

Commission on Nomadic Peoples

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MORE ON CAMELS AND DESERTIFICATION

by Daniel Stiles

He who wants to see his time rightly must look upon it from a distance. How great a distance? Quite simply, just far enough away so that he cannot discern Cleopatra's nose.

Ortega Y Gasset

Jere Gilles in his reaction to my article «Desertification and Pastoral Development in Northern Kenya» (No. 13) raises some important questions which have relevance to many other pastoral regions. The attitudes expressed in his reaction enjoy widespread acceptance amongst anthropologists, and I think some of them represent a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what is actually happening in semiarid and arid lands occupied by nomadic pastoralists.

Gilles first of all seems to equate long term dessication, i.e. climatic drying, with desertification. There is of course a relationship between the two, but they are far from being the same thing. Gilles contrasts the slow (and variable) rate of dessication over the past 3-4,000 years with the rapid southerly movement of camels in Kenya and then questions whether there is evidence for dramatic environmental change in northern Kenya of the type I propose. I state that cattle pastoralists are adopting camel herding as an adaptive response to desertification.

Gilles, apparently under the impression that he is offering an alternative explanation, states that overgrazing around permanent water points, the loss of grazing lands to cultivators, and increased population pressures «... rather than environmental change can explain the growing popularity of camels.» What does he think environmental change is? It is caused by precisely the factors he mentions, as I pointed out in my article - overpopulation, overstocking, constriction of territory, concentrations around watering points, etc. That these factors have caused substantial environmental degradation in northern Kenya (and elsewhere) is clear. These factors are not an alternative to environmental change, they are environmental change, with serious social, economic and cultural implications.

The evidence for this change over the long term can be grouped into three types: 1) natural science, 2) oral traditions, and 3) written records. The first includes mainly geomorphology and the pollen record of past vegetation patterns, and it is applicable to the more distant past, for the pastoral period in Kenya of say 5,000 to 500 years ago. Oral traditions of pastoralists are useable for up to 100 to 200 years ago and written records begin in 1887.

All three sources support a view that there has been significant environmental change in northern Kenya over the past 5,000 years, and pastoralist oral traditions (I have interviewed Gabbra, Rendille, Samburu and Turkana) and colonial records indicate that the rate of environmental degradation, i.e. desertification, has accelerated markedly in some areas over the past 50 or 60 years (Sobania 1979; Brown 1963; Stiles in press). Of course recent political and socioeconomic changes accompanying nationhood have perturbed normal pastoral behavior (alienation of land, restrictions on free movement, population growth, the creation of permanent

settlements, etc.), but to contend that deserts have been created by these changes would be to misconstrue the evidence. The desertification process started long ago.

I should point out that camels were in Somalia no later than the 4th century A.D. and possibly as early as 1000 B.C. (Epstein 1971:565). Even though it did take at least 1000 years, and probably much longer, for camels to reach the (now) Chalbi Desert, only 900 km due west of Mogadishu (with no serious geographical barriers), they did arrive well before the British colonialists. Cattle people were adopting camels in the face of environmental degradation centuries before land alienation and permanent settlements came to the region. Desertification began much earlier than the factors which Gilles and others propose as an explanation, and the real cause was and is cattle pastoralism in lowland areas.

A possible solution, if integrated with other programs as outlined in my article, is one based on establishing or strengthening camel based pastoral production systems to the detriment of cattle systems in lowland regions. I believe that this approach has equal validity in the Sudano-Sahelian and North African regions, where camels are already familiar animals. A shift from cattle to camels might not gain ready support from African governments interested in increasing beef output, but as an A.I.D. workshop concluded, «the prime emphasis on livestock sector interventions at this time should be to support the subsistence base of pastoral herding rather than to stress commercial activities» (A.I.D. 1980:10).

To broaden the discussion somewhat, I would like to bring to the attention of readers of NOMADIC PEOPLES that the United Nations Environment Program is currently engaged in a comprehensive General Assessment of Progress in implementation of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, which was formulated at the United Nations Conference On Desertification (UNCOD) held in Nairobi in 1977. The data resulting from dozens of studies, reports, regional assessments and country questionnaires from around the world are not encouraging. Rangelands almost everywhere continue a downward spiral in terms of condition and productivity, in spite of a general awareness of what the causes are. The ultimate consequences of continued desertification are more serious than most people realize. The planning and implementation of a livestock or range development project that will actually achieve beneficial results for pastoralists and the land is also more difficult than most people realize.

Urgent action is needed to increase the effort given to the combat against desertification by national and international organizations, or by the year 2000 the question of pastoral development will be largely academic. The human, cultural and economic loss for the world, let alone to the people themselves, would be of monumental proportions with the passing of nomadic pastoralism. In the 7 years since UNCOD few concrete results have been achieved in halting the spread of deserts. The problem is global, it is vast, and it is growing.

Anthropologists have much to offer in this fight, but the problem must first be understood. The myopia of seeing all change in terms of the 20th century, as important as it might be, needs a good pair of historical glasses to correct the distortion of time. The past has much to tell us about the present, if only we have the vision to see it (Stiles 1981).

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