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SUMMARY

The main objective of this research is to analyze the socio-technological transformations in the Fulani communities in northern Benin. Regardless of their length of stay in Benin, the Fulani pastoralists are often regarded as strangers, having practically no rights to land and natural resources. This marginalization has taken various forms since the pre-colonial period, during the French colonization and the postcolonial nation-state with its various governance regimes. Within a context of technological breakthrough and globalization, many changes have occurred, tending to challenge the sustainability of pastoralist livelihoods. Meanwhile, several grassroots organizations have also emerged to defend the rights of pastoralists in order to ensure them greater political inclusion and socio-economic wellbeing.

The study was carried out in Gogounou District located in the Benin northeastern province of Alibori, where pastoral activity remains the second most important way of life after crop farming. The fieldwork was spread over a total period of ten months between July 2013 and October 2014. An ethnographic approach has been adopted which focused on the uses of various technologies and collective action. Participant observation, a key data collection tool, was carried out together with open-ended and semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with various stakeholders.

One main result of the study is that the overlapping state policies in relation to agriculture, environment and land tenure have allowed several technologies (e.g. tractors, pesticides, chainsaws, plant seedlings and rural land title) to be widely spread. These technologies, however, have contributed to reinforcing inequalities in power relations between rural actors. Those crop farmers, who have better access to these technologies, have adopted them – changing their meanings in some cases – and have used them to increase their control over land and natural resources. This has led to the eviction of Fulani pastoralists from lands with adverse consequences on the cooperative relationships between rural actors and a more conflictive coexistence.

Facing this ‘crisis’, Fulani households respond with multiple and varied strategies. The study reveals that pastoralists – according to their socio-economic and technological capital – rely on geographical, social and technological strategies of mobility to deal with and sustain threats. Livelihood diversification has proven to be the more promising strategy among Fulani pastoralists. The study has identified extroversion strategies and development brokerage as examples for collective action that aim at the socio-economic and political inclusion of pastoralists. Fulani association leaders embrace a diversity of actions oriented towards fulfilling international donors’ agendas and aligning with government policies in order to achieve their own goals. Fulani civil society organizations have thereby contributed significantly to the transformation of pastoralism without however resolving the main issues of local pastoralists, which include long-standing land rights and fair access to resources.

Keywords: Pastoralism, Fulani herders, Technologies, Livelihood diversification, Collective action
