

BOOK REVIEW

Knowledge sovereignty among African cattle herders

Zeremariam Fre (2018). University College London (UCL) Press, London,
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REVIEWED BY STEVE TONAH

Pastoral peoples in Africa are currently amongst the most misunderstood and vilified groups on the continent. Their cultural practices and livelihood are often disparaged and they are commonly regarded by governments, non-governmental organisations and the urban population as being archaic, backward and anti-development. There is very little appreciation for pastoral livelihood and most people believe that pastoralists must settle down and engage in cattle ranching instead of moving their livestock within and across countries in search of pasture and water.

Galaty *et al* (1980) have examined in detail the future of pastoral peoples in Africa with particular reference to the impact of development on their lives and livelihood and conclude that pastoral peoples have survived despite the numerous challenges that they have faced over the decades. In the same volume, Migot-Adholla and Peter Little (1980) also examined the evolution of policy toward the development of pastoral areas in Kenya while Cisse (1980) discusses the policy of forced sedentarization of nomadic pastoralists in Mali. In a discussion paper by the Global Drylands Imperatives (UNDP, June 2003) the issue of existing prejudices against pastoralism and the widespread perception that mobility is backward and therefore pastoralists must settle were examined extensively and debunked. Baxter (2017) also concluded that sedentarization has negative consequences for social relationships among pastoralists in Tropical Africa. Finally, Fratkin and Roth (2006) examined the social, health and economic consequences of pastoral sedentarization in Northern Kenya. They concluded that while pastoralists settle for a variety of reasons (including the search for security, privatization of pastoral lands, expansion of game parks and ranches, increased drought and famine), mobility of pastoral herds has some advantages and should be encouraged, especially in the more dryer areas.

The book under review, written by Zeremariam Fre, on the Beni-Amer cattle herders of the Horn of Africa can be described as a plea for an appreciation of pastoral livelihood, cultural practices and knowledge systems. The main focus of the book is the study of specific aspects of the indigenous knowledge system of the Beni-Amer, the marginalisation of their knowledge system and its potential use for the sustainable intensification of livestock production. The book's central argument is that the Beni-Amer cattle owners are knowledge sovereign, that is, they have the ability to choose their knowledge system and use it freely to critique dissimilar constructions of knowledge without being subsumed by them.

The first two of the ten chapters defines and discusses the various concepts used in the book. These include a distinction between indigenous knowledge and indigenous knowledge system; and also between indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge. The author concludes that, although rooted in very different grounds, both indigenous and scientific knowledge systems attempt to systematize and understand the world.

The third chapter describes the geographical location of the Beni-Amer as well as the ecological conditions under which they undertake their herding activities. The author explains the different ecological conditions in the three geographical areas (Eastern Sudan, Eritrea and North-Western Ethiopia), where they keep their animals. It also shows how ecological conditions determine their pastoral species specialization and movements of their herds between the highland areas of northern Eritrea, the fertile savannah areas of Eastern Sudan and the low-lying plains of northern Ethiopia.

Chapters five, six and seven provide an extensive description of the cattle production, livestock husbandry and animal health management skills of the Beni-Amer, respectively. Chapter five provides a detailed description of their methods of animal production. From their informal knowledge of genetics to their intimate knowledge of the different breeds of animals and their skill at breed manipulation, the book shows that the Beni-Amer's indigenous knowledge and methods are much more systematic and far more 'scientific' than the scientific community would acknowledge. Chapter six describes the nature of cattle husbandry and management among the Beni-Amer. This system of management forms the second major area of traditional knowledge in which the Beni-Amer can make a major cognitive and skilful contribution to livestock research and pastoral development. Chapter 7, on the other hand, describes the ethno-veterinary knowledge and practice among the Beni-Amer. According to

the author, “the rich ethno-veterinary vocabulary, ethno taxonomy, the belief that most diseases can be prevented by good husbandry, good knowledge of pharmacology, surgical and bone-setting skills, and the admission by pastoralists that certain diseases can only be treated or prevented by western veterinary medicine” (page 101) is an indication of their willingness to use other knowledge systems. Indeed, Fre acknowledges serious gaps in the Beni-Amer’s knowledge of diagnosis, the life cycle of vectors and organisms, cross-infection from livestock to humans, and taxonomy, among others.

Chapter eight provides a description of indigenous knowledge and practices among other pastoral groups such as the Tuareg of Mali and Niger, the Raika of Northwestern India and pastoralists from the Andean region of South America (Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Chile). All of these pastoral groups were found to have developed their own unique pastoral knowledge systems.

The main findings of the author are again critically discussed in chapter nine. The author reiterates the fact that the Beni-Amer have mastery over breeding and animal husbandry and indicates that an analysis of their methods of animal production, husbandry and animal health clearly demonstrates the resilience of their pastoral system.

In the final chapter (Chapter ten), the author makes some concluding remarks as well as recommendations for research and policy following new and emerging threats from globalisation and climate change. Some of his key recommendations are the need to reposition indigenous knowledge and knowledge system within a global context; the need to involve pastoral communities in research and policy design as well as the need to protect the rightful ownership of indigenous knowledge and ensuring the non-exploitation of pastoral communities, protection of their knowledge in accordance to customary laws and human rights.

This book makes a convincing case for the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems of pastoral peoples and by extension, all indigenous knowledge systems. The author challenges the widely-held misconception that indigenous knowledge systems are untrustworthy when compared to western scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, the author does not remain dogmatic. He does not dismiss the relevance of western scientific knowledge nor does he pit indigenous knowledge against western scientific knowledge. Instead, he acknowledges the pitfalls of the indigenous knowledge of the Beni-Amer pastoralists and indicates some areas where they can rely on western medicine.

The book is well-written, easy to read and comprehend by the general reader. It is a must-read for specialists in the fields of animal science, veterinary medicine, indigenous knowledge systems and pastoralism in Africa.

About the reviewer

Professor Steve Tonah has lectured at the Department of Sociology, University of Ghana, Legon since September 1999. He obtained his first degree in Economics and Sociology at the University of Cape Coast/Ghana (1982), and a MA and PhD in Development Sociology at the University of Bielefeld, Germany in 1989 and 1993, respectively. After completing his PhD, he worked as a Development Officer with the Christian Council of Ghana between 1993 and 1999. He has undertaken numerous consultancy works for several local and international organizations. Tonah has also undertaken joint academic research with several institutions and universities in West Africa and Europe. He has published 7 books, 31 journal articles, 36 book chapters and over 40 consultancy and research reports in the areas of development, chieftaincy, Fulani pastoralism, farmer-herder conflicts and ethnic conflicts in Ghana. His most recent book publication with title “Migration and Development in Africa: Trends, Challenges and Policy Implications” was published by Rowman and Little, Maryland, USA in 2017. He is a member of the Ghana Sociological and Anthropological Association and a Fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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