

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The sedentarisation process of the Bahima in Uganda: An emic view

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**The traditional lifestyle of nomadic pastoralists is vanishing rapidly, because of human population growth which often leads to land scarcity or political pressure on pastoralists to settle. 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. 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.**

**Key words:** Sedendarisation, Uganda, Bahima, pastoralist, nomadic life

## INTRODUCTION

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 (Fratkin, 1997; Homann et al., 2004; Desta and Coppock, 2004).

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 (Nduma et al., 2001; Fratkin and Mearns, 2003; McCabe, 2003; Homewood et al., 2006). This is also the case for the Bahima pastoralists of Uganda who are keeping the Longhorned Ankole cattle (Wurzinger et al., 2005).

Sperling and Galaty (1990) reported that starting from the 1950s onwards a trend of seeking jobs, at least seasonally, outside the pastoralism production system can be observed. Also Zaal (1999) reported that there is an increasing number of part-time pastoralists.

Nowadays, even small towns offer some possibilities

for investment in transport services, small-scale restaurants, or petty trade in groceries and dry goods. However, other than pastoral tribes used to be involved in commerce. They mostly outmatch pastoral people in this matter (Sperling and Galaty, 1990).

Politicians support sedentarisation because they want to enforce development – pastoralism is often seen as “backward”. Many policy makers think settlement is the condition for development. Settlement is seen as a principal requirement for building schools, markets, clinics, cattle dips, and veterinary centres (Iro, 2001). Another motive is to exert more political control.

NEMA (1996) states that the Ugandan government policy has tended to emphasise sedentarisation of pastoral communities through increased water development and social infrastructure. In addition, land was offered increasingly for sale, although pastoralists rarely made use of it. On the other hand, very little effort has been made to improve the production conditions of pastoralists (NEMA, 1996).

Interestingly, pastoralists do not – contrary to the popular, romantic belief in many Western countries – enjoy moving so much. Three-quarters of the mobile Fulani report that herding is not only toilsome, it is becoming more strenuous (Iro, 2001). In Uganda, leaving the district and crossing borders also often leads to cattle rustling

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and violent conflicts (NEMA, 1996).

One group of pastoralists who used to live a nomadic life are the Bahima in Uganda. This group belongs to the tribe of the Banyankole which can be subdivided into two groups, one is the Bahima, the other one the Bairu. Apart from speaking the same language - Lunyankole - and living in the same area, they do not have much in common. One striking distinction is by their different agricultural activity. The pastoral cattle owners who were moving in search of good pasture throughout the year are called Bahima, the farmers cultivating the fields, having always led sedentary lifestyle are called Bairu. The Bahima are very famous for their intimate relationship to their cattle and the breeding of pure Ankole cattle (Karugire, 1971). This relationship between cattle keepers and their cattle is described as the "cattle complex" (an extensive ritual usage of cattle with an emotional attachment to or identifications with cattle). Klima (1970) distinguishes a "strong" and a "weak" cattle complex depending on whether there is an intensive or extensive involvement of cattle in the lives of the people. Based on this definition the Bahima can be described as having a strong cattle complex.

Nowadays this strict distinction is not valid any more as also the Bairu have taken up cattle husbandry, as well as many Bahima have started growing crops, living a sedentary life (James, 2006).

The Bahima are traditionally keeping the Ankole cattle. This breed is an intermediate *Bos taurus*/*Bos indicus* type belonging to the Sanga cattle group of East Africa (Rege and Tawah, 1999). It is characterised by a medium to large body frame with a small cervicothoracic hump. It has, conspicuously, large, long and curved horns. The coat colour is mainly red and often variegated. Other coat colours include fawn, brown and black. The breed functions as a source of food and income to meet recurrent needs, it is important in risk aversion and acts as a cumulative and yet convertible asset.

Aim of this study was to document the sedentarisation process of the Bahima people, their perception of this process and point out the changes in the lifestyle of these people.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study area

The study was carried out in Kiruhura district between September and December 2006. This district as such was created in January 2006 when Mbarara district was split into two parts namely Kiruhura in the east and the new and smaller Mbarara district. One of the biggest trading centres of this district is Rushere, which was the base of the research team. Most of the interviews were done in a 30 km radius around Rushere. The study area is part of the Ankole region, which describes the original distribution of the Banyankole people.

Kiruhura district consists of large grazing areas, most of them neatly fenced with barbed wire or natural shrubs or both. Where no pasture management is practised the land is covered by dense bushes. The mean annual rainfall ranges between 900 and 1,500

mm and the temperature varies between 17 and 27°C. The natural pastures are of moderate to low nutritive value (Samaanya et al., 2002).

### Data collection

Based on the information gathered in previous studies on Bahima cattle keepers in the region (Wurzinger et al., 2005), the interviewees were selected. Criteria for the selection of the interviewees were the following: (i) he/she has experienced the nomadic life and settlement of his/her family his-/herself (ii) the ownership of Ankole cattle during nomadic life (iii) living within the Ankole region, which is nowadays split into the four districts Bushenyi, Mbarara, Kiruhura and Ntungamo.

Because of the language barrier a translator was needed to translate the questions from English into Lunyankole and the answers back from Lunyankole into English. All interviews were recorded with the digital voice recorder Olympus WS-310M and later downloaded on the computer for further analysis.

In total 23 interviews were carried out following an interview guide. All of the interviews were carried out at the homes of the interviewees; most of them inside the houses, a few were conducted in the courtyard or on pastures.

### Data analysis

All recorded interviews were transcribed with the help of the software programme "f4". These transcripts were then transferred to the programme Atlas.ti version 5.2 which was used to analyse the qualitative data of the interviews (Muhr, 2004). Data analysis is based on the grounded-theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Themes (e.g. problems during movement, reasons for settlement) were identified in the text and "open" or inductive coding was carried out. In total, 89 codes were created to sort the information and discover patterns of thoughts and ideas of the various interviewees.

In order to give the reader a better insight of the thoughts of people, many direct quotations are made in the text.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Interviewees

The average age of the interviewees was 76. The average number of household members was 17 persons, including also workers on the farm. Only five people mentioned having another profession apart from cattle keeping. Two interviewees have been teachers, one a Catechist, one has worked for the Ugandan police force and one man has been employed at the stock farm of a local chief. However, not many interviewees had attended school.

Half of the respondents stated that livestock was their main source of income; the other half said that livestock and crop production contributes equally to the household income.

### Nomadic life

The Bahima led a very opportunistic way of life; they were always on the move looking for water and pasture.

The nomadic lifestyle was described like “That they used to live like cows when they were still wandering”. Especially during the dry season, movement was a necessity in order to feed the animals. Only well-fed animals could provide the families with enough food and therefore the herd was of upper most importance for the pastoralists. Traditionally, the Bahima had no home base where they returned to. They were wandering around, not following any routes and whenever they found a good place, they built a kraal with thorny branches to secure themselves and their animals from predators during the night. Within the kraal, small beehive huts were constructed within a few days. Depending on feed and water availability, they stayed up to three months in one place. In general, the whole family or a group of families moved together, old people were either carried by strong men or they lagged behind some hours and caught up after the others had reached their destination. The most frequently mentioned reason for moving was the availability of pastures and water, families followed the rain. But also death of either people or animals in any circumstances would lead to an immediate shift, because these places were considered as bad. The infestation of an area with tsetse flies (transmitting trypanosomiasis), or ticks (transmitting East Coast Fever) led to movement. One interviewee said that they believed that their cows would die if they did not move from one place to another.

The majority of the interviewees reported that they lost great numbers of animals during times of movement. Many died because of diseases; they also lost animals and people due to fighting with members of other clans. “Moving long distances, rain, drought, diseases, ticks for cows and mosquitos” were mentioned as the major problems. All respondents mentioned conflicts on access to water during the dry season as important. Each family had to make a trough for watering animals. The use of a trough from another herdsman resulted in conflict. Fights also happened when strangers invaded a grazing area. People then defended their land with sticks and spears.

Predators such as lions, leopards and hyenas were frequently mentioned as a threat for the family and the animals. Therefore, during night fires were lit to chase away wild animals. People feared the tse tse fly as it transmits trypanosomiasis, a deadly disease for humans and cattle. The occurrence of this fly led to an immediate shift to another area. It was reported that in the 1960s the government began to act by spraying the region with insecticides; people carrying small containers of insecticides on their back were moving in lines through the bush. During the spraying pastoralists were advised to shift the cattle to another area. Areas with heavy tick infestation were also avoided.

Responsibilities were clearly regulated between men and women. Men were responsible for herding, watering and milking cows. Men were sent ahead to look for new places where to stay, construct kraals and huts and protect the family against predators and thieves. The duty

of women was to take care of the children, prepare milk pots and lids for the pots, clean the milk pots and prepare ghee. The traditional Bahima staple food was raw milk, on rare occasions meat was fried. Blood was consumed fresh or clotted, but only occasionally.

One interviewee summarized the dependence of the Bahima on their animals as following “They were looking for pastures to feed their animals well because their animals were the only source of food: milk, meat and blood”.

Menstruating women were not allowed to drink milk, but had to eat vegetables. Therefore trading relations with the Bairu were important.

The intense relationship between the Bahima and their cattle is expressed very well by the following statements “The cow and the human being are one. They loved it so much that it forced them to move.” “The life of the cattle keeper was the cow. It was the house, it was their banana plantation, it was everything” The social status of the people depended on the beauty of their cows, and also on the number of animals. A man was only allowed to speak in public when he owned at least 100 heads of cattle.

### **Period of sedentarisation**

The idea of sedentarisation started to spread in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the sedentarisation is a long process, most interviewees could indicate a particular year when they settled. The earliest year of settlement was in 1944, the most recent settlement took place in 2004. Except two people who settled in this millennium and one who settled in 1944, all other interviewees settled between the 1950s and 1970s.

### **Influences on sedentarisation**

The following factors were mentioned having influenced people’s decision to settle: (i) land scarcity: as more and more people settled, freely accessible land was not available any more and people decided to settle (ii) education (iii) possibility of crop production and (iv) availability of water. As important influencing persons/institutions government, Christian missionaries and friends were mentioned by 47, 39 and 14% of the respondents, respectively.

Education was one of the arguments put forward by the government to encourage people to settle. Parents were told to send their children to school to enable them to enjoy a better living standard and economic situation. Both the county chiefs of the king and sub-county chiefs of the central government tried to make them settle and get land titles. They were also taught how to cultivate, fence land and build houses. White colonialist administrators encouraged people to have their own land and graze fewer cows. Another argument was that people converted and became Christians and learned that formal

education was important. Some interviewees felt that missionaries taught them how to eat and convinced them also that crops were good food. But they also had to give up traditional practices like drinking blood which were considered as being bad.

Many people were encouraged to settle when they saw others doing so. "They would admire it and they started also settling down. That is why you find most of the people have settled down. They are also learning from their friends. None of them would not like this beautiful kind of life."

### Decision process

Eighty percent of the respondents said it was the decision of the household head to settle and the wife agreed. The others explained that it was a collective decision between husband and wife. Some women reported that the husband discussed the matter with other household heads, came back and told the family of their ideas. One interviewee pointed out the patriarchic culture of the Bahima in the decision making process as family members had to agree with the decision made by the household head even when they did not like it. None of the interviewed persons expressed resentment about the decision to settle. Especially women expressed happiness that they did not have to move any more as they considered the nomadic life as very cumbersome and tiresome.

### Lifestyle changes

One of the most important changes of settlement was to live in one permanent place in a long-lasting house. Dietary customs have changed a lot according to the statement of the interviewees. When they settled down they started eating vegetables apart from milk and meat. Matoke (steamed and mashed cooking bananas) has now clearly replaced milk as staple food in the Bahima society. Most people have now stopped drinking blood as they fear the acaracides in the blood.

Nowadays the Bahima grow bananas and other crops like cassava, maniok and maize. Half of the respondents mentioned the increasing ownership of materialistic goods with sedentarisation like thermos flasks, cups, couches, beds and so on. Ten persons stated that they would have a modern family, but that they had also lost traditions.

The herd management has also undergone some changes. All cattle keepers reported that they have access to veterinary service. Ten respondents think that their Ankole cattle of today would not be able to move anymore over long distances. They believe that because of the better management the animals have become weaker, have no resistance to diseases. The other thirteen interview partners considered the Ankole cattle still as a strong animal and could not observe any difference

in the performance compared to former times. A decrease of milk production was linked to the confinement of the cattle and the dependence on one single piece of land. A less precise selection of bulls for the herds was seen as another reason for a lower production. One person pointed out that rich cattle keepers nowadays value the beauty of their cattle more than the production. "So they do not select according to production because they get better production from the Friesian. So they look for beauty in the Ankole cow. That is why production at times is compromised. A trend towards crossbreeding Ankole with Holstein Friesian to increase milk production can be observed. This was also discussed during interviews and many respondents expressed their fear that the Ankole breed might be displaced by other breeds in the future. They see "westernisation", education, cash economy and the opportunity for increased milk production as reasons for this possible trend.

Nowadays, almost all cattle keepers have their own land, which they usually fence off. Part of the herd or the entire herd is only moved to other areas during long and severe droughts. But these movements to another district have to be officially approved by the District veterinary officer. In this case the person who would like to move animals has to prove that he possesses land in the other district. As this is not always possible, movements of animals are often done without official documents, which might lead to problems with communities in other districts.

Overall, all interviewees expressed their satisfaction with the new and sedentary lifestyle, although they face some challenges and problems.

Many expressed that they would not want to move any more, on the contrary that they are enjoying their settled life very much.

### Conclusion

The sedentarisation process of the Bahima in Uganda has started a long time ago, but is still on-going. The process can be described as peaceful and voluntary, which none of the interviewees regretted. People see the settlement of families as a positive development as their situation has improved a lot.

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