

Pastoralism, Crisis and Transformation

The Case of Karamoja in Uganda

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This essay seeks to define the problem of pastoral crisis. The basic perspective is that a crisis cannot be equated with its various manifestations; in this case, the crisis of pastoralism with famine or forced emigration or cattle raids. Conversely, it would be meaningless to analyse the manifestations of a crisis except contextually. For example, it would be quite misleading to catalogue instances of famine over time and on that basis analyse the trend in incidence of famines. Because, as a historical and social product, the causes and the significance of famine differ from one historical period to another.

This essay thus addresses the problem of pastoral crisis in a specific period, the one opening with the colonisation of Uganda in this century. The objective is to sum up the research that has been done so far - in a thematic way rather than by way of a review of literature - so as to define a problematique for a team of researchers at the Centre for Basic Research in Kampala. As the essay moves from the sum up to defining the problematique, it moves from a statement of argued positions to a formulation of series of questions.

The discussion is organised around five issues, together representing various aspects of the "problem of pastoralism". These are (1) history, the labour process and ecology, (2) division of labour, organisation of production and class formation, (3) crisis as temporary solutions, (4) ideology and politics, and (5) state solutions as imposed crisis.

Ecology and History

Is ecology to be understood as a historical constant, more or less a geographical setting within which evolve historical processes, or should we begin with a study of the very history of ecology? Is the study of famine in Karamoja to begin with the assumption that drought in semi-arid regions is a more or less natural and recurring phenomenon, and that therefore the starting point of analysis must be to underline the ways and means arrived at socially to cope with this natural phenomenon? Or, do we begin with no less than a study of drought as a byproduct of social history?

We begin with the understanding that it is the capacity to produce, the capacity for conscious and creative activity, that distinguishes human beings from other forms of life. Thus, labour establishes an *active* relationship between humans and their natural environment; unlike animals who more or less *passively* adjust to their environment, humans go beyond an adjustment to transforming the environment to suit their

own needs. The point is that the study of ecology must begin with an historical investigation into the relationship between geography and history.

Travellers' notes, records of missions and of government officials, and evidence gathered from older folk, indicate that the ecological change in Karamoja during the period of British colonial rule - roughly from 1920 to 1962 - was rather dramatic. Simply put, Karamoja changed from a grass savannah into a semi-arid bush land. To understand the reasons for this transformation, it is necessary to analyse the impact of state policy on the labour process of the pastoralists, and the cumulative impact on the ecology of the land.

Let us begin with the labour process of the pastoralists as obtained at the beginning of colonial rule. The extensive herding of animals in the region paralleled the extensive cultivation practices of nearby peasants, what has come to be known as slash-and-burn agriculture, which leaves fallow large tracts of uncultivated land. The regenerative influence of bush is capped with a seasonal burning, whereby the nitrogeous ash fertilises the soil. Similarly, pastoralists too divided their grazing lands into two, for wet and dry seasons. They too had an annual burning of grazing lands left fallow the previous season, both to fertilise the soil and to check the population of harvester ants.

The immediate and massive impact of state policy on the labour process of pastoralists was through the alienation of land. The alienation took place in phases. The first and the major blow to pastoralists was at the time of colonialism, through a series of transfers of land, from pastoralists to peasants, and from peasants to immigrant settlers. The transfer was not simply a result of entry of White settlers into the region; state policy had also a preference for peasants whose immobility and fixity rendered them more as "sitting ducks" in comparison to pastoralists who had a greater capacity for both mobility and defence. Except for peasant societies organised as kingdoms, and therefore equipped with organised defence capacities, the tenacity of pastoral resistance and the corresponding terror unleashed on them by the colonial state has little comparison in the annals of colonial history. Both from the point of establishing a colonial law and order and from the standpoint of producing a regular surplus, state policy strove to transfer land from pastoralists to peasants.

We shall see later that the search for a surplus to be appropriated led to the commodification of cattle almost as soon as a semblance of law and order had been established in Karamoja. In the period after the Second World War, however, with British colonialism facing an intense crisis, there was introduced the policy of commodifying wild game and the land on which it was located. The location of wild game in Africa is by and large coterminous with pastoral grazing areas; the search for guaranteed sources of water in dry areas tended to bring herders of

cattle and wild game to the same locations. The designation of game reserves and game parks after the Second World War led to further alienation of land - and of the most reliable sources of water - from pastoralists.

The third social process that led to further land alienation from pastoralists was the result of private property of land, introduced by the colonial state and given expression to in the form of land grants to government officials and mission stations. Later, it was supplemented by the grant/purchase of land by the emerging petty bourgeoisie in the region.

The cumulative effect of these land transfers and alienation was to make it impossible for the pre-colonial labour process to continue unhindered. Because of shortage of land, it was no longer possible to divide grazing land into wet season pastures while leaving the rest fallow for the dry season; all the land had to be grazed all the time. The annual burning ceased. The harvester ant population multiplied without further check. These together led to the depletion of soil cover and to soil erosion. Local land shortage led to the felling of trees, especially on hills and mountain slopes, in turn affecting rainfall patterns in the region.

Any research on famine must distinguish between and periodize types of droughts. The point is that the root causes of droughts were not the same after colonialism as they were before it. To get a sense of the distinctive character of each drought, it is necessary to define concretely the frequency, the trajectory and the causes of drought, period by period.

Division of Labour, Organisation of Production and Class Formation

The second major theme of study focuses on the relationship between state policy and changes in the social organisation of the pastoral people.

Following the establishment of law and order, the appropriation of the surplus labour of pastoralists took the form of the payment of tax which required the commodification of cattle. The system was simple but effective. A tax was imposed which was payment in the form of money only. The only way to acquire money was through the sale of cattle. Cattle markets were established by the government and trade in cattle was declared a government monopoly; cattle prices were fixed with an eye on the tax to be paid and the cattle to be acquired. Finally, administrative chiefs were paid according to the number of tax-payers they managed to "nail" or "corner" each year.

The system was set up in the early 30's. After the Second World War, the trading monopoly was given to a private British company, Messrs Leibig's Extract. A meat canning factory was at Namalu, and the canned

meat was exported to Aden for consumption by the garrison of British soldiers stationed there. No wonder that the meat canning factory became the focal point of popular demonstrations in the nationalist agitation of the 50's, and was as a result simply moved out of sight of the pastoralists from Karamoja to Soroti!

Combined with this form of taxation were periodic destocking campaigns by the colonial state. The public rationale behind destocking was simple: with diminishing grazing land and increasing cattle population, all the elements of a crisis were present. The only way to diffuse the situation, reasoned the colonial state, was to reduce the cattle population voluntarily. The pastoralist, on the other hand, reasoned exactly the contrary. Crisis was not avoidable; the best one could do was to prepare for it. From this point of view, destocking or reducing herds would be the most foolish thing to do, for the smaller the herd the lesser the chance of any of the cattle surviving. The best way to prepare for crisis, on the other hand, was to resist any destocking campaign and increase the herds to the maximum as a form of insurance against crisis.

Surely, there is more than a passing similarity between the cattle "destocking" campaigns of yesteryears and the human "population control" campaigns of these years. Doesn't each demand from the people a short-term adjustment to what it presents as an "objective" reality, a reality that cannot be questioned, be it the reality of drought and ecology or of production and poverty? Is there not, in each instance and even in the short run, a contradiction between individual and social rationality?

Put together, this complex of exactions of cattle - whether through taxation or through administrative measures as destocking - resembled more a system of plunder difficult to reproduce even over the medium run than a system of exploitation. It is, of course, the centrality of extra-economic coercion in the relations between the state and the pastoralists that gave the system such a characteristic. And yet, it is this historic reality that must be the basis of a belief common amongst the people of Karamoja that all cattle in the country were once theirs, and which thus sees in contemporary raids nothing but a historically justifiable redress through a redistribution of cattle.

Within this overall relation between the state and the pastoralists took place a series of changes in pastoral society. For our purposes, two are of particular significance: the changing division of labour between the sexes and an embryonic class formation amongst the cattle-keepers.

The division of labour underwent a significant change through the colonial period as did the organisation of the labour process and the intervention of the state in the process of production. A number of changes may be noted here. First was the impact of diminishing sources of food. Before colonialism, the source of food was triple: cattle

breeding, sorghum agriculture and game hunting. With colonial rule, game hunting - a male activity - was redefined as "poaching" and became illegal. To the extent that this was not offset by other changes, the male share of labour diminished. Though complementary, the division of labour between the sexes became increasingly unequal.

Second, the weight of cattle grazing increased and that of agriculture as a source of food decreased, also primarily as a result of state policy. On the one hand, the alienation of the land with the most reliable water sources as game parks diminished the prospects of the expansion of agricultural land; on the other, the security cordon (and the resulting quarantine) thrown around Karamoja for the entire duration of the colonial period brought to an abrupt halt all barter relations between surrounding agriculturalists and local pastoralists.

And finally, the fact that cattle was the only source of money to pay tax, and that the state levied tax only on the adult male population, meant that cattle tended to be considered much more a "male property" in the family than before. Within the context of these broader changes, it is important to discern concretely the changing relations between the sexes in the labour process.

Now, to turn to the question of class formation. Although appropriation by the state took on the character of plunder, tending to depress the state of producers in an almost uniform manner, there were nonetheless embryonic tendencies towards the formation of classes amongst the cattle producers. Not only did cattle turn into a "male property" within families, there also took place a social differentiation between families.

In the pre-colonial period, a number of factors tended to discourage social differentiation amongst pastoralists. To begin with, not only was land held in common as amongst peasants, it was also appropriated commonly (unlike peasants, who could "use" land only individually). Secondly, no money economy existed. Accumulation could only be in the form of cattle, which were perishable over the medium run. And thirdly, a series of cooperative practices existed - like common care of stock - which tended to pool together labour for common use thus spreading its returns between families more or less equally.

With colonialism and the period following it, cattle were commodified. Large herds were not simply thinned out over time as one drought followed another; they could be transformed into money through sale. Over time, even land was commodified, not simply when national parks were created, or when the Church or its officials or those of the state got private estates, but particularly so when it became possible to create ranches. In the shorter run, however, the quickest way to elevate one's social position was through a political connection with the colonial state, say by being appointed a chief.

Even cooperative practices failed to halt this trend, for their significance remained at most nominal. Quite often, formal cooperation between unequals even tended to accelerate the disparity between them, while simultaneously hiding that fact. Two families could pool together their cattle (say 100 on one side, and 10 on the other) in a single kraal and take equal turns in tending to these (say 10 day each); the arrangement simply became a cover under which a transfer of surplus labour took place from the cattle-poor to the cattle-rich family.

Crisis as Temporary Resolutions

The above analysis, of the changing division of labour between the sexes and of the emerging differentiation into classes, is necessary to grasp the differences between various social groups as they come to terms with the several manifestations of crisis. These differences can shed light on a range of issues, from the social basis of different *perspectives* on the crisis to their varying *conceptions* of what might constitute a solution to their differential *capacities* in implementing a solution.

The crisis takes on several forms. The most dramatic are famine on the one hand and raids on the other. Associated with both are contradictory responses and outcomes. For social differentiation - both the differentiation between social classes and the development of an increasingly unequal division of labour - the cost and the benefits of these manifestations of crisis are unequally shared and experienced.

On the side of benefits, both famine and raids can and do act as mechanisms spurring on primitive accumulation. For example, when asked how she could manage to purchase so much land and cattle in a place where clan values are still strong, a capitalist farmer explained that the 1980 famine helped; people in need were willing to sell that which they would never have considered as the object of commercial transactions. Similarly, initial work on raids has shown that increasingly these do not redistribute cattle from one clan or tribe to another but to small minorities inside the "winning" clan or tribe. It should be possible to identify those with an interest in raids, and more so those who combine this interest with a capacity for organising raids: for example, state officials, merchant interests and propertied elements inside the pastoral populations. The hierarchy of relations between these, leading to a differential distribution of rewards between them, is also important to grasp.

On the other hand, famine and raids also lead to an opposite outcome: malnutrition (sometimes death) and flight, resulting in impoverishment and at times in proleterianisation. Once again, the fate of different groups is shaped by their location in society, particularly by the terms on which they participate in the unequal division of labour. Both the differences and the shared effects need to be understood through concrete research.

Ideology and Politics

In Eastern Africa, the pastoral peoples (the Karamojong, the Masai, the Turkana, etc.) probably had the cruellest experience of colonialism. The colonial experience put their entire way of life into jeopardy. After going through some of the most brutal colonial pacification campaigns, they shared a dual tragedy: on the one hand, an exploitation focused on the confiscation of first land and then cattle, a practice bordering on plunder; on the other, a total denial of rights since they came to be governed through externally recruited agents and were not allowed either freedom of movement or of transactions with neighbouring peoples.

The early resistance of pastoral peoples, as of peasants in societies where class formation had been no more than incipient, was led by clan leaders. They functioned as both ideological and political leaders of the people. The defeat of these resistance movements reflected their weaknesses. At the same time, these defeats led to demoralisation. In the contest between clan ideologies and the new religion ushered in by the colonial order, the scales tipped in favour of Christianity. No wonder the period after the First World War turned into a period of large-scale conversions to Christianity.

Later, however, resistance found room within the ideological cover provided and acknowledged by colonialism. Protest movements developed inside Christianity, variously taking on the title of one or another type of fundamentalism. It was thus no longer possible to identify Christianity with a single political practice; it is necessary to acknowledge the differential character of Christianity, whether as an ideological tendency or as a social/political movement. Furthermore, the antagonism between the ideological cadres of Christianity and traditional clan leaders could also not be assumed; it had to be investigated.

This background should bring to the fore a series of questions for research. It is necessary to gain an understanding of not only the history of resistance but also of the ideology of resistance, of not only the political but also of the ideological cadres of the resistance of pastoral peoples to state repression and plunder. Within that context, it is important to understand the evolution in the relationship between the clan leadership of the pastoral peoples and the missionaries in the region. Furthermore, it is also important to enquire into the various ideological and political forms assumed by that resistance.

State Solutions as Imposed Crisis

From the time of the very first manifestations of crisis on the looming horizon, the state was concerned to respond to it. In formulating its response, whether during or after colonialism, the state never stood alone; it was usually joined in the exercise by various other agencies, including "aid" agencies and NGOs.

The early response of the state to the ecological crisis in Karamoja, whose various aspects were carefully detailed by a number of on-the-scene state officials, was summed up in a single demand: destocking. When turned into policy, this measure only served to fuel the resistance of the people and expand the ranks of the democratic struggle against colonial rule.

From then on, there has been a remarkable consistency in state response to crisis and in its conceptualisation of a solution to it. Broadly speaking, the solution offered has been along two fronts.

On the one hand, state policy has called on the settlement of pastoralists, that is on their transformation into peasants. This, of course, is the ultimate expression of the colonial state's preference for the peasant over the pastoralist. But this preference also had a "scientific" justification in a theory of unilinear evolutionism which saw cultivation as an historical advance over grazing under natural conditions. From this point of view, of course, the problem was the pastoral people themselves; thus the solution was to do away with pastoralism as a mode of life.

A second solution called on by the state calls for the "modernisation" of pastoralism, thus solving the contradiction between limited grazing grounds and expanding cattle populations. This solution has called for a transition from extensive to intensive forms of grazing, from pastoralism to modern ranching. While in theory upholding the breeding of animals as a way of making a living, in practice modern ranching as a solution has tended to be at the expense of the pastoralists themselves. Preliminary research into the Masaka-Mbarara Ranching Scheme, financed in the 60's by US AID, shows that the ownership of ranches established on pastoral grazing lands was by and large with important state officials or those with connections to them. Since it is based on the commodification of land, modern ranching can objectively be taken to symbolise the concluding point of the tendency towards the alienation of land from pastoralists.

In conclusion, it is perhaps necessary to caution against the negative aspects of a tendency to focus on the study of famine so as to prepare for it. The result is research which tends to resemble consultancy, which lifts issues out of their historical-social context - not by ignoring that context - but by assuming it as an unchangeable given.