

The Modern Motility of Pastoral Land Rights: Tenure Transitions and Land-Grabbing in East Africa

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Is there a future for pastoralists in Africa? The modernizers seem to feel the answer is ‘no’, but as long as there are rangelands, mainly suitable for animal production, conditions will make continued highly mobile husbandry needed. Small towns, the efflorescence of a commercial and service sector, and urban migration do handle much population increase, but regional economies – except where there are minerals – will continue to be livestock-based. Pastoral societies experience many of the constraints of remote, rural living – dispersed populations, few and bad roads, distant services, less integrated market chains, lower educational participation, lower levels of literacy - as they long did in rural North America. Cultural resilience - often called ‘traditionalism’ when pastoralists are in question – are, however, more symptoms of the infrastructure of arid lands than causes of the relative detachment of rangeland communities from national societies. The cultural integument of herding societies will undoubtedly become increasingly folklorized or --like Maasai age-sets --retained as a form of cultural nostalgia. But pastoralists will persist because livelihood opportunities it presents will, since static forms of ranching – with people replaced by intensified techniques and technologies of livestock production – have not proven able to generate the level of livestock production, especially flows of reasonably priced meat, that is increasingly demanded by Africa’s growing cities and towns.

The major challenges to pastoralism are not the demands of modernity, which most pastoralists are fully willing to embrace, nor the cultural lure of education – since the educated pastoralist is not an oxymoron but an increasing reality. Pastoralism is most critically challenged by the appropriation of rangelands by a variety of actors who use political means to achieve what would normally be socially and economically impossible. “Land grabbing”, which has become an idiom of African politics as salient as the “politics of the belly”, is not limited to the semi-arid and arid lands but is especially compelling in dryland locales because of the scale with which it is pursued. Within the large setting of African modernity and political economic change, this paper will examine how moments of vulnerability provided by transitions in land tenure – most importantly the assertion of rights over land by the state and the privatization process – has enabled the opportunistic seizure of pastoral lands by a variety of actors, including the politically well-positioned, entrepreneurs, commercial farmers, speculators, conservationists, tour operators, miners, and so on. The lands held by Maa-speakers from central to southern Kenya and northern to central Tanzania are especially illustrative of pastoral land loss, given the sheer diversity and inventiveness of means by which territory is seized. This paper will examine strategies by which land has been taken during the process of privatization of Kenyan Maasai districts, including the subdivision of Group Ranches, and during the paradoxical process by which state sovereignty asserted over pastoral lands in Tanzania (much as in Ethiopia) is used to (neo) liberally allocate land to private

interests. While the corrupt nature of some land-grabbing is indicated by its covert and surreptitious nature, some is carried out under the progressivist and triumphant banners of development, national progress, the preservation of natural resources, conservation, regional diversification, anti-traditionalism, anti-conservatism, and what have you. Based on results from a multi-sited study of pastoral tenure change and environmental governance, the paper will aim to address two questions beyond how land-grabbing occurs: first, how it is strategized and justified, in discourse and policy; second, what its impact is on the productive use of rangelands where opportunistic livestock mobility has long defined the most effective strategy for extracting value out of otherwise marginal lands; thirdly, what its impact is on rangeland societies who, despite dramatic achievements in economic diversification, thrive on a firm base of animal husbandry on territories they claim and defend.