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GENDER DIMENSIONS OF DROUGHT AND PASTORAL MOBILITY AMONG THE MAASAI

BY JULIA BAILEY

SUMMARY

- Maasai pastoralists are increasingly faced with annual droughts that cause significant livestock deaths and periods of food insecurity.
- A new form of rangeland management that emphasizes pastoral migrations and extensive herding to mitigate the impact of drought is crucial to sustaining Maasai livelihoods.
- Gender dynamics are particularly important to pastoral mobility among the Maasai; the movement of livestock is dependent on the woman's ability to manage the household and food supply.

Like many pastoral communities in East Africa, the Maasai are increasingly faced with frequent and extended periods of drought. Drought in the region can be partially explained by lack of rainfall and is linked to a wide-range of political and economic factors (Homewood, 2008). To mitigate the impact of drought, the Maasai engage in seasonal migration in search of pasture and water. In recent years, land loss and fragmentation pose challenges for pastoral mobility across rangeland environments.

The gendered dynamics tied to seasonal migrations are less understood and appreciated; mobility is often prefixed on a woman's capacity to manage the household and food supply. An understanding of the gender dynamics at play during migrations is critical to improving policies aimed at supporting pastoral livelihoods and food security in rangeland environments.

ABOUT
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Julia Bailey is a Ph.D candidate in socio-cultural anthropology at McGill University. As of September of 2011 she will be conducting her fieldwork in southern Kenya where she will be examining the social networks of Maasai women's social networks and how they impact pastoral livelihoods. An important dimension of this research considers how women's networks are used to manage household food security. Julia holds a Master's in social anthropology from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and an honours degree in international development studies from McGill University.

MAASAI MOBILITY AND LAND LOSS

The Maasai are a semi-nomadic people. Historically, the Maasai rely on specialized livestock production. Today, many have diversified their livelihood activities by engaging in wage-labour, eco-tourism, and agriculture, leaving only some communities relying exclusively on livestock. Diversification has not hampered pastoralism among the Maasai; rather, it has boosted the practice by enabling families to re-invest earnings into livestock by purchasing cattle, sheep, and goats (Fratkin, 1997, Homewood et al., 2009). Re-investing earnings into herds mitigates livestock deaths caused by drought and disease epidemics, and also provides the necessary capital for livestock exchanges among social networks (Evangelou, 1984).

The Maasai occupy an area of 200,000 km² located just on and below the equator, between southern Kenya and Northern Tanzania. Maasailand has very low, variable and unpredictable rainfall levels, with two rainfalls per year (Homewood, 2008, Homewood et al., 2009). While rainfall levels have not decreased over the years, the length, amount, and temporality of rainfall levels has changed in ways that are detrimental to pastoral production. This was evident between 1997 and 1998, when the *El Nino* weather phenomenon caused rain for close to eight months, catching pastoralists off guard (Galvin, 2009). Because of the changing weather patterns, local populations claim low periods of rainfall now last much longer than in the past, with grasses failing to recover after the dry season. Due to low and erratic rainfall, irrigated intensive agriculture is marginally feasible in Maasailand, although the land in the more moist areas has come under increasing pressures by cultivators as a result of population increases and changing land-tenure regimes (Evangelou, 1984, Homewood et al., 2009).

Over the last hundred years, the Maasai have faced a drastic decline of the commons available for extensive grazing (Homewood et al., 2009). Land has been subdivided into individual plots, sold to outsiders, and in some cases transferred to alternative uses such as conservation, commercial ranching, and agriculture. Today, pastoralists have limited access to grazing lands during drought, leading to significant livestock deaths and a "one-way trajectory out of pastoralism into poverty and livelihoods on the margin" (Homewood et al. 2006: 1).

MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF DROUGHT

Pastoralists, including the Maasai, who live in arid and semi-arid environments, have developed time-tested strategies to cope with dry conditions. Of these strategies, mobility is perhaps their greatest asset (Homewood, 2008, Niamir-Fuller, 1998). Pastoral mobility has been enhanced by the advent of new communication technologies (radios and mobile phones). Drawing on social networks and the advantages of modern communication, pastoralists can now track ecological conditions and rainfall levels — both spatially and temporarily — to match the availability of fodder and water resources with animal herds.

During migrations, herds are often split into a ‘home’ herd consisting of some lactating cows, bulls, and young and diseased animals (Evangelou, 1984) and a mobile herd that is dispersed across the range and consists of non-lactating cows, and goats. Mobility allows pastoralists to access a variety of resources that are unevenly distributed on rangelands, particularly water resources and dry-season grazing lands.

RANGELAND MANAGEMENT AND THE ‘NEW RANGELAND ECOLOGY’

Pastoral mobility has emerged — and is being accepted — as a new form of rangeland management. Under the old system, pastoralists were encouraged to engage in settled ranching, where the ‘carry-capacity’ of the land is carefully balanced in relation to livestock numbers. However, the accumulation of livestock in limited space has resulted in overgrazing and the progressive degradation of arid and semi-arid rangelands in Africa (Homewood, 2008). When herds are artificially confined to a circumscribed area, both livestock numbers and vegetation levels suffer (Homewood, 2008).

The new rangeland ecology model challenges many of the environmental assumptions that guide policies promoting limited land use and the conservative management of livestock numbers. Anthropologists and human ecologists now agree that that by splitting herds and migrating seasonally, pastoralists effectively create a rotating system where rangelands can recover from human-use (Behnke and Scoones, 1993, Behnke et al., 1993, Evangelou, 1984, Vetter, 2005). With this new perspective on

rangeland ecologies, development planners are beginning to recognize the importance of pastoral mobility, and extensive-grazing practices, which are often supported by the communal management of land. Managing land communally, rather than individually, expands the area available for grazing and migrating livestock.

GENDER DIMENSION OF MOBILITY

There are multiple gender dimensions involved in the Maasai's migration and pastoral mobility. In the past, women and children often moved with their family herds but today, with the exception of very few women, most stay home with their children while the men lead the herds. This shift is mainly linked to the desire to keep children in school year-round, and the convenience associated with maintaining a permanent household. In the context of land loss, the division of labour leaving women to manage permanent households is particularly important in creating a visible marker to claim or maintain land rights.

At home, women build homes, tend to children, herd, monitor and manage livestock diseases, prepare food, and other daily tasks associated with maintaining a household. Women also work as traders in local markets where they sell goods and purchase household supplies. During drought, the workload of women and girls increases dramatically. More time than usual is spent to fetch water, firewood and collecting grass for household use and for sale (Aregu and Belete, 2007). Women's involvement in livestock herding also increases. With men on migrations and younger boys enrolled in school, women and girls are charged with the role of tending to the 'home' herd.

Food security is the greatest concern for Maasai women during drought periods. Women in pastoral communities control the procurement and sale of milk. During the wet season, when milk is abundant, women will travel to nearby markets to sell milk, or to purchase other foods if the terms of trade for maize flour, cooking fat, and beans, are profitable. During drought, some lactating animals are left behind to support household diets, but most are separated from women and children. This drastically reduces the consumption of milk within households and suspends the sale of milk in markets. Also, during a drought the price of other food items such as grains and vegetables tends to increase. Many pastoral communities face periods of moderate food insecurity as a result of the changes in food supplies and prices.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

Despite the challenges mentioned above, women have developed coping strategies to deal with both the increased labour burdens and the scarcity of food that result from drought. Of these, 'networking' in daily patterns of cooperation with other women is crucial (Dahl, 1987: 267). Women tend to work in coordination with one another under normal conditions; however during drought, forms of cooperation take on new importance because time, energy, and resources are scarce. Working in co-ordination with others allows women to maximize their time, minimize their energy expenditure, and negotiate ways to access limited resources, including cash and purchased foods.

For example, women living in the same homestead will share the responsibilities of livestock herding and collecting water, with each woman assigned a different day to perform the task at hand. Those women left behind will care and provide for young children and sick or young animals that are too weak to migrate. Women will also meet weekly or bi-weekly to jointly collect water, grass, or to build a home for vulnerable women who are either ill, pregnant, or who have recently given birth and are unable to perform labourious household tasks.

In terms of accessing cash, women transform their daily tasks into income-earning activities by selling their labour to wealthier women, collecting additional grasses and firewood to sell to neighbours, in markets or along roadsides. Much of these earnings are invested in household food supplies, and some in informal and rotating savings cooperatives. These cooperatives are organized at the community level and require women to contribute the same amount at each meeting, with one woman collecting the money. While some women are provided start-up capital by external NGOs, most sources of funds are organically created by groups of women who are seeking financial capital. Despite forming and dissolving relatively quickly, and therefore not always providing a secure form of savings, these groups have the secondary function of broadening women's social networks beyond their immediate households. In this sense, they offer a successful coping strategy in periods of insecurity.

FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR PASTORAL MOBILITY

The livelihoods of Maasai women and Maasai men in pastoral communities are, in most cases, very different—especially when taking into account their opportunities, responsibilities and roles within the household. A gendered analysis of seasonal migrations highlights the importance of women's relative sedentarism to men's mobility during the dry season. Research into the livelihoods of pastoral women begins by asking how women manage household diets in the absence of adequate milk supplies. This question is particularly timely as the conditions of climate change begin to force pastoralists to migrate livestock for longer distances and for longer periods of time than in previous practice. It is during these periods when women need to rely on purchased foods that require access to markets and adequate supplies of cash as well as fuel wood and water, which take time and energy to secure (Aregu and Belete, 2007). To deal with these additional labour burdens and cash constraints, women rely on social supports at the household level. If they are to be effective, strategies and policies devised to support women will need to take into account the importance of social networking and the tensions that emerge between women when resources are scarce.

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