



Pastoral Practices in High Asia: Agency of ‘Development’ Effected by Modernisation, Resettlement and Transformation

Author: Bunn, Stephanie

Source: Mountain Research and Development, 33(3) : 358-359

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm123>

Pastoral Practices in High Asia: Agency of 'Development' Effected by Modernisation, Resettlement and Transformation

Edited by Hermann Kreutzmann.
Dordrecht, The Netherlands:
Springer, 2012. xv + 350 pp. US\$
129.00, £ 90.00, € 106.95. Also
available as an e-book. ISBN 978-94-
007-3846-1.

This is a geographical study of high-mountain pastoral nomadism in the ranges of the Pamir and Alai, Tien Shan, and Hindu Kush, along with the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayas. These high mountain regions encompass parts of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Qinghai Province in China, Nepal, Himachal Pradesh in India, and Bhutan. The volume explores how nomadic pastoralism is constituted and adapting within the changing economic priorities of nation states in the region today.

The chapters are drawn from a series of workshops, either in Germany or in the regions concerned, conducted through field visits and interviews with local stakeholders. The range of ethnic groups and pastoral practices is vast—it is ambitious yet estimable to attempt to encompass such diversity in one volume. Groups in the Hindu Kush, Pamirs, and Himachal Pradesh (Pashtuns, Baluch, Tajiks, and Bhotiyas, for example) practice a kind of “combined mountain agriculture” (Ehlers and Kreutzmann 2000), which may be centered on one settlement, whence herders move out during the year to high or low pastures, or on several permanent settlements per community between which herders migrate. In contrast, Kyrgyz from the Pamir-Alai and Tian Shan formerly migrated throughout the year be-

tween high mountain summer pastures (*jailo'o*) and lowland winter pastures (*kyshto'o*), each group having rights in pastures as a result of allocation from a group leader, and no settled base. The latter group, in particular, played a pivotal role in the Silk Road trade until the early 20th century, acting as both guides and providers of transport, and interacting with traders along high mountain passes and trade routes. Since forcible settlement in the Soviet era, they too have operated from permanent bases.

In response to developments in the region, this volume examines prevalent themes of “endism” (pp 6–7) and settlement among nomadic herders, along with the role of colonial powers who have restructured and restricted pastoralism and access to pastures. The imposition of new pastoral practices by nation states has often led, at best, to a more “detached” (pp 11–12) form of mountain pastoralism, where state legislation or managers of collective farms now frequently determine what routes and pastures herders use, often ignoring well-honed local knowledge and groups' attachments to locality. At worst, groups have been forcibly settled, very frequently in winter pasture regions. On occasions, they have even found themselves restricted to high-mountain summer pastures, as was the case with the Afghan Kyrgyz who, for several decades, spent both summers and winters at altitudes in the Wakhan area that are so high that some of their herds could not breed.

The book is a very enlightening survey of the minutiae of variation in regional pastoral practices and the impacts of factors such as global economy, national legislation, power relations, war, migration, population pressure, and climate change. Thus, even in one small former mountain kingdom, Chitral, entitlement to pastures and fodder land varies between very close localities. Here the Laspur move between winter and summer settlements using communal herding

practices, whereas nearby an incoming group, the Gujur, have few customary grazing rights, with some Gujur households working as herders for the historically privileged local Kho elite. The broader impact of Chitral's integration into Pakistan, with imposition of land access laws, improved road networks, and the diminished economic role of animal husbandry, further impact upon the dynamics of pastoralism in Chitral, so that, as the authors of this chapter argue, transformation becomes the only continuing factor, and persistence is the exception for herding in this region.

Flexibility in the face of change is, however, an advantage in some circumstances. In Badakhshan, northern Afghanistan, the Baluch and Achekzai historically collaborated on a swamp-draining project that provided them with both very productive fodder and pastureland. The result was a clearly demarcated, fair attempt at pasture sharing, which is now under threat from protracted war and resulting “roads of insecurity” (p 63). Land may be grabbed by armed commanders, national and local customary views on land rights diverge, and the long distance (30 days of travel) between winter and summer pastures is extremely dangerous. The author, Schütte, argues that, ironically, the very adaptability of these groups to move on a continuum between nomadism and sedentarization may be their strength under such circumstances in this situation.

Collectivization and sedentarization under both Soviet and Chinese rule has had unique impacts upon groups such as Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Tibetans. The diverse experiences of Kyrgyz herders provide a case in point. In the former Soviet Union, they experienced top-down interventions during both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Socialism brought forced sedentarization, but also, arguably, some benefits such as animal welfare initiatives and the broad support of the *kolkhoz*, positioning Kyrgyzstan as the “wool factory” (p 129) of the USSR. The rapid

change to capitalism and privatization following independence was economically catastrophic for herders who had to find new strategies to bring in an income. Kreutzmann's chapter on Kyrgyz in the remote Chinese Pamirs in Xinjiang reveals yet other externally imposed difficulties. Sedentarized in lowland winter pastures in the late 1950s and severely impacted by the "Great Leap Forward" experiment, animal numbers fell while Kyrgyz migration routes diminished to about 15 kilometers. This was later addressed, but pastoralism now is seen as a practice that denies people's ability to "enjoy the pleasures of modernization" (p 122), and Kyrgyz are now being rapidly resettled to lowland agropastoral communities and townships, often to work as laborers. Pastures themselves are being "modernized" and their function "replanned." Stories are similar in Tibet and Qinghai Province, whose circumstances have been more widely documented. A third Kyrgyz group, who fled to their high mountain summer pastures in Afghanistan in the 1940s to avoid Soviet reprisals, ultimately settled in Turkey. However, a very small num-

ber, 300 in all, remained in the Afghan Pamirs. As regional borders opened up, those Kyrgyz herders who had been impoverished through exodus and forced migration showed resilience through a local practice of risk sharing, known as *amanat*, transforming their sheep from a "subsistence crop" to a "cash crop" while migrating between regions to avoid food tariffs.

For Kreutzmann and his co-authors, despite the great political injustices faced by herders across the region, it is perhaps climate change that will turn the eyes of the world to this area as other events have not. Pastoral communities themselves are particularly aware of climate change, evident as it is in glacial melt, changing weather patterns, pasture degradation, and reduced fodder production. These transformations may prove to be as difficult to adapt to as economic and political events, and often are not gradual but dramatic. But whether linked to politico-economic or environmental events, as the author argues, the space available for pastoral practices does continue to shrink, as does the freedom to practice this system of mountain management.

Despite the challenges posed in covering such a diverse range of groups and regions, this volume succeeds in providing an extensive and unique insight into the ways of life, adaptability, and external factors facing mountain herders in High Asia today. As an anthropologist, I would now like to see what benefits a more nuanced ethnographic approach could contribute, but this book stands as a significant, and well-executed, document of human-environment relations in this region.

REFERENCE

Ehlers E, Kreutzmann H. 2000. High mountain ecology and economy: Potential and constraints. In: Ehlers E, Kreutzmann H, eds. *High Mountain Pastoralism in Northern Pakistan*. Erdkundliches Wissen, Vol. 132. Stuttgart, Germany: Franz Steiner, pp 9–36.

AUTHOR

Stephanie Bunn

sjb20@st-andrews.ac.uk

Department of Social Anthropology, University of St Andrews, St Andrews KY16 9AL, United Kingdom

Open access article: please credit the authors and the full source.