¹⁵

There are several narratives and discourses that have been presented and promoted to create an impression that pastoralism is an economically inefficient way of utilising land and if sustained it will cause environmental degradation and desertification,¹⁶ thus pastoralism cannot make meaningful contribution to economic growth, poverty alleviation and sustainable management of the environment.¹⁷

The notion that it is a primitive way of rearing livestock that should be eliminated continues to dominate rangeland policies in most African countries despite little growth in the more "modern" livestock production systems.¹⁸ These narratives portray pastoralists as irrational and inherently destructive.¹⁹

These views have been challenged by authors²⁰ who contend that the rangelands in Africa follow the non-equilibrium theory. The non-equilibrium theorists argue that pastoralism reduces exposure, sensitivity and enhances adaptive capacity of pastoralists to livelihood stress. Other authors²¹ have also found that pastoralists approaches are rational, efficient and sustainable. The practice of moving livestock is a strategy to cope with the unpredictable rainfall and very fluctuating distribution of grazing and browsing resources.²² Pastoralists are able to harness from the resources that vary at spatial and temporal scale in both quality and quantity.²³

Despite growing evidence that pastoralism is an appropriate approach to utilise rangelands where the biophysical conditions are erratic and grazing resources vary at spatial and temporal scale, it continues to be vilified and discouraged by most African governments. The intrinsic

knowledge of pastoralists that they have developed over years based on experiential learning is still not acknowledged and appreciated by most policy makers in Africa. Governments continue to underrate pastoralism and promote policies and interventions that seek to replace it. This because mainstream discourses of the equilibrium view of functioning rangelands, which was ostensibly developed for wet environments and the northern hemisphere²⁴ have remained dominant and influential among government bureaucrats. These narratives and discourses have become hegemonic and continue to influence national policies and institutional arrangements because they form part of the discourses on global environmental crisis that are promoted by very strong actors.²⁵

In this paper, I present the socio-ecological benefits of pastoralism and some of the most common interventions that governments in Africa use to limit or abolish pastoralism. I further provide the implications of these interventions. I conclude by characterising these interventions and suggest a way forward that can facilitate building consensus between mainstream rangeland management discourses and pastoralism.

BENEFITS OF PASTORALISM

Pastoralists in Africa live in the most hostile and unpredictable landscapes in terms of environmental conditions and livelihood opportunities. Livestock mobility, which is the hallmark of pastoralism in Africa, enables optimisation of the use of the range, facilitates access to seasonally available resources and enables evasion of disease-prone areas.²⁶ Key grazing resources such as watering points and drought reserves in the rangelands that pastoralists occupy in Africa vary at spatial and temporal scale and therefore mobility of herds is the only effective adaptive approach to ensure that these resources are accessed.²⁷ They are able to access forage and water resource which are generally disproportionately distributed and vary over time.²⁸ Pastoralism enables herders to adjust to changes in environmental and cultural conditions,²⁹ thus sustaining livestock production under all circumstances in an opportunistic manner.

The rangelands of Africa are mostly savanna grasslands and woodlands whose structure has been shaped by disturbance of grazing and browsing of wild animals and livestock. Studies show that pastoralists have played a significant role in the evolution of rangeland ecosystems through herd mobility.³⁰ The cyclic movement of herds at a landscape level at various frequencies and intensities sustains the characteristic rangeland plant diversity that is dependent on plant herbivore interaction,³¹ thus maintaining ecological health of rangelands.³²

Pastoralism minimises land fragmentation which is one of the threats to livestock production in the rangelands of Africa. It facilitates communal land ownership thus enabling land consolidation which is critical for seasonal and drought-induced herd movement over large geographic areas.³³ Pastoralism enhances social capital, mutual assistance networks, community cohesion and minimises conflicts thus improving on adaptive capacity and livelihoods of pastoralists.³⁴

COVERT AND OVERT INTERVENTIONS TO LIMIT OR ABOLISH PASTORALISM AND THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Governments are using both discursive and governmentality means of exercising power³⁵ which pastoralists cannot effectively resist due to their inherent inadequacies in most African countries. Pastoralists are marginalised in political processes and thus cannot participate effectively in shaping their governance or resisting dominant narratives and discourses that regard their practices as unsustainable.³⁶

Government officials, bureaucrats and their allies in conservation Non-Governmental Organisations and International Development and Aid Agencies have better abilities to create, legitimize and disseminate their narratives³⁷ especially those that depict pastoralism as inefficient and backward way of livestock production that can lead to desertification if not controlled.³⁸ They use what Svarstad et al. describe as discursive power which is very influential in defining rangeland management and governance that vilifies pastoralism as archaic and unsustainable.³⁹ Governments are also using “governmentality”⁴⁰ to ensure that communities that live in rangeland areas follow government priorities and approaches to rangeland management. Most of these approaches are at cross-roads with the traditional practices of pastoralists.

Several initiatives have been implemented to limit or abolish pastoralism through policies, legislation and sometimes development programs supported by national and international development agencies.⁴¹

These have been further emboldened by international conservation organisations that have sustained the “Tragedy of the Commons” narrative by Garrett Hardin.⁴² He argued that users of common pool resources such as pastoralists would be “trapped” in their tragic overuse of the grazing resources, thus causing environmental degradation. In order to avoid that, it was important that the state controls the land or individual ownership be promoted in areas where land was communally owned.⁴³

Governments in Africa have continued to use the Carrot and Stick approaches to settle pastoralists to ensure that they do not move their

livestock.⁴⁴ This is through incentives tagged to limiting movements or enforcement of regulations that prevent movement of herds.⁴⁵ Anti-pastoral environmentalism is increasingly becoming common among African political leaders and this has often resulted into eviction of pastoralists from the landscapes they have historically occupied or forced them to practice sedentary livestock production.⁴⁶ Settling of pastoralists is perceived as a strategy that can effectively solve most of the historical and contemporary challenges that pastoralists have encountered.⁴⁷

More so, governments are promoting individualisation of land in areas dominated by pastoralists to limit mobility and improve the land market.⁴⁸ This is through providing incentives for land registration at individual level and creating privately owned individual ranches.⁴⁹ This has increased exposure of pastoralists to biophysical risks associated to limiting movement of herds in landscapes where grazing resources are unevenly distributed at spatial and temporal scale.

They are limited from harnessing through movement of their herds to grazing resources that are not evenly distributed. This is because routes used by livestock to these resources may not easily be accessed under individualised land tenure system. This has often resulted into loss of livestock especially during drought⁵⁰ and increased the social vulnerability of pastoralists.

Rangeland condition has also deteriorated in many parts of Africa where pastoralists have been coerced to stop their mobile lives.⁵¹ All these changes have negatively affected the socio-ecological resilience of the landscapes that are occupied by pastoralists because the interventions governments, their allies or surrogates promote are not responsive to the socio-ecological realities.

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

Pastoralism that is characterised by herd mobility enhances the adaptive capacity of pastoralists to socio-economic, cultural and environmental changes. It also improves the ecological resilience and biodiversity conservation through maintaining regular disturbance regimes through plant and herbivore interactions. It is a rational rangeland management strategy that needs to be harnessed rather than vilified. Governments in Africa need to integrate traditional ecological knowledge of pastoralists in land use and pastoral development policies and plans. Policy makers, researchers, bureaucrats need to continue exploring areas of convergence between mainstream rangeland management and pastoralists' approaches

to benefit from the two knowledge systems. This will require establishing mechanisms that support mutual learning among mainstream rangeland experts and pastoralists.

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