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The Sedentarisation Process of the Bahima in Uganda: An Emic View

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Abstract

The traditional lifestyle of nomadic pastoralists – freely moving with their herds – is under threat worldwide and rapidly disappearing due to many reasons. These include human population growth and the associated pressure that it has on grazing land as well as political and economic pressure. More and more cattle keepers have adopted a sedentary lifestyle and are practising mixed crop-livestock farming and deriving livelihoods from other non-pastoral activities. This is also the case for the Bahima pastoralists of Uganda who are keeping the Longhorned Ankole cattle. The sedentarisation of the Bahima pastoralists in Western Uganda started in the 1940s and is still going on. In this study former nomadic cattle keepers, who have settled with their families, were interviewed in order to document the decision to settle and the subsequent changes in the lifestyle of these people. All interviewees expressed their satisfaction with their sedentary life. Interestingly, pastoralists do not – contrary to the popular, romantic belief in many western countries – enjoy moving so much. Conflicts with other families, loss of people and animals because of diseases or predators and scarcity of water were mentioned as major problems. Traditionally, the Bahima had no home base where they returned to. Depending on feed and water availability, they stayed up to three months in one place.

The idea of sedentarisation started being spread in the first half of the 20th century. The majority of the interviewees settled between 1950s and 1970s. Most respondents said it was the decision of the household head to settle and the wife agreed. Others explained that it was a collective decision between husband and wife. Land scarcity, access to education, better availability of water and the possibility of crop production were given as factors for settlement. The decisions were influenced by Christian missionaries, the government and friends.

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