

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir,

My attention is caught by a passage in the review by Tim Ingold of the book, *Pastoralism in Tropical Africa* (*Africa* 47 (2): 220). There he commends that we expugn 'the popular belief that pastoralists engage in the irrational accumulation of stock merely to gain prestige.' Popular it may be among some administrators and planners, though scarcely with social anthropologists, at least not in that naïve form. We are then advised to replace this belief 'by a picture of ecological balance.' Mr Ingold cannot be expected to substantiate that opinion in a brief book review, nevertheless it raises an issue of some importance and represents an exhortation which becomes as tiresome as it is nowadays repetitive. Animal ecologists, whom Mr Ingold seems to follow, are greatly addicted to this concept of 'balance'. Social anthropologists might be less critical were it not that they have been rather busily occupied for some time in getting away from assumptions of balance in socio-cultural systems. Ecologists, on the contrary, appear to be happy with the notion, indeed it seems integral to their thinking.

What is this balance? I doubt if it is an idea among pastoralists themselves—at least it is not among those I have known. And obviously, wild animals do not have it. So it must be an observer's intellectual concept. It is one that fails to persuade me and that, in admittedly cursory reading, I have not seen convincingly argued. It may perhaps in some circumstances be a useful concept, but is it not also a misleading one? As in functionalist theory, one is told that it is something perceivable only over the long run and that it may never be achieved in actual fact: it is a tendency to which the highly complex variables incline; it is a condition which in inter-connected unity they might reach were these variables not to keep on varying so much and so unpredictably (the climatic variables alone in pastoral areas of Africa are arbitrarily ever-changing). It remains mysterious to me why anyone should assume that all those variables could interconnect so nicely. Yet we are frequently being told about the balance of nature being upset, as if there was, in Africa or in the Western world, once that happy state. Surely, even before man got into the act, animals together with climatic vagaries were always responsible for a good deal of unbalance. There is, it seems to me, an unfortunate emotive character to the notion of balance: the good old days, or somehow things can be sorted out so as to abolish our present difficulties . . . Of course, ecologists are aware of the fluctuation of these variables, although most of them (having focused on animals) give less than proper weight to social and cultural factors when it comes to human beings. It has not been uncommon, in Africa and elsewhere, to view humans as quite comparable to wild animals and to see, therefore, the adaptation of nomadic pastoralists in arid lands to be the same, *mutatis mutandis*, as the herds of wild animals which also live there.

To be sure, anthropologists cannot deny that they have often been naïve and deficient in their examination of the variables of the natural environment inhabited by pastoralists; nor is it a valid excuse that they could not do everything and so they concentrated on social things. Clearly, we do need much more sound, detailed data in that neglected area and more sophisticated treatment, including adequate recognition of their interplay with social things. We do, as Mr Ingold reminds us again, need careful analysis of herd management strategies. Yet is there not danger that we may too easily overlook social things in the pendulum-swinging rush to make amends for past failures? The very idea, for example, of a strategy is a human, cultural one, with at least some components of cogitation, goals, affects, decision-making, self-consciousness, and in part, therefore, subject to considerations, variables, which are cultural. It looks as though different sets of nomadic pastoralists come up with different strategies, different enough to be important. Now, no two pastoral peoples inhabit quite the same natural environment, so perhaps we shall never know for sure that their different strategies are not just the result of environmental differences. It has been asserted to me that this is so. Yet we should be foolish to accept so deterministic a view: we should maintain the working assumption that socio-cultural variables are part of the explanation. If we do include these latter variables together with the environmental ones, the difficulty of envisaging balance seems to become even greater.

Consequently, when Mr Ingold advises us to adopt his 'picture of ecological balance' I think he is rather too extreme as well as conceptually vague and possibly misleading. To the contrary, I am inclined to say let us *not* entertain a notion of balance but instead accept and work with the more difficult idea that the complex variables interact in constant change, continual flux, not ever settling down nor even tending to do so. It is not acceptable to say that the concept of balance is analytically helpful. It is a never-never land of delusion.

A Californian trapper has been quoted as saying: 'They talk about balance of nature, but to my mind there's no such a thing, it's the extremities of nature that moves things along. Hot and cold. Dry and wet . . .' (*The Atlantic*, September 1977, 68). I think he has something there. In my experience, nomadic pastoralists are a great deal concerned with the extremities: the inevitable failure of the rains which brings heavy loss of livestock and grave danger to human lives; the probable better year or two when losses are recouped and the next disaster prepared for, economically and psychologically. Their strategies, that is, must be affected by such considerations. Mr Ingold obviously knows this when writing of 'a rational policy for insurance against the vagaries of Nature.' Others who think like him are also doubtless aware of these conditions and may then not disagree with the burden of my argument. And yet they continue to press the concept of ecological balance. As he points out, quite rightly on the whole, in anthropology we do lack an adequate (or adequate enough) conceptual and theoretical foundation for the study of pastoralism. It is not promising, however, to adopt as a guiding star a conceptualization that is suspect.

Finally, to leave balance and return to prestige. If we can agree that nomadic pastoralists, or some of them, endeavour to accumulate livestock in the better years as insurance against the periodic bad and disastrous years, then the successful herd owner is, at least in one respect, the successful accumulator. Success here brings commendation and prestige among his fellows. The process is reinforced when prestige plus the larger herd give a man a good reputation, wealth, influence, instrumental power, even spiritual well-being—for prestige is largely a catch-all name for a variety of capacities and potentialities a man may acquire. Is this, then, 'irrational', as Mr Ingold says, or '*merely* to gain prestige'? (my emphasis). It seems most sensible to me. A man can go a long way to cope with both his social and natural environment and the vagaries of each by the one kind of general strategy.

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