

BOOK REVIEW

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Katherine Homewood. Ecology of African Pastoralism

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Book details

Homewood Katherine: *Ecology of African Pastoralist Societies*. Oxford: James Currey; Athens: Ohio University Press; Pretoria: Unisa Press; 2008:392 pages. ISBN 978-0-85255-990-1

Katharine Homewood has written a bold book of wide scope. Her objective is to bring together material on the ecology, in the broadest sense, of pastoral groups throughout Africa. She wants to show the diversity of pastoral systems, the ways they interact with other forms of land use, while analysing common characteristics across pastoral societies as a whole. As Professor of Anthropology at University College London, a noted researcher on the Maasai, and the promoter of an excellent Masters degree in Anthropology which focuses on ecological issues, Homewood is well placed to do this.

She covers an enormous field. In nomadic fashion she roams widely across the pastoral literature, covering pastoral groups in West Africa as well as Eastern and Southern Africa; she reports findings from several disciplines, and from specialist fields. The ecological focus of the book means that natural science and ecology occupy the most important place, but there is a solid social and political scaffolding.

The book opens with a short summary of cross-cutting issues which underpin the analysis of African pastoral systems and provide a framework within which we can understand the trajectories of change in pastoral societies. Homewood's underlying idea is, first, to link dryland ecosystem dynamics to associated patterns of pastoralist use (especially mobility); second, to explore how management of and access to these resources interacts with the social, economic and political dimensions of pastoral society; and third, to present changes in resource tenure which in her view make it necessary to rethink theories of development, livelihoods and diversification.

Chapter 2 covers the origins and spread of African pastoralism and the emergence of present-day pastoralist societies. Chapter 3 describes the environments inhabited by pastoralists, summarises the debate about equilibrium and non-equilibrium systems, and describes pastoral tenure arrangements. This chapter concludes with a discussion of pastoral production strategies. Chapter 4 then summarises the contemporary pastoral systems in both dry and more humid areas of Africa.

Chapter 5 takes a more analytic look at pastoral livelihoods and economies. Chapter 6 describes herd biology and dynamics. Chapter 7 describes food systems, diets and nutrition. Chapter 8, by Sara Randall in Homewood's department at UCL, describes the little we know about pastoral demography, and concludes that contrary to what some have argued, there isn't a single pastoral demographic regime, but there are

common themes; Chapter 9 draws conclusions about diversification, development and change in pastoral livelihoods.

This is a wide ranging approach with many strengths. Highlights include a balanced introduction to the equilibrium/non-equilibrium ecosystems debate which concludes that it involves not so much a disagreement about theory, as the result of different types of empirical experience. Equilibrium systems, in which density-dependant factors are a major influence on primary production (too many cows eat up all the grass and prevent pasture recovery; herd size should be adjusted to the long-term carrying capacity of the pasture they have available), occur in higher rainfall areas. Non-equilibrium systems, where random external events such as drought are the main determinant of pasture availability, are found in drier areas: as rainfall diminishes it becomes more variable and this variability becomes an increasing source of vulnerability. In such conditions the calculation and use for management of a carrying capacity for any specific pasture is pointless since the number of animals is not in itself a determinant of pasture growth. (The number of cows is irrelevant to long-term pasture prosperity, since it the latter is determined by events external to the ecosystem, not by density dependent factors.) This has obvious implications for support to pastoralist strategies and for management.

Chapter 5 discusses pastoral livelihoods and economy from a starting point in modelling. Here the empirical data are weak and it is hazardous to average them from a small number of detailed models or cases. This is especially true of the discussion about pastoral labour, the elephant in the room in most analyses of pastoral development. Pastoral labour has very different characteristics from agricultural labour (very significant role played by individual skills and knowledge so that one hour's input by person A is very different from an hour put in by person B; substantial economies of scale in some operations with large step jumps in labour requirements between herd size categories; wide seasonal differences in labour demand but year-round labour inputs required; large differences in the skills required for different tasks), but we scarcely begin to understand pastoral labour so far.

Homewood's description of the place of markets is uneasy. In her treatment, markets play a quite small, walk-on, role, mainly as part of the recent history of economic diversification. This does not do justice to the central role played by markets in pastoral livelihoods for a very long time, and the key role likely to be played by markets in future pastoral development.

The marketing discussion opens with the commercialisation of dairying. The main discussion of marketing more generally is in a set of case histories from each geographical area, focussed on events since the 1960 s. There is little discussion of the growth in marketing related to other aspects of pastoral economy and society, and especially marketing as the engine for far-reaching changes in pastoral production; its impact on ownership and control of production factors, on gender, the location of power, livestock production itself including herd management strategies, poverty.

A key aspect of growth in marketing of livestock products is the terms of trade between products pastoralists sell (especially live animals), and those they buy (especially staple cereals, cloth and veterinary drugs). Over the long term secular changes in pastoral terms of trade have had an important impact on pastoral livelihoods and pastoral welfare. Where there have been improvements in terms of trade, it has been possible for households to live from smaller herds, and such changes in terms of trade have stimulated changes in

the age and species composition of household herds. Nevertheless increased reliance on livestock sales in a volatile market has made pastoralists more vulnerable.

The most serious impact of volatile terms of trade occurs in pastoral famines. Pastoral famines are essentially a breakdown in terms of trade resulting from collapsing animal prices and soaring cereal prices. These changes can be triggered by drought, but may also be the consequence of other influences on price or availability of livestock or cereals in the market. Perhaps the largest African famine - at the start of the colonial regimes around the turn of the 20th century - was caused by rinderpest. Homewood mentions all this in a couple of paragraphs, but it deserves a central place in her discussion.

Livelihood diversification is identified as a possible forward trajectory, but a depressing table of diversification activities ranked by wealth class shows that it is only well-off and wealthy pastoralists who diversify into productive activities. For poorer pastoralists diversification means adoption of one or more from a range of coping strategies which generally lock such households into long-term poverty.

Homewood has performed a long-overdue task by bringing together material scattered over a large number of publications. The resulting study is enormously valuable because it brings together in one place information which, if properly used, could make possible a better understanding of pastoral livelihoods, and more enlightened development planning.

The book serves several audiences: undergraduates and other learners interested mainly in pastoralism; specialists in related subject matters seeking to understand how pastoralism impinges on their professional interests; civil servants in countries with nomad populations; elected members of national assemblies representing pastoralists; development planners in government and agencies dealing with pastoral societies; literate pastoralists seeking to understand their own society and how it could move forwards.

The book provides an extremely good primer for these audiences. If copies could be got into governments and development agencies it would be a major step towards a common platform of understanding of pastoral rationality, which is perhaps the most important outcome that can be expected. An enlightened development agency could have a significant impact on pastoral development by buying a hundred copies and mailing them to key government people in countries with nomadic pastoral populations, and agency department heads.

A further task remains. It is now imperative to bring together all this empirical material into a more theoretical model of pastoral livelihoods, a model with both explanatory and predictive power. Thanks to Homewood's synthesis we now have many key elements. We need a volunteer for this next task.

Author information

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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