Book Reviews

Beyond Communal Wisdom: Land and Cattle in African Agrarian Systems

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A Review of Thomas J. Bassett and Donald E. Crummey, eds. *Land in African Agrarian Systems*. Madison: University of Wisconsi Press, 1993, pp.xi, 418; and Peter Rigby. *Cattle, Capitalism and Class: Ilparakuyo Maasi and Transformations*. Philadelphia: Tempte University Press, 1992, pp. xviii, 247.

African agrarian systems are often shrouded in myth, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation, especially when it comes to the question of access to, control over, and management of, rural land. The common assumption is that the 'indigenous', 'traditional', or 'customary' land tenure systems present obstacles to efficient agricultural development. Specifically, it is held that the 'communal' tenure systems are unproductive, they promote environmental degradation, and suffer from tenure insecurity, thus making it difficult for farmers to get credit for investment to increase production. The brunt of these criticisms is reserved for pastoralists, who are perceived as conservative 'tribesmen' with quaint, if picturesque, customs, irrationally opposed to modernisation, and hopelessly wedded to endemic wanderlust and the 'cattle complex'. The commercialisation and individualisation of rights in land, the critics believe, would increase agricultural productivity and expedite the pastoralists' demise.

The two books vigorously challenge these assumptions, analyses, and prescriptions. They demonstrate the complexity, diversity, and transformations that African land tenure and pastoral systems have undergone since the beginning of colonialism. Both call for clearer and historically grounded understanding and respect for what they term the 'indigenous land tenure' systems and 'pastoral praxis'. Only those development strategies that build on, rather than seek to overhaul, the inherent strengths and attributes of these systems can hope to succeed in promoting, simultaneously and sustainably, agricultural growth, environmental protection, and improved access and participation of women and the rural poor.

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The papers in Bassett's and Crummey's collection can conveniently be divided into those that present inter-continental comparisons, and those that focus at the national level, or at the level of local communities. Each seeks to demonstrate, with varying degrees of emphasis and success, how the patterns of land access, control, and management are embedded in social, political, and economic structures and processes that have changed over time. They are all unanimous in showing that analysing communal and individual tenure systems in terms of dichotomous and evolutionary models is too simplistic, for it ignores the fact that there is considerable individual freedom under corporate tenure systems, and conversely, land commercialisation has in some cases strengthened collective control. Thus, African land tenure systems are flexible and adaptable to changing conditions of accumulation, rural power relations and struggles, and state agrarian policies, often inspired by either the free-market illusions of modernisation discourse, or the coercive edicts of socialist collectivisation.

The case is stated forcefully in Chapter 1. Bruce[1] argues that indigenous tenure systems do not inherently militate against security of tenure and efficiency in resource allocation, nor do they prevent land mortgageability, or promote the extensive subdivision and fragmentation of holdings. He agrees, however, that women's access to land in these systems, whether in patrilineal or matrilineal societies, is limited, although reforms predicated on individualising household land tend to favour the male heads at women's expense. But the critique is marred by the instrumental, abstract, and ahistorical manner in which the argument is advanced, and the failure to define clearly what these indigenous tenure systems are. At one point he seems to equate them with 'shifting cultivation', which leads him to making such ridiculous statements as: 'Under most indigenous systems, a farmer can have as much land as he or she can use, so long as it is available'.[2] Obviously, he hasn't heard of the land-short, exploited, and highly differentiated peasantries of precolonial Egypt, Ethiopia, Northern Sudan, Sokoto, Senegambia, Rwanda, and Burundi, just to mention a few well-known cases. More compelling is Lawry's[3] analysis in the next chapter on the flexibility of customary land tenure in Lesotho, whose complex arrangements reflect the shifting structures of chiefly authority, conceptions of leasehold rights, sharecropping practices, and the effects of labour migration.

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1 John W, Bruce, 'Do Indigenous Tenure Systems Constrain Agricultural Development?'.

2 *Ibid.*, p.39.

3 Steven W, Lawry, 'Transactions in Cropland held Under Customary Tenure in Lesotho'.

The need for concrete historical analysis and inter-continental comparisons cannot be overemphasised, which Okoth-Ogendo[4] attempts to do in his extensive and impressive overview. The paper begins by an appraisal of the conflicting 'externalist' and 'internalist' approaches advanced by nationalist and dependency scholars, and colonialist and modernisation ideologues, respectively, to explain the current African agrarian crisis. Central to these explanations, he states, are assumptions about land, its availability, conditions, and productivity, and assessments of the accompanying systems of labour organisation, production technology, markets, and the social ideologies of access and control. Those who believe that the crisis is externally induced trace its origins to colonialism, arguing that the colonial states, despite their differences, both real and rhetorical, assumed ultimate control over the land, so that they could expropriate it and relocate communities at will. The larger the number of European settlers, the more harshly these measures were executed. Combined with the coercive labour control systems, colonial land policies, institutions, and practices altered and distorted indigenous land tenure systems, leading to increased land inequalities, resource plunder, rural deprivation and social stagnation.

The colonialists, and their modern reincarnations, of course, blamed the 'defective' tenurial arrangements which they thought were inherent in Africa's 'communal' agrarian systems. In response they implemented, especially in the 'colonial welfare and development' period after the Second World War, a series of ill-conceived land settlement and privatisation schemes, known as land 'consolidation' in Kenya and land 'concentration' in Zimbabwe. The colonial agrarian crisis persisted after independence, indeed, it deepened because the postcolonial governments' capacity and need to change colonial agrarian policies was limited. Independence brought new normative and institutional parameters that constrained the use of state coercion to appropriate land, relocate communities, and settle interethnic land conflicts, while at the same time developmentalist pressures, predicated on the need to earn the almighty foreign exchange, reinforced colonial export production.

Consequently, Okoth-Ogendo argues, 'irrespective of the ideological and other preferences or predilections of independence elites... post-colonial responses to the agrarian crisis were generally in the nature of consolidation and expansion of colonial policies and programs, on the one hand, and limited experimentation with new but not altogether novel strategies within the framework of inherited structures, institutions, and bureaucracies, on the

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4 H, W, O Okoth-Ogendo, 'Agrarian Reforming Sub-Saharan Africa: An Assessment of State Responses to the African Agrarian Crisis and Their Implications for Agricultural Development'.

other'.[5] The first pattern is quite evident in countries such as Kenya, Malawi, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe. Among the countries where serious attempts were made to devise alternative or 'radical' agrarian policies and programs are Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Tanzania. None of these countries, he concludes, has been able to realise the expectations of increasing agricultural productivity, and more generally, achieving rapid and sustained development.

Some of these countries are examined in greater detail by the other authors in the book. The case of Kenya is discussed by Fiona Mackenzie[6] in a paper that unfortunately fails to live up to its promises. Noting the legal pluralism that operates in Kenya, 'customary law' and statutory law, she seeks to show that 'customary rights' to land are neither static artefacts transmitted from the precolonial past, nor are they merely a colonial construct, but constitute 'a continuing domain of discourse or an arena of struggle... one of the legal sphere to which disputants have recourse'.[7] Faced with large-scale appropriation of land in the 1950s the colonial land consolidation schemes, struggle over land between and within families, and between men and women, intensified, fought on the continually shifting and interactive terrains of 'customary rights' and modernisation. Similarly, Werbner[8] demonstrates, in a rather convoluted paper, that elite competition over land for commercial agriculture and livestock rearing in Botswana is couched in the idiom of 'custom', although there is little that is 'customary' about the elite's accumulation or social class values. It has entailed 'retribalisation' of spatial and ethnic identities and neopatrimonialism by the elite as they try to extend their organic links to the countryside.

Unlike these two, Ranger[9] tends to see the notion of 'communal tenure' in Zimbabwe primarily as a colonial construct, full of misconceptions and based on a false reading of both precolonial and colonial histories. A construct, however, that, like a chameleon, has been able to provide different shades of meaning at different historical conjunctures: its supposedly collectivist ethos was lamented by colonialists and later the modernisers, while the nationalists and the radicals celebrated it, seeing it as the bedrock of Zimbabwe's socialist reconstruction. This ignored the simple fact that not all land in the colonial reserves, rechristened communal areas after independence, was used in common by the community, let alone cultivated

5 Ibid., p. 262.

6 Fiona Mackenzie, '"A Piece of Land Never Shrinks": Reconceptualising Land Tenure in a Smallholding District, Kenya".

7 *Ibid.*, p. 201.

8 Richard, P, Werbner, 'From Heartland to Hinterland: Elites and the Geopolitics of Land in Botswana'.

9 Terence Ranger, 'The Communal Areas of Zimbabwe'.

in common, and that individuals had specific rights and differentiation was widespread and constantly deepening. These misunderstandings, Ranger argues, led to the failure of colonial development schemes, and will frustrate postcolonial state interventions as well. At stake is more than correct historical knowledge, however. The appropriation of the colonial discourse on 'communal tenure' by the postcolonial state reflected an important ideological shift from romantic socialism to technocratic modernisation. In a series of official reports in the mid-1980s the problem of land reform was redefined, away from unequal land distribution between black and white to increasing production in the communal areas, from land resettlement to tenurial changes. This is an intriguing argument, but the factors behind this shift are not fully explored.

Unlike Kenya and Zimbabwe, the self-styled revolutionary governments of Somalia, Ethiopia and Mozambique sought to radically transform the agrarian systems they inherited. Following the 'revolution' of October 1969, the new Somali government announced a series of agrarian reforms aimed at stimulating growth and economic development within a socialist framework. The state assumed control of all land in an effort both to eliminate customary land tenure arrangements, which were perceived to be inefficient, environmentally destructive, and conductive to the capitalist processes of land concentration and speculation, and to facilitate the establishment of state farms and cooperatives. The reforms, combined with the fluctuations in the Somali domestic and external economy, Roth[10] contends, actually led to the rise of a class of big absentee urban landholders. The creation of large state farms, cooperatives, and private plantations displaced many peasants from the fertile river valleys. Contributing to peasant tenure insecurity, especially among those adopting conservation policies, was the provision requiring repossession if land was left uncultivated for a successive two year period. Patriarchal control was also reinforced in the rural areas for the majority of those who gained state leasehold concessions were men.

The resolute Marxist rulers of neighbouring postrevolution Ethiopia attempted an even more radical agrarian reform program. In a fascinating, carefully argued paper, Rahmato[11] assesses the shift from populist and pro-peasant policies of the regime's early years to the statist policies of collectivisation. By implementing rural land redistribution the new government hoped to win the loyalty of the long-suffering and restive peasantry and dislodge the landed classes from their rural bases of power, thus ensuring against counterrevolution. Also, the formation of peasant

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10 Michael Roth, 'Somalia Land Policies and tenure Impacts: The Case of the Lower Shebelle'.

11 Dessalegn Rahmato, 'Land, Peasants, and the Drive for Collectivisation'.

associations was encouraged as a means of empowering local peasant communities. But as the revolution became consolidated, the hand of state intervention in the rural areas tightened, and the drive to promote socialist production and socialist relations was accelerated. The statist agrarian regime consisted of collectivisation and tight fiscal regulations, including villagisation, resettlement, grain procurement, and control of grain marketing and pricing. These programs, it was believed, would finally liberate Ethiopian agriculture from its backwardness and perennial food shortages. However, the experiment was doomed from the start: the socialist theories and examples it was based on were contradictory. Moreover, there was little public consultation, indeed, the peasant associations were soon turned into coercive vehicles of state policy. The reforms may have succeeded in lessening rural conflict, differentiation, and exploitation, but they gave rise to insecurity of holding, blocked rural outmigration and employment, and, above all, they did not result in agricultural growth and development. As the evidence mounted that despite massive state support, the collective sector continued to be outperformed by private peasants, and that the continuous monocropping favoured on the state farms exacted heavy environmental costs, the state slowed down the drive for collectivisation in the latter 1980s.

Mozambique seems to have followed a similar path. After independence the Frelimo government pursued large-scale collectivisation at the expense of peasant production, but it was forced to change course from the mid-1980s because of disappointing results, partly compounded by South African destabilisation. Bowen's[12] paper discusses the reform programs implemented, which were 'predicated on four main policy and institutional changes: regional prioritisation, administrative decentralisation, liberalisation of commercial activity, and allocation of resources on the basis of economic pragmatism rather than ideology'.[13] Examining two specific rural development schemes, she argues that the reforms have been constrained by continued shortages of consumer goods, draft animals, plows and labour, especially among the poor peasant households, as well as by transport and marketing bottlenecks, poor project planning, coordination, and implementation, and the government's inability to supply agricultural inputs promptly and confer land titles for security of tenure. Nevertheless, output has increased, though at the expense of greater rural inequality, which she fears, 'will be a formidable political and economic problem in the long run'.[14]

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12 Merle L, Bowen, 'Socialist Transitions: Policy Reforms and Peasant Producers in Mozambique'.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 329.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 350.

What these authors seem to be saying is to be saying is that the radical states supplanted the flexible and adaptable arrangements of indigenous tenure systems with uncertain and rigid land allocation and management practices, whose inspiration was more often political than economic, ideological rather than pragmatic. Moreover, the reforms were implemented with the authoritarian reflexes of the colonial order not the participatory promises of independence. What is needed, in Rahmato's words, is 'agricultural pluralism', agrarian policies and systems that do not place 'all eggs either in the smallholder or in the collective agricultural basket. Just as collective agriculture, even under the best of circumstances, has severe limitations, so too does peasant production whose long-term developmental prospects are not as bright as its admirers make out.[15] As persuasive as this argument might be, focusing on state agrarian policies without grounding them, as is evident from most of these papers, in the changing contexts of, first, peasant politics and struggle, second, the national constellation of class forces and the dynamics of accumulation, and third, the impact of the world system, leaves us with inadequate historical analysis and idealistic prescriptions.

The papers that focus on agrarian transformations at the local community level in some ways offer a more textured analysis, although they do not always succeed in linking the local to the broader forces at work, structure and agency, process and contingency. We learn from Saul's[16] paper on land in Bare in western Burkina Faso of the fine distinction that is made between a land holding unit and the unit of production, which are not always identical. Consequently, far from accelerating individualisation of tenure, the expansion of commodity production and immigration pressures have reinforced corporate control as lineages have sought to strengthen their rights of permanent ownership, while permitting and encouraging individual production, including outsiders. Thus 'custom' here constitutes less a set of past practices than it represents responses to contemporary conditions.

The last three authors examine the unsatisfactory results of technocratic interventions. Bassett[17] focuses on the failure of Fulani sedentarisation projects in northern Cote d'Ivoire. The Ivorien government launched the projects in the 1980s in order to increase domestic beef production and also in the hope of integrating the Fulani herders and the local farmers in order to reduce tensions between them. In their formulation and implementation the

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15 Rahmato, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

16 Mahir Saul, 'Land Custom in Bare: Agnatic Corporation and Rural Capitalism in Western Burkina'.

17 Thomas J, Bassett, 'Land Use Conflicts in Pastoral Development in Northern Cote d'Ivoire'.

projects betrayed a poor understanding of the nature of herd movements, and above all, they failed because they ignored the social, political, and economic dimensions of the conflicts between the farmers and herders over land control, access, and management. Bloch's[18] paper looks at the impact of irrigation projects in Bakel in eastern Senegal on land access and conflicts between the elite and subordinate groups. Despite the project's egalitarian intentions, the elite, mostly men, have been able, by manipulating their status and national political connections to appropriate substantial amounts of land for themselves.

Also surveying the impact of irrigation projects, Watts[19] admirably shows the progressive intensification of labour associated with the irrigated rice schemes in the Gambia between 1830 and 1987, transformed, reproduced, and reinforced intrahousehold struggles between men and women over land and labour, and the customary representations of gender, conjugality, and patriarchal control. This paper puts to rest the notion that African land tenure systems were uniform, simple and static, or that change entailed a predictable and evolutionary movement from 'communalism' to individualisation. The forms and patterns of controlling, accessing, and managing land in various parts of the continent, and over time, embodied collective and individual rights in complex combinations, arrangements that were articulated in diverse cultural idioms, reflected varied economic and social conditions, and were rooted in specific histories of accumulation and struggle at various levels from the household and the local community, to the nation and the world system.

Rigby's book shares the same epistemological agenda as the collection above, namely, to critique conventional characterisations of pastoralism, to demonstrate that as a system of production pastoralism is far more complex and dynamic than it is often depicted. It concentrates on those much romanticised and much maligned quintessential pastoralists of popular mythology, the Maasai. Rigby presents a passionate defence, marshalling historical evidence that shows the Maasi have always undergone, and adapted to, change, and theoretical insights from canonical Marxist texts to reaffirm the historicity and humanity of his subjects. He expresses moral outrage against anthropoligical knowledge predicated upon the assumption of the demise of the subject, as successive generations of anthropologists have been want to predict the 'end of the Maasai'. And he insists that development strategies and plans for pastoralists have generally failed, not

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18 Peter C, Bloch, 'An Egalitarian Development Project in a Stratified Society: Who Ends Up With The Land'.

19 Michael J, Watts, 'Idioms of Land and Labour: Producing Politics and Rice in Senegambia'.

because of pastoral pathology, but because of endemic misconceptions of pastoral praxis. But it is not a flawless defence. Occasionally the analysis lapses into glib sentimentality, the text wears its erudition too loudly with intrusive copious quotes, and the narrative has a temporal formlessness suggesting that the established anthropologist in Rigby has overwhelmed the aspiring historian.

The book opens with a critical review of Maasai historiography, noting the ambivalence with which the Maasai have been viewed by administrators, both colonial and postcolonial, European and African, and by academic researchers and development tourists. Fostering the anti-pastoral discourse has been the fact that the scholars, administrators, and experts writing, ruling, and planning development for the presumably hapless pastoralists have come from non-pastoral economies and cultures. Certainly during the colonial period official antagonism to the Maasai provided a justification for the massive theft of the best Maasai lands for European settlement and farming. Similarly, postcolonial developmentalist interventions among the Maasai have been fuelled by a drive to appropriate or control their land and livestock resources. These points are broached in Chapter 2. But it is one of the most annoying things about this book that the narrative is often broken by lengthy flights of theory, in this case on post-modernist discourse. His critique of post-modernism is quite perceptive, but it is a digression that remains unconnected to the central discussion.

The subject of the colonial impact on the Maasai is taken up in Chapter 4, with special emphasis on its ideological ramifications. The author correctly points out that the material and iedological changes brought about by colonialism, including alienation of Maasai lands and destocking, the ecological disasters that accompanied colonisation, and the introduction of Christianity and western education, severely tested and transformed social relations, upsetting in particular 'the relations between elders in power and active *ilmurran*'.[20] And he outlines the various forms of Maasai resistance, including refusal to enter wage labour or the colonial schools, rebellions, and involvement in anticolonial political movements. All this is well-known. The analysis flounders precisely where it ought to make a contribution, namely, the ideological repercussions of these confrontations and transformations. All we get is a stale description of the *eunoto* ceremony performed when junior warriors turn into seniors.

Similarly Chapter 3 on 'Class Formation in Historical Perspective' delivers less than it promises. It begins with a lengthy review of sociological and Marxist debates on class. One can only agree with his call for

20 Peter Rigby, *Cattle, Capitalism, and Class: Ilparakuyo Maasai Transformations* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992:73.

conceptual precision, and the need to discard the dichotomous models and categories that litter the field of African Studies, and the social sciences generally. In this context, his reproach against those who portray the Maasai as capitalists, on the basis that 'cattle and other livestock have all the attributes of 'capital'... in that they may be accumulated as 'pastoral capital', allowing for 'management decisions that are lacking in agricultural regimes',[21] is apt. However, his own characterisation of the Maasai economy and society is equally ahistorical and superficial. He sees the Maasi social formation as 'precapitalist', that is, 'classless' and 'communal; indeed, he believes it' could be the basis for true socialist development.[22] Against his declared intentions, he comes to the conclusion that change in Maasai society, throughout its known history, has come about as a result of the increasing intrusion of foreign merchant capital, since as a classless society it has lacked class struggle, that Marxist motor of historical transformation.

The question of Maasai classlessness is pursued in greater detail in Chapter 5, where he argues that Maasai ideological notions of egalitarianism 'are embedded in the age-set and kinship structures and are materialised in the speech and discourse, whether in the everyday *praxis* of pastoralism or in the rituals that mark crucial periods in the lives of boys and girls, women and men'. The evidence presented in this chapter does little to substantiate this thesis. Any systematic discussion of gender relations, and the differentiations spawned by colonial and postcolonial processes of accumulation would prove the contrary. In fact, Chapter 7 examining the 'Dynamics of Contemporary Class Formation', and comparing development strategies in capitalist-oriented Kenya and socialist-oriented Tanzania as they affect the Maasai, shows unmistakably that economic inequalities have grown and social differentiation has deepened, as the loss of land, labour, and livestock resources has intensified due to either commoditisation or coercive state development programs.

How do the Maasai themselves perceive these changes? This is an important, but neglected, subject. All too often scholars are content to describe and explain the events, structures, and processes they are analysing without adequately problematising and incorporating the perceptions, knowledge, and consciousness of the people concerned. Rigby addresses himself to this question in Chapter 6, and attempts to capture Maasai views of 'peripheral capitalism', as he put it. Unfortunately, the results are quite unsatisfactory. For such an endeavour to succeed an extensive and intensive

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21 *Ibid.*, p.39. He is quoting Harold K. Schneider, *Livestock and Equality in East Africa.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979:221.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

reading and interrogation of Maasai oral and written texts would be needed, more than is attempted here. Perhaps as an honorary Maasai, a fact trumpeted in the captions accompanying the photographs, the author felt he intuitively understood the Maasai mind and saw no compulsion to do more.

It also wont do to reduce African societies into raw data to be processed through theories manufactured in Europe or America. This is a pitfall Rigby laudably tries to avoid, if only in the concluding chapter, where he seeks to merge African epistemologies and Marxism, or what he calls 'the 'Africanisation' of Marxist theory, as well as 'Marxistisation (if I may coin a term) of African historical, social, and reflexive studies'. One prays that this ugly term, 'Marxistisation', wont gain currency! Commendably, though, Rigby's encounter with the leading African philosophers, such as Senghor, Hountondji, and Mudimbe, and historians such as Temu, Swai, and Depelchin is serious, despite the fact that no theoretical resolution emerges, not even in outline. But it is an intellectual challenge that needs to be pursued with vigour and urgency if we are to gain a deeper and richer understanding of African economies and societies, beyond the comfortable, but facile, stereotypes of colonial and imperial discourses.

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