



Capital on the move: The changing relation between livestock and labor in Mali, West Africa

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ABSTRACT

In dryland areas of the Africa, livestock play important economic roles as commodities, wealth stores, producers of products, and agents of environmental change. Conventional depictions of livestock economies in this region have focused (in support or against) on the need for greater engagement of livestock producers with markets supplying meat to urban areas. This paper argues this singular focus has led analysts to ignore two important aspects of livestock economies: livestock as a preferred store of wealth across a wide range of social groups and the need for specialized labor to manage these livestock across open pastures to maintain their productivity and limit their negative environmental impacts. In the West African Sahel, the capital-like nature of livestock wealth has become more clear with a growing fraction of the region's livestock owned by investors with little connection to livestock husbandry. Livestock investments are maintained on a day-to-day basis by hired herders who facilitate access to ephemeral pastures and water. A particular concern is the changing geographies of livestock ownership and the herding labor in relationship to regional pastures (to economic and environmental ends). This relationship will be explored using the case study of the Maasina region of central Mali – a historically important livestock region, which is now undergoing significant labor emigration. Building from a long-term ethnographic engagement with local livestock owners and herders, the results of ownership surveys of livestock herds across a 14-year period and interviews of urban-based emigrants from the study area about investment decisions will be used to analyze the changing geographies of livestock investment and herding labor in the Maasina.

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1. Introduction

Expanding scholarly attention has been directed at the enrollment of environmental services, genomes, and ecological communities into processes of commodification, “accumulation by dispossession”, and capital accumulation (Castree, 2008; Cronon, 1991; Harvey, 2003; Heynen et al., 2007; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). Critical engagements with such enrollments, coupled with the multidisciplinary literature on the social embeddedness of markets, has revealed the rich interplay among concepts of privatization, commodification, enclosure, production, invention, natural reproduction, and capitalization (Baker, 2005; Castree, 2005; Mansfield, 2004; Prudham, 2007; Robertson, 2006). In this new era of neoliberal environments, references to the commodity-, capital-, or invented-like nature of nature are no longer seen as outlandish.

In this paper, I will investigate this interplay as it relates to not a new but old economization of living organisms – domestic livestock (particularly cattle), in Sahelian West Africa – a developing region of

the world where human use of cattle as a commodity, wealth store, status marker, and beast of burden is ancient. Therefore, by addressing Sahelian livestock, I will necessarily not use the popular prefix “neo.” – Moreover, historical information is not available to investigate the processes of domestication, privatization, and commodification in their entirety. What this case will allow is the exploration of their uneven progression and the overlapping roles played by livestock as living animals and economic objects within an ecology and economy that are unquestionably peripheral. In so doing, I hope to show how the cow's economic roles have, despite its long history of being a privately held socionatural object, remained multiple and overlapping reflecting the social embeddedness of economic systems and the friction/resistance to deeper commoditization/capitalization of living organisms.

More importantly, I will show, that by acknowledging the multiple roles played by livestock in the Sahelian economy, one can illuminate the critical economic relations that will strongly shape its future. In thinking about livestock economies in arid Africa, significant attention within academic and policy circles has focused over the years on the degree to which livestock producers in arid Africa sufficiently market their animals. This debate no longer (if ever) addresses the realities of the Sahelian livestock economy.

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Yes, animals have cultural value and are sold for meat *but* livestock are implicated in a broader political economy than simply that between pastoral households and the market. In the Sahelian region, livestock are increasingly owned by outside investors who hire labor (through different contracts) to care for their livestock in distant pastures. How this relationship is negotiated across a region undergoing significant social change will play an important role in shaping livestock investment and management with important implications for the region's environment and economy.

The paper is organized in the following fashion. After briefly describing the role of livestock in the Sahelian economy, I will explore the different ways in which Sahelian livestock can be conceptualized as living organisms, commodities, and capital. Building on this exploration, I will then present a reconceptualization of the Sahelian livestock economy that places the relationship between livestock capital and herding labor as a central force in its future evolution. I will then explore these changing sets of relationships in more depth by presenting the case of the Maasina area of central Mali using information gathered from long-term participant observations with herders, repeat herd surveys, and interviews of migrants from the Maasina who now live in Bamako, the capital city of Mali.

2. Livestock and the Sahelian economy

Subsaharan Africa seemingly, and the West African Sahel most certainly, are backwaters of economic globalization. Extra-regional trade is small and international capital investments are limited. While one is hard-pressed to identify any “competitive advantage” the area enjoys in the global economy, the Sahel does arguably hold a competitive advantage in the regional economy with respect to livestock (cattle, sheep, goats, camels, donkeys) and to a lesser extent, cheap labor (Asuming-Brempong and Staatz, 2004). Livestock produced in the Sahel supply regional markets that are strongly shaped by rising urban demand within the humid tropical zone along the coast where livestock production is limited by trypanosomiasis (tsetse fly). Young men from the Sahelian drylands also move south on a seasonal or semi-permanent basis to work in mines and plantations, as well as taking on menial urban-based jobs within region. While the export of livestock and labor is not new in the region, the centrality of these movements for the economy's future has grown with the 1995 devaluation of the currency of Sahelian countries (FCFA), reduction of Sahelian government subsidies/support for crop agriculture, and reduction of trade barriers among the countries in the region.

Major factors of agricultural production in West African rural economies are land, labor, and livestock. A long-standing diagnosis of dryland West Africa's development problem by a wide range of observers has been the need to not only develop markets but to introduce, codify, or clarify property rights to factors of production in order to stimulate investment; spur differentiation; and improve resource management (Barrière and Barrière, 2002; Ensminger, 1992; Gavian and Fafchamps, 1996; Moorehead, 1991; Simpson and Sullivan, 1984). Formal rights to land largely rest with the community as do other rights to important terrestrial resources such as vegetation, salt deposits, and water. The literature of the 1970s and 1980s on rural gerontocracy, patriarchy and caste has largely been one describing the tight control of the elder male elites on the labor of young men, women and casted groups (Carney and Watts, 1991; Guyer, 1981; Meillassoux, 1981; Whitehead, 1990). While land has been increasingly sold in some areas and labor emigration has worked to free labor from these extra-economic patriarchal constraints, there remains, in many minds, much work to be done to privatize the rights to these factors of production in order to spur development (Falloux and Rochegude, 1988; McIntire

et al., 1992; Platteau, 1992; van den Brink et al., 1995; World Bank, Africa Division, 1991).

In contrast to land and labor, domestic livestock as both commodities and stores of wealth have a much longer history of being held in private hands (Smith, 1992). During precolonial times, cattle were primarily owned by noble freemen who relied on herding clients to manage their cattle for them (Ba and Daget, 1984; Bonfiglioli, 1988; Kintz, 1985). With the gradual and uneven emancipation of slave and caste groups during the early colonial period, livestock have become increasingly the private wealth store of choice by all social groups. It is common for economic surplus to be cycled through livestock whether eventually ending as plows, grain, urban land or building materials. In this way, livestock populations have been at the center of wealth maintenance and capital circulation in the region.

Despite these considerations of competitive advantage and property rights, the livestock industry is not typically seen by development experts as a progressive sector or dynamic force in the Sahelian economy. This is due to their narrow view of the economic roles played by livestock (to be discussed below) allowing primitive labeling of pastoralists to dominate their thinking in development and conservation circles.

3. Interrogating common understandings of the economic roles of livestock

“Were the term capital to be applicable to classical antiquity... then the nomadic hordes with their flocks on the steppes of Central Asia would be the greatest capitalists, for the original meaning of the word capital is cattle” (Marx, 1964, p. 119)

“Thus the Latin word for money, *pecus*, referred equally to a herd of domestic livestock; whilst the Greek word for interest on a financial loan, *tekhos*, denoted also the progeny of an animal” (Ingold, 1980, p. 229)

Despite the myriad of socioeconomic roles played by livestock in African societies, there has been a tendency for outside analysts to emphasize only a few.¹ The elevation of certain roles over others reflects prior (mis)understandings of livestock economies and the perceived need to counter misrepresentations by other epistemic communities. In arid lands of Africa, the major oppositional dyad has been formed by treatments emphasizing “livestock as commodities” versus those emphasizing “livestock as sources of subsistence” (Ensminger, 1992; Schneider, 1981). The formation of this oppositional dyad has a long history. One can trace it to early colonialist attempts to coax/coerce rural peoples to sell products of interest to the colonial state (largely meat for livestock producers). Pastoralists were generally more able to resist the colonial political strategies to induce (through taxation, etc.) “sales” because of their mobility. Depictions of pastoralists' tradition-bound economic irrationality are countered by those arguing that resistance to the market was due to some combination of cultural veneration of cattle (Herskovits,

¹ Domestic livestock simultaneously serve multiple economic purposes for their human masters (e.g. stores of wealth, commodities, producers of products/services). The relative importance of these purposes varies across individuals, families and communities due in part to differences in their wealth status and livelihood strategies. Outside observers of rural Africans have tended to emphasize singular roles played by domestic livestock such as: holders of cultural meaning (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991; Herskovits, 1926; Kelly, 1985; Kuper, 1982), commodities (Delgado and Staatz, 1980; Fafchamps and Gavian, 1996; Holtzman and Kulibaba, 1994; Kervan, 1992), producers of manure (Powell et al., 1995), laborers on the farm (Boserup, 1965; Winrock International, 1992) and stores of wealth (Doran et al., 1979; Fafchamps and Udry, 1998; Ferguson, 1985; Schmidt, 1992; Sutter, 1987). These variable depictions reflect not only the complex social roles played by livestock but our inability to grasp their multivalent nature.

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