

Coping with Natural and Socio-economic Uncertainty in Arid Africa

SUN Xiaogang

Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

Abstract

The interaction between nomadic pastoralists and the arid environment of Africa has been viewed by the biased theory of “East Africa cattle complex” and “the tragedy of the commons” in the 20th century. Although recent disequilibrium ecosystem theory reconsidered nomadic pastoralism as an optimal adaptation strategy for natural hazards, pastoral societies had experienced dramatic socio-economic transformation and had changed rapidly. In search of human-nature coexistence in the arid area of Africa, a comprehensive approach combining field observations with a longitudinal and comparative study on the Rendille pastoralists of northern Kenya was attempted. The results show that the Rendille have changed from nomadic to semi-nomadic under the influence of development projects and relief efforts in the past three to four decades. However, by continuing communal use of rangeland and water resources, setting high value on livestock and maintaining high mobility of livestock at herding camps, adapting social institutions such as age system and cooperative relationship in herding tasks, and challenging new opportunities, they have achieved certain success in maintaining pastoral subsistence. The case study further suggests that it is necessary and important to understand the functions in local technologies and institutions, and encourage the mobility, flexibility, and creativity of pastoralists for future sustainable development.