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## Building on pastoralists' cosmovisions

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**This article provides an overview of the bond between man and animals among traditional cultures in Africa and India. The strong bond, based on the cosmovision of the pastoralists, determines their ideas about health and disease.**

In academic circles, pastoralism is usually explained as a way of life that depends on grazing animals on native pastures. At a meeting of the World Herders Council (Conseil Mondial des Eleveurs) held in Burkina Faso in 1998, however, Fulani and Tuareg pastoralists came up with a much more poignant definition: 'Pastoralists are people who have a social relationship *with* livestock'.

An intimate relationship with animals is indeed one of the most distinguishing characteristics of pastoral cultures. While in the industrialised world it is common practice to consider food-producing animals as machines, pastoralists experience their animals as fellow creatures and essential partners in the struggle for life.

### Identity

The myths of origin of pastoral cultures indicate that either they, or rather their primeval ancestors, were created by God to take care of particular animal species. The Raika, a traditional pastoral caste from Rajasthan in India, believe that the first Raika was made by Lord Shiva to look after the first camel. The Raika continue to believe that camel herding is their heritage in spite of the fact that it no longer generates enough profit to make a living.

The myth of creation among the Fulani in West-Africa provides another example. 'God created the animals. Afterwards he created people and assigned a certain function to each group. Suddenly he realised that domestic animals had not yet been entrusted to anyone and he immediately created the Fulani-cowherds. From that time the lives of the Fulani have been closely linked with their cattle'. (Conseil Mondial des Eleveurs, 1999).

On the basis of this myth, the Fulani believe that their primary duty is to serve their cattle. In turn their herds will give them all they need. They regard the cow as a mother because it is through her, and her alone, that life is possible. In several other African cultures, such as the Maasai, the Dinka and the Nuer, as well as in Hinduism, similar attitudes can be found.

### Prestige

For the Turkana pastoralists in north-western Kenya, cattle constitute the prime indicator of wealth. They figure prominently in legal procedures, social events, dance and are considered to be a source of healing. The Turkana are not interested in breeding cattle for sale. Their main interest is possession. Cattle are exchanged for women and are impor-

tant in developing profitable relationships with other cattle owning Turkana.

Bantu speaking peoples in Eastern and Southern Africa give their cattle names and create praise poems for them in the same way as they do for important members of their communities. In some cases they bury their dead in the cattle kraal.

A Bantu father must give a cow to his daughter when she marries. This cow cannot be sold or slaughtered. It must supply milk for the daughter's children and magical protection is provided by the bracelets and belts woven from the hairs of its tail.

### Camel pastoralists

But it is not only cattle that inspire deep affection and gratitude among their keepers. Camel pastoralists have similar feelings about their animals. An Afar pastoralist from Ethiopia is quoted as saying: "If a son dies, he is buried, but life goes on and maybe you will have another son. But if a camel dies, then everything comes to a halt and without movement there is no life and the household breaks down" (Teka, 1991).

This comment suggests that the strong human-animal bond among pastoral cultures is based on mutual dependence. Religion is a major factor in shaping this

bond. People who believe in spirits have the closest association with their livestock and see themselves as being on an equal footing with their animals. On the other hand monotheistic religions, like Islam and Christianity, promote a feeling of human superiority over animals and preach that man should rule over all creatures.

Studies among different Tuareg groups have shown that the more distant their contact with Islam the more intense and sentimental their relationship is with their animals. For example, sub-groups that have not come under the influence of Islam reject the idea of eating camel meat, whereas those who have been converted to Islam have few qualms about selling camels for slaughter (Spittler, 1983).

### Ritual

Ritual is another important determinant in the interaction between pastoralists and their livestock. Animals are an essential component of seasonal and life cycle rituals, like the ceremonies associated with birth, circumcision and wedding. Meanwhile, in order to ensure that the herd will thrive, certain rules have to be followed. As a result, animal husbandry is often strictly ritualised.

Good examples of this can be found among the Gabra and Rendille of Northern Kenya who do not allow women or sexually active men to milk the camels. Only ritually pure males - young boys and old men - are allowed to perform this task. It is believed, for example, that the disease of camel calves known as *Saam* can be attributed to the fact that ritually impure men have been involved in the milking of the calf's mother.

### Disease perception

In Africa and India illness amongst humans and livestock is explained by natural or supernatural forces. Illness caused by natural forces is the result of a disturbance in the physiological equilibrium of the individual. Illness can also be caused by supernatural forces and here sorcerers, witches and other agents, such as Gods or evil spirits, are involved.

The ethno medicine of the WoDaaBe in Niger, for example, has a category of 'ills' that is engendered by evil forces or the violation of a taboo. These 'ills' are different to specific 'diseases'. Disease is conceptualised as hot, cold or contagious. Evidence suggests that, when applied to livestock, the category hot refers to contagious diseases such as anthrax or blackquarter. More chronic conditions, such as parasitism or nutritional deficiencies, fall into the cold category.

Accordingly, there are also two options for treatment. Common diseases, such as diarrhoea, cough, fractures and birth problems, fall within the domain of the village animal healer. This person will treat animals in a rational way, either with herbal preparations or western medi-

cine.

On the other hand, if there is an unexplained outbreak of an unfamiliar disease, a spirit-medium, or *Bhopa*, will be consulted. A *Bhopa* is a person in whom a God becomes manifest after he has induced a state of trance. In this condition the *Bhopa*, who might be an ordinary pastoralist, comes into close contact with supernatural powers and as such is able to provide help. He is not only approached for animal disease but also plays an important role in human psychological problems and alcoholism (Rathore et al., 1999).

### Gender differences

Among the Raika pastoralists in India, men have the most ethno-veterinary knowledge and they are the ones responsible for herding.

Among the Samburu pastoralists of northern Kenya veterinary care is also mainly the responsibility of the men. Elders with specialised knowledge may be called upon when there are certain types of disease. In addition each clan has a specific type of veterinary skill. While men typically deal with diagnosis and the choice of treatment, women collect and prepare the various herbs used in these traditional remedies. Because they do the milking, women are often the first to notice behavioural changes and other initial signs of disease.

Traditional vets or the 'men of knowledge' among the Beni Amer pastoral group in Ethiopia are usually older men and in most cases they are herders themselves. Accordingly, the Beni Amer ethno-veterinary knowledge is widely shared among males. One can argue, however, to what extent women are in fact ignorant of men's knowledge and vice versa.

### Changing dynamics

In many parts of India and Africa the pastoralist way of life is under pressure. Attitudes towards livestock change with each new generation. Population growth and the invasion of grazing grounds have changed the pastoral way of life and today more and more pastoralists are entering the wage economy. Due to this labour drain women and children are obliged to assume herding responsibilities. Frequently, when pastoral children have obtained some schooling, they lose interest in herding and look for other types of employment. Among Africans with western education there are many who scoff at traditional ways.

Livestock treatments in many pastoral societies are a mixture of old and new. Traditional medicines and techniques are often substituted by modern veterinary drugs and vaccines. Apart from their useful effects, the growing demand for Western pharmaceuticals has been responsible for eroding traditional authority structures and social roles in animal health care. Women are less often called upon to col-

lect and prepare traditional medicines.

### Including cosmivision

There is a wide divergence in the evaluations of pastoral animal husbandry practices amongst outsiders. Anthropologists, who try to understand the perspective of pastoralists and who spend extended periods of time with them, are usually deeply impressed. But animal scientists, politicians and development agencies, that use western models of animal production as a yardstick, despair about lack of productivity and commodity output. It almost seems as if these two perspectives and knowledge systems are incompatible.

But the Western approach to animal production now receives increasing criticism for ecological, animal welfare and public health reasons. By comparison, traditional pastoral systems are refreshingly different. Most pastoral systems include elements of social justice, because they have ways of distributing the benefits of animals among all members of a society. Moreover, the extreme diversity of pastoral cultures has also resulted in a high degree of domestic animal diversity. This diversity may eventually have to come to the rescue of the genetically narrow high performance breeds of the West.

These intriguing aspects of pastoralism are a consequence of a cosmivision where people and animals are basically equal. As parts of God's creation they have the same right to live. From all this it is obvious that, in pastoral cultures, the meaning of livestock transcends that of a 'means of production'. Rather there is an intimate relationship between livestock, human identity and world view. It remains a major challenge to ensure that these aspects are included in livestock development projects.

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