

Commission on Nomadic Peoples

“A Reaction to Stiles”

Jere Gilles

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A REACTION TO «DESERTIFICATION AND
PASTORAL DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHERN KENYA»

by Jere Gilles

I read the paper by David Stiles, «Desertification and Pastoral Development in Northern Kenya» with interest and surprise. While I support the idea of encouraging that camel raising, I have trouble with some of Mr. Stiles' reasoning.

I found two of the paper's assertions to be particularly troubling. The first is the assertion that the growing popularity of camels in Northeast Kenya is a result of rapidly occurring desertification in the region. The second is that a switch to camel production will solve many of the environmental problems of the region. I will address each briefly.

Stiles mentions that the issue of African desertification has been highly controversial. While almost all would agree that there has been a slow dessication of the region for the past 3-4 thousand years, there is little evidence that this process has accelerated in recent years. Camels have moved south in Northern Kenya extremely rapidly in recent years. Stiles suggests that this movement is due to the fact that people now need them and that the environment has changed so that it is now suitable for camels. Is there evidence that the environment has changed so dramatically in Northern Kenya?

Settlement around water points by impoverished nomads has led to severe overgrazing in some localities. Similarly the developing of farming settlements in areas formerly used by cattle herders has confined cattle raisers to the drier parts of their traditional ranges. These factors rather than rapid environmental change could explain the growing popularity of camels. As available pastures have shrunk, those remaining may be better suited to year-round occupation by camels than by cattle. The constriction of pastoral territory rather than a dramatic change in environment may explain the increased popularity of the camel. Secondly the popularity of camels may just be a result of increased population pressure. If, as Stiles suggests, camels produce more food per hectare but require more labor and tighter management than do cattle, camels may be an attempt to increase overall food production by adopting a labor intensive production strategy. Since camels subsist on vegetation not used by other ruminants, their herding offers one way to increase food availability for a growing population. Does Stiles have any evidence to show that grazing pressure from sheep, cattle and goats is declining? Or is the popularity of camels simply due to the fact that they can exploit a previously underutilized niche? My own biases suggest that rather than being a result of widespread changes in environmental conditions, increased camel production is likely to be a response to changing social and demographic conditions. For example, are Boran finally using camels because of the deterioration of the environment or because the cattle production system they brought from their Ethiopian homeland was not well suited to their new Kenyan home? The latter is more likely I feel.

In general, I am sympathetic with the ideas for pastoral improvement suggested by Mr. Stiles. There are, however, some problems connected with camel

raising. The first was raised by Stiles himself: there is no evidence that camel producers are less likely to overgraze than cattle, sheep or goat raisers. Thus increased camel raising can broaden the subsistence base of pastoralists but it may not address the root causes of overstocking.

Stiles has outlined the positive aspect of the camel's relatively low rate of reproduction. Such low rates of reproduction may reduce the likelihood of overstocking but they also increase the risk of camel production and the cost of livestock insurance schemes. Camel pastoralists who lose their herds to droughts, epidemics or raiding have virtually no way to rebuild their herds in 4-5 years unless a huge insurance herd was somehow maintained by the state. The higher reproductive rate of cattle and small ruminants permits them to respond to cycles of wet and dry years. It is easier for a person to cull animals in dry years when the natural reproduction rate of his herds is large enough to rebuild them quickly. In addition, markets for beef and mutton are generally better developed than for camel meat so that culling of these animals is easier. One would expect under many circumstances camel producers to be even more reluctant to destock in dry years than cattle, sheep or goat herders.

The camel has much to offer the Northern Kenyan pastoralist. It provides a way to broaden the subsistence base of pastoralists by using previously under-utilized browse. For that reason it should be encouraged. Camel herding will, however, not in itself lead to a solution to the problems of overpopulation and overstocking.

Jere Gilles
Department of Sociology
University of Missouri-Columbia
Columbia, Missouri 65211
U.S.A.