

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of *Lands of the Future* edited by Echi Christina Gabbert, Fana Gebresenbet, John G. Galaty and Günther Schlee

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Book details

Echi Christina Gabbert, Fana Gebresenbet, John G. Galaty and Günther Schlee, (Eds.) 2021. *Lands of the Future*. Berghahn Books (in association with Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale) New York and Oxford. 332 pages. Volume 23 in Integration and Conflict Studies. ISBN 978-1-78920-990-7 (hardback) ISBN 978-1-78920-991-4 (e-book).

This is an outstanding volume which begs to be read cover to cover. It addresses the widespread and ongoing marginalisation of rangeland pastoralism across the Horn of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular, and the problematic design, enforcement and impacts of ‘modernising’ agricultural, infrastructure, conservation and social interventions. Though persistently ignored and dismissed, these are well-documented issues keenly salient for the people of arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) around the global South, and for those researchers who live and work with them. The volume is unusual and particularly compelling because it arises from a long-term collaboration of people working together across that divide, with several authors belonging to both worlds. In this powerful compilation and integration of local experience and international scholarship, in its perceptive documenting and analysis of *longue durée* political, economic and social change across the region, and in its minutely observed and intimately experienced evocation of recent and ongoing interventions and their impacts, this volume carries great weight and authority.

In her introduction, Echi Christina Gabbert outlines the overarching framing: that for decades, ASAL pastoralists have been portrayed as backward, needing

modernisation to improve their lives, and that the ASALs themselves are portrayed as empty lands, un- or under-used, requiring development for their peoples’ and the national good. She balances these persistent, misconceived and damaging narratives against the collaborative authorship’s hopes for the future: lands where pastoralists have a voice in dialogue with the state to chart their lifeways and land use in mutually positive ways, where both local people’s concepts of well-being, and also the repeated failures of modernising interventions, are more thoughtfully weighed in terms of their social, cultural, ecological and economic sustainability. This is not a romanticised view wishing to fix pastoralism in some timeless state. It is an expression of hope for political and technical acknowledgement of pastoralist skills in dealing with difficult, unpredictable, agro-ecologically poorly endowed lands, of the social, economic and environmental knowledge they bring to these challenges and of their dynamism and adaptive capacity for responding to opportunity as well as constraint. The immensely important contributions of pastoralism have been consistently suppressed and denied, and the pastoralists themselves marginalised and silenced.

Prominent doyens of African pastoralist studies have contributed to this volume, their overviews framing the main dimensions subsequently explored through in-depth case studies by Ethiopian and northern researchers. Galaty’s ever-insightful analysis focuses on

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urbanisation, fragmentation and the emergence of new forms of mobility under changing constraints. Schlee expounds the internal contradictions set up by Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, analysing the ways that topdown, effectively one-way political discourse silences people on the ground and engenders conflict, rather than suppressing or resolving it. Little reviews the economic contribution of pastoralism and its persistent undervaluing by states. Markakis sets out the *longue durée* history of Ethiopia's political journey from Empire to DERG to EPRDF, with these successive regimes' modernising plans consistently ignoring the needs and priorities of local people's well-adapted livelihoods. He charts the social, political and economic impacts of sequential heavy-handed, consistently violent, often murderous, sometimes genocidal dispossessions in different regions (Afar, Gambella, Omo). Turton recapitulates the devastating history of over half a century of dispossession and environmental degradation through dam building, irrigation and displacement in the Omo River basin.

A further eight chapters, across three sections on territorial expropriation, politics of state-building and underdevelopment in Omo, present a series of hard-hitting, in-depth studies by up-and-coming Ethiopian and northern researchers. These studies range from thematic analyses of dimensions of dispossession through infrastructure, agribusiness and other developments (Laltaika and Askew) and of villagisation (Gebresenbet); of cross-cultural mistranslation undermining or invalidating the concept of free, prior informed consent (Mun (Mursi): LaTosky) through to detailed, site-specific analyses of local development-induced dispossession and conflict (Afar: Ashami and Lydall; Oromia-Somali frontier: Wedekind; state-building in Mela (Bodi): Buffavand). A moving chapter by Regassa charts the way land expropriation for agro-industry drove Guji livelihoods to decline from sustainable cattle herding pastoralism to charcoal burning. Stevenson and Kamski analyse the deployment and interpretive risks of misleading narratives around the Omo-Turkana Basin hydropower, irrigation and development interventions. The final chapter sums up the challenges to modernism and large-scale land investments, and the solutions offered by pastoralism, agro-pastoralism and small-scale farmers (Gabbert, Gebresenbet and Wedekind).

This is an acutely topical and timely volume. As the introduction says: "Development patterns that seemed to make sense in one institutional framework (Sustainable Development Goals) have been matched with market mechanisms that seemed to make sense in another institutional framework (economic growth and investment). By ignoring possible synergies and convergence with pastoralist livelihoods, this match has created toxic environments of global social engineering and state-building

that are marked by expropriation, conflict and cultural, environmental and economic losses, which, in their harmful effects, are much greater than the sum of their parts." (Gabbert, *Introduction* p.19). This volume gives an up-to-date, comprehensive, profound and well-substantiated analysis of the historical and ongoing dispossession and displacement of pastoralism, the failures of the 'modernising' land and energy investments put in its place, the opportunities local land use systems offer in these most challenging arid and semi-arid regions, and the wider lessons they present in a time of climate change and global environmental crisis. It will be of keen interest to students and scholars of policy and practice across ASALs in general and for Ethiopia and the Horn in particular. The urgent and profound lessons for practitioners and policymakers are clear. Read this book!

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