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Introduction: the study of agrarian change among African herders

A group of elders huddle in the shaded area outside a small retail store, seeking reprieve from the midday heat of northern Kenya. The wind swirls a red glow of sand that eventually covers everything in its path. Conversation among these herders focuses on the latest development initiative in the area – irrigated agriculture – and the possibilities for wage employment that it might create. Their low-keyed tone implies that they are not particularly enthusiastic about the prospect. Their herds have been devastated by the droughts of the 1980s, and they find themselves especially vulnerable now, as well as increasingly dependent on wage employment and nonpastoral foods (imported grains, for example). While droughts are a normal occurrence in the dry regions of Africa, herders are confronted with processes of change that go well beyond the effects of climate. Their economies and their social structures are clearly in a state of transition – and nowhere is this more apparent than in northern Kenya.

The study of agrarian change in Kenya has a long history that has provided excellent data and a number of analytical insights (Kitching 1980; Leys 1974; Cowen 1981; Collier and Lal 1986). Kenyan materials figure prominently in recent dialogues on the agrarian “crisis” in Africa, a topic of widespread interest to journalists, academics, and policy makers (Berry 1984; Cohen 1988; Commins *et al.* 1986). The geographic coverage of Kenya, however, has been uneven. Both theoretical and empirical work concentrate mainly on the country’s central highlands, where commoditization of land and labor are widespread, and where state and capitalist enterprises have a long history of relationships with rural communities. Debates about the nature of agrarian transformation in Kenya – and in Africa generally – have excluded discussions of pastoral areas (see Cowen 1981; Schatzberg 1987), which are assumed to have been “only marginally under . . . the capitalist colonial economy” (Gutto 1981: 49).¹ For example, a recent journal issue devoted to agrarian change in Kenya includes only one article on the rangelands, limiting itself to a few paragraphs on a group-ranching scheme (Review of African Political Economy 1981), while Kitching’s (1980) seminal work on social and economic change in rural Kenya focuses mainly on cultivation areas.

Scholars who have studied herding groups are at least partly to blame for their

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inability to engage in larger debates on agrarian transformations. By “buying into” the argument that rangelands were outside of state and market influences, researchers in the past analyzed local social and ecological processes without concern for larger politico-economic issues. Herders were (and are), they imply, content to look after their animals, uninhibited by commercial processes and government bureaucracies. Recent studies of pastoral areas, however, demonstrate that these areas were clearly affected by state policies and commodity markets that, *inter alia*, differentiate pastoral households, increase pressures to enter wage-labor markets, and create contradictory and sometimes destructive land-use systems (Anderson 1982; Sperling 1987; Hogg 1987). In a recent publication, Hogg argues that a “new pastoralism” is emerging in Kenya, “where poverty and dependence is becoming a permanent way of life to many pastoralists” (1986: 319). This situation, characteristic of many of the pastoral areas of northern Kenya, calls for new approaches to study.

Recent data from pastoral areas are instructive with respect to at least four areas of concern in studies of agrarian change and crisis in Africa (Berry 1984). The first encompasses the nature and origins of rural differentiation, which until recently was considered nonproblematic in pastoral areas (see Sutter 1987; Starr 1987; and Watts 1987). Incipient forms of class are emerging in these areas, where inequities in property ownership are now the norm rather than the exception. Another issue germane to the study of agrarian change is the relationship between rural producers and the state. This topic is of particular interest in pastoral studies because African herders are politically marginalized in most states, as both colonial and postcolonial policies have discriminated against them. A third topic of major concern involves questions of land tenure and land rights (Berry 1989; Downs and Reyna 1988). Recent studies among pastoral peoples document privatization of communal lands, the presence of land-use conflicts, and – again – the role of the state in local tenure systems (Bassett 1988; Peters 1988; Behnke 1985). All are issues critical to understanding the nature of agrarian change in Africa. A final subject, similar to this third topic in that it links studies of herders to the larger debate about African agriculture, is analysis of the social and political causes of land degradation. It is clear that environmental problems in Africa are related to social and political processes that diminish the productivity of the resource base (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Little and Horowitz 1987). Recent case studies of herding populations are providing insightful data on such relationships (Watts 1987; Ibrahim 1987; Arhem 1985).

This book supports Sara Berry’s position that the agrarian “crisis” literature is based too frequently on aggregated data and on assumptions about African agriculture rather than on location-specific findings (Berry 1984: 61–62). By analyzing the history, social structure, and ecology of the Baringo District of Kenya – and, in particular, the Il Chamus area – I show that the “crisis” among the region’s herders is rooted in processes that preceded the droughts of 1979–1980 and 1984. The crisis in Baringo is simple in concept but complex in origin: whether one wishes to term it an ecological, agrarian, or economic “crisis,” the predicament is that more than one-third of pastoral households do not earn enough

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income to meet subsistence costs. This fact must be central to analyses of environment, agriculture, and other issues. The climatic disasters of the 1980s are used as an entry point to show that drought is a “normal” state of affairs, while the processes that have inhibited Baringo’s herders from adequately responding to it are not. These trends include growth in absentee herd ownership, which competes for local pastures; engagement in wage labor, which constrains local labor supplies; and a form of sedentary pastoralism that overuses certain range areas while underusing others. In this and subsequent chapters I draw on materials from elsewhere in Africa to show that the Baringo case is not unique.

The political economy of pastoral change

One intellectual influence reflected in this book derives from recent work on the political economy of rural Africa (cf. Barker 1985; Bernstein 1981; Watts 1983). Notions of political economy have come to define the conceptual framework under which pastoral production and ecology are addressed. Until the 1970s very little research had been conducted on the ways in which politico-economic variables affect pastoralism, particularly in Africa. Then studies of the Sahelian drought made it clear that much of the devastation associated with that crisis was related to state policies and the penetration of international capital (Franke and Chasin 1980; Watts 1983). Outside of the Sahel it is also increasingly apparent that pastoral systems should be examined within a politico-economic framework. Many of the social and economic changes that threaten pastoral systems are grounded in political processes. Some of the more important of these transformations are discussed below.

Transformation of tenure systems

Recent studies show that pastoral tenure systems are subject to both external and internal pressures. Changes in tenure systems resulting from the loss of rangelands to agricultural encroachment, to private and state development schemes, to wildlife parks, and to planned settlements are well documented (Anderson and Grove 1987; Bassett 1988; and Hitchcock 1980). Local regulations on resource use often prove ineffective in halting encroachment by nonpastoral groups and organizations. The state itself plays a major role in undermining the power and autonomy of local organizations that are vested with resource-management responsibilities, leaving a vacuum for nonherders to increase their control of resources. In the Sudan, for example, the state took control of range regulation from local authorities in the late 1960s (Haaland 1980), while in Botswana indigenous institutions have been supplanted by District Land Boards that currently regulate access to land and water (Gulbrandsen 1980). In both cases nonherders have been able to benefit from the changes. The usurpation of power by African states, however, has been incomplete in many cases, creating for farmers and herders what Runge (1981) calls a problem of “assurance.” In such situations producers lack confidence in the capacity of either state or local institutions to

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regulate access to resources, creating ambiguity about who has legal rights to range and water sources. It will be shown that uncertainties regarding land rights in Baringo result in a proliferation of land-use problems, including cultivation and settlement of areas that should be restricted for pastoral use.

Civil servants, traders, and urban-based herd owners take advantage of the uncertainties surrounding pastoral land rights by staking claims to water points and land. This process, which has been described for Niger (White 1987), Somalia (Behnke 1988), Botswana (Peters 1988), and Kenya (Hogg 1987), aggravates the general impoverishment of many pastoral areas. White, in a recent study of the Wodaabe of Niger, shows that many herding families have been relegated to herding animals owned by merchants and other nonpastoralists: "They are now obliged to resort to migrant labour or herding animals belonging to outside investors as stop-gap measures in order to survive" (1986: 24). The absentee herd owner usually has the political clout to negotiate exploitive management contracts, as well as to gain control of valuable pastoral resources. In Botswana, for example, nearly one-third of all water points in the communal rangelands are owned by civil servants, who are "in a position to influence government policy" (Behnke 1984: 275). In sum, the transformation in resource ownership and control has been coupled with changes in livestock ownership, whereby animals are increasingly owned by nonpastoralists. As will be shown in chapter 7, this process is well advanced in Baringo.

Pressures to transform tenure systems also stem from local factors. In Baringo, so-called "progressive" herders (see footnote 4, chapter 4) have fenced off farm and range areas for private use. Similarly, Behnke (1988) describes a case of spontaneous range enclosure in Somalia, where wealthy herders have staked out areas of up to fifty hectares near important dry-season water points. The herders first fenced off plots of two to three hectares for cultivation, then gradually expanded them to include areas for pasture. As they convert land to pasture they reduce the cultivated area for crops. Somali land laws legally recognize ownership of "fenced off" land for cultivation but not areas enclosed for livestock production, so the herders pursue a strategy of "agricultural sedentarization" that circumvents official restrictions and allows them to enclose lands for pastoral use. The spontaneous "privatization" of communal lands and water occurs elsewhere in pastoral Africa (for Botswana, see Peters 1988).

"Tradition" is sometimes invoked by Africans to justify private claims to land. It can be manipulated and redefined to suit particular circumstances, and can be very dynamic rather than static. The use of indigenous tenure concepts ("tradition") to stake private claims in farming areas of Kenya has been described in detail (Njonjo 1981; Glazier 1985). For pastoral zones, the process is best described for Maasai areas of southern Kenya, although there is evidence of its occurrence in northern Kenya as well (Louise Sperling, personal communication). Wealthy Maasai herders utilize the traditional concept of *olopololi*, which refers to a small grazing area reserved for calves, to facilitate land speculation. Work by the staff of the International Livestock Centre for Africa (ILCA) describes how Maasai herders have demarcated individual plots of up to several hundred hectares

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of land, and called them olopololi. In contrast to past practice, they graze adult cattle there and lease portions of these units to neighboring private ranchers (Grandin 1986; Peacock *et al.* 1982; de Souza 1984). Frequently the size of the olopololi has little relationship to the grazing requirements of the individual's herd, since it is invoked for purposes of land speculation (Grandin 1986). From 1980 to 1983 the area covered by privately owned olopololi increased by 33 percent in parts of Kajiado District. The cumulative effect of this process is especially felt in one part of Kajiado District – Meruishi – where individual olopololi account for 20 percent of pastoral lands (de Souza and de Leeuw 1984).

In sum, the politics of land rights in pastoral areas reflect phenomena similar to those described for farming zones of Africa (see Downs and Reyna 1988; Watts 1988; Bassett 1988). These include the use of state “connections” to legalize land claims by local chiefs and other notables; the emergence of absentee property owners who reside in urban areas; the support of “tradition” to justify land speculation; and the spontaneous privatization of lands owned in common. Showing that the two types of areas – pastoral and farming – are affected by similar political and social processes makes it easier to formulate a general model of tenure transformation in Africa.

Herder differentiation

Current contradictions in pastoral land rights in part reflect increased economic differentiation among herders. Recent studies of herder differentiation in Africa document three important findings. First, the level of inequality in pastoral systems has been greatly underestimated. Data from Senegal (Sutter 1987), Niger (Starr 1987), Kenya (Grandin 1983; Little 1983), Tanzania (Kjaerby 1979), and Somalia (Little 1989) demonstrate that up to 45 percent of livestock units are frequently owned by only 10 percent of herders, while the bulk of households (up to 50 percent) may own 15 percent or less of the total herd. Such inequities in animal ownership are comparable to patterns of land distribution in certain commercial smallholder zones of Kenya (cf. Buch-Hansen and Kieler 1983; Cowen 1981; Haugerud 1983).

A second important conclusion of recent studies is that herder differentiation influences a range of microeconomic activities. Sutter, for example, notes for Senegal that “such differences in the size distribution of livestock holdings have considerable ramifications on pastoral productive strategies” (1987: 201). This is equally true for Il Chamus herders of Baringo (see chapters 4 and 5). In East Africa both milk and animal marketing strategies of rich and poor herders differ considerably, with important implications for consumption and expenditure patterns (Grandin 1988; Kjaerby 1979). Engagement in wage employment and investment in nonfarm businesses also vary according to wealth differences (Sperling 1987; Hogg 1987; White 1984), while strong differences in the consumption of cereals and meat relate to distinctions based on herd ownership. In short, microeconomic analyses of household activities that rely on statistical averages, ignoring their ranges and variances, are flawed. An effort is made in

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chapters 5 and 6 to refine the concept of herder differentiation by examining its nonpastoral dimensions, including wage employment.

Finally, recent data reveal an increasing polarization of livestock ownership since the late 1960s and constriction of the class of “middle” livestock owners. This process is of theoretical importance because “middle peasantry” debates have assumed a particular significance in the study of agrarian change in Africa (Anyang’Nyong’o 1981; Cowen 1986; Watts *et al.* 1988). After all, it is the “middle” group that is expected to benefit most from smallholder programs that promote export crops (World Bank 1981; 1984). A case study of one Maasai group ranch in Kenya shows that between 1969 and 1983 the middle livestock-ownership group had virtually disappeared; “wealth had either increased or decreased markedly from the 1969 figures” (Graham 1988: 3). Studies from elsewhere in Kenya show that the rich and poor categories are significantly larger than the “middle” group (see chapter 4), although time-series data are usually lacking. Livingstone, for example, shows that the “poor” category of herders in southern Kenya encompasses more than 50 percent of producers, with 37 percent in “dire straits” (1986: 262). In examining cattle ownership, he draws upon data (Theuri 1979) showing that the four categories of “middle” owners (those who possess between thirty and sixty-nine cattle) account for only 13.3 percent of owners, while the five poorest categories (those who own fewer than thirty cattle) and the four richest groups comprise 80.1 and 6.3 percent of herders, respectively. Sutter’s work in Senegal does not show such a “constricted” middle group of herders (in this case, owners of twenty-five to forty-nine cattle) as in Kenya, but at 22 percent of households they are less than one-half of the size of the poorest categories of herders (owners of 0 to twenty-four animals). Here 48 percent of herders own herds of fewer than twenty-four cattle, while 30 percent own herds of fifty or more (1987: 200). The question of what is happening to “middle” livestock owners is critical for trying to compare processes of differentiation in pastoral areas with those in agricultural regions.

The relationship between herder and state

Lonsdale (1981) shows the contradictory roles of African states in shaping rural social structure, while Bunker (1987, 1988) demonstrates the importance of “dissecting” the state to account for national, regional, and local differences. In dealing with a unit as complex and amorphous as the state, considerable attention should be given to its differences and inconsistencies. States, like rural communities, are not homogeneous entities with shared interests at local, regional, and national levels. For the herder, encounters with the state can be via the local chief, a national land policy, or, indirectly, government-sanctioned price controls.

The study of herder/state relations takes on special significance because pastoralists play such a peripheral role in most states. Herders rarely have had the political power that other groups have experienced (Horowitz and Little 1987). As Bishop points out in the case of Mali, “pastoralists . . . frequently suffer loss of

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grazing rights, when disputes with farmers lead to administrative intervention” (1988: 7). With few exceptions, the policies of African states (colonial and independent) can be construed as antipastoral, especially *vis-à-vis* policies for settled agricultural and urban populations (Galaty *et al.* 1981). While anthropologists often assume that the state’s influence in pastoral areas is relatively recent, historians demonstrate the important role of the colonial state in shaping pastoral society and economy (Spencer 1983; Anderson 1982). For example, what are called “traditional” homelands in northern Kenya are often lands that herders were relocated to and/or able to occupy only because the state forced out another herding group (Hjort 1981a; Waller 1984). Colonial rule “resulted in restrictions on the movements of herdsmen often coupled, depending on individual administrators, with paternalistic attitudes that saw ‘vigorous measures’ needed to enforce the ‘correct way’ for herdsmen to behave” (Sobania 1988: 227). The colonial state’s demarcation of “native reserves” and “tribal grazing areas” represented the ultimate policy intrusion into pastoral land use. In Baringo each of the major ethnic groups – the Il Chamus, Pokot, and Tugen – occupied new lands (native reserves) in the twentieth century because of military and resettlement policies of the state.

The colonial state’s influence on pastoral marketing systems was also strong. The works of Spencer (1980; 1983) and Mosley (1983) show how Kenyan herders were affected by quarantine and marketing policies that, for example, forced them to supply animals for British troops during World War II (this policy was enforced in Baringo: see chapter 3). It is argued that state policies in the colonial era had a greater effect on the supply of cattle from pastoral areas than did price or other market variables (Mosley 1983: 107). Ironically the influence of the state on marketing behavior was stronger in pastoral areas than in many of the commercial agricultural areas of Kenya, where the impact of the government is generally assumed to have been greater.

The notion of an “exit option” is often invoked in studies of state/peasant relations in rural Africa (Hyden 1980, 1986; Bunker 1987). This hypothesis, which argues that peasant freeholders, because they are relatively self-sufficient, can opt to withdraw from the market when policies are unfavorable, has not to my knowledge been tested for pastoral economies.² Is the “exit option” a concept that has relevance to pastoral areas? On the surface it would seem applicable, for herders are often distant from major markets and assumed to be relatively self-sufficient (cf. Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson 1980). The economic reality, however, is far more complex. Consumption and expenditure patterns alone dictate that most African herders no longer have a viable “exit option” (see discussion in chapter 6). They purchase significant amounts of grain (especially in the dry season), tea, sugar, and other necessities, requiring them to interact with the commodity market and perhaps also with the labor market. In most cases they sell animals and/or labor to earn the cash needed to buy the goods that allow the household to survive.

Data from certain pastoral areas show that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, herders may hold less of an “exit option” and be more dependent on the

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market than commercial smallholders. In comparing household budgets of smallholder coffee producers of Embu, Kenya, with those of Orma herders of northeastern Kenya, Ensminger and Rutten note that, ironically, the pastoralists are far more dependent on commercial production and market purchases than are the coffee producers (1987: 24; also see Haugerud 1984; Ensminger 1984). Coffee is the vital cog in Kenya's market-driven agricultural strategy, while the Embu area is in many respects similar to the Central Province of Kenya, which has been a focus of agrarian-change studies. The Embu area has good infrastructure and is relatively close to major urban centers, such as Nyeri and Nairobi (it is a distance of approximately 130 km to the latter). The Orma, on the other hand, occupy the Tana River District, which has poor infrastructure and is distant from Nairobi (in excess of 400 km). In a geographic sense, therefore, the Orma are considerably more isolated from major markets than are the Embu coffee growers. How then can they rely on the market more than do the export-oriented peasants? As Ensminger and Rutten show, "traditional" Orma herders are less self-sufficient and subsistence-oriented than Embu coffee producers, who grow most of their own food.³ The implications of market dependency among the Orma and similar herding groups are that cash income and purchases increasingly serve as indicators of welfare, and thus it becomes particularly important to understand state policies that affect herders' relationships with the market.

The special case of the Il Chamus of Kenya

The Il Chamus⁴ of Baringo District, Kenya, provide a particularly interesting case of pastoral change that allows a local-level interpretation of an African "crisis". They are part of the larger Maa-speaking "complex" of East Africa that mainly includes specialized pastoral groups (Maasai and Samburu), but also some who practice cultivation as well (Arusha and Il Chamus). Early explorers and administrators frequently referred to the Il Chamus as the "agricultural Maasai" until they began to accumulate cattle herds comparable to those of other pastoral groups. Located in the transition zone between northern (Samburu, Turkana, and Pokot) and southern (Maasai) Kenyan herding groups, they have experienced several important economic changes in this century – from irrigated agriculture to pastoralism to wage employment combined with agropastoralism. Since the 1880s the Il Chamus area, in contrast to many parts of northern Kenya, has been perceived as a location of exceptional agricultural potential – an area "capable of producing anything" (Thompson 1885: 265) and "the most fertile part of the eastern area of the Province," (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya [CPK] 1926: 8). The location is frequently referred to as a potential "granary" and this view has helped shape the state's relationships with the community. The group in effect has had a "roller-coaster" relationship with the state: initially it was the government's economic and military ally, but later it was undermined by government policies. Since the 1920s most droughts and famines in Il Chamus (and generally in Baringo) have been associated with punitive state policies,

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the most serious of them market and land related. Using archival and field data, I show how the area's dependence on the market has increased over time, reaching a point in the 1920s and 1930s when an exit option was no longer a viable strategy.

The term crisis has special significance in the Baringo context. The area was one of the first in East Africa to receive famine relief, and it has been the subject of special "rehabilitation" studies dating back to the 1930s (CPK 1931).⁵ According to some observers, Baringo, including the Il Chamus area, had already reached an economic and ecological "end point" by the 1930s (Maher 1937). This is in spite of the fact that only forty years earlier the area produced enough surplus to supply food to trade caravans (see chapter 2).

The Il Chamus example provides an excellent context for unraveling the concept of crisis; accounting for local discrepancies and changes in labor use, consumption, and marketing strategies; and relating these to ecological problems. By treating the notion of crisis as problematic – that is, as a concept to be accepted or rejected on the basis of analysis rather than as an *a priori* assumption – this study demonstrates the importance of social and temporal specificity in addressing the issue. Although the local economy had periods of general prosperity, periods of hardship affected certain social groups more severely than others. What may be termed crises had different implications for discrepant groups: some herders did well even during times of economic and ecological decline. Contradictions are found in other aspects of the Il Chamus and Baringo economies – for example, the export of grain from one part of the region, while a neighboring location is importing it; or the pursuit of agricultural strategies that actually jeopardize the area's main livelihood, pastoralism. The Il Chamus area provides a good illustration of why the agrarian "crisis" in Africa needs to be addressed within the broader context of social change. The "crisis" that is observed may be more symptomatic of the tensions and contradictions inherent in social change, than of a doomsday situation of economic and environmental collapse.

Analytical framework for the study

In addressing a topic as complex as agrarian change, it is necessary to devise a theoretical schema that accounts adequately for scale, time, structure, and behavior. Economic and anthropological studies of agrarian and pastoral systems in Africa are frequently ahistorical, and use units of analysis (scale) that do not capture the significant political processes affecting change. Other analyses overemphasize either the structural and political-economic dimensions or the behavioral aspects of agrarian transformation, and do not adequately try to incorporate both sets of variables. Thus, advocates of decision-making theory often neglect the larger structural context while emphasizing the behavioral aspects. Marxists, on the other hand, frequently focus on structural issues and neglect the behavioral dimensions of resource allocation and decision-making (see Blaikie and Brookfield 1987: 24).

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A model of land management and welfare

This study advocates a model that incorporates both structural/political-economic and behavioral variables. It is adapted to the particular circumstances of Baringo, but is likely to have general applicability to other areas of Africa. Figure 1.1 provides a greatly simplified representation of the model. It starts with the premise that low, poorly distributed income is the major cause of land-management problems in Baringo. The structural/political-economic parameters affecting income differentiation and poverty are listed separately and include such factors as access to markets and land, and the terms of trade. These are distinguished from the behavioral aspects of the model, which are manifested at the homestead and intrahomestead levels. While the causes of low, unequally distributed income tend to be structural and historical in content, analysis at this level alone does not reveal the behavioral processes that also influence the direction of change. Thus, it is important to trace the extent to which differentiation and low incomes affect homestead decisions about production, marketing, and land management, as well as the ability of homesteads to earn a living without degrading the resource base.

The model traces the cycle of poverty and change among homesteads that ultimately results in land-management problems. In the Il Chamus case, the scenario starts with low-income pastoral homesteads who confront problems of producing sufficient food and income to meet consumption and expenditure needs. To make ends meet, they divert labor from herding to wage employment and other nonpastoral activities. They also begin to mortgage their futures by selling off productive animals (assets) from their herds (see chapter 5) and by entering into client-like relationships with wealthy absentee herd owners who overuse local pastures. The latter group does little to enhance the resource base, but, instead, pursues short-term goals of profit accumulation. The diversification into wage employment and other activities constrains the amount of labor available for livestock and agricultural production (for a Latin American example of this, see Collins 1987). Labor shortages, in turn, result in land and herd management practices that are harmful to the local ecology, ill-adapted to drought conditions, and unsustainable over time (see chapter 7). Wealthy herders and outsiders benefit from the local impoverishment by purchasing “cheap” animals at stress (drought) sales, hiring local pastoralists to manage their herds, and alienating common pasture for private use. The net results for the majority are problems that become evident physically in localized resource degradation and socially in increased impoverishment and market dependency.

The model in figure 1.1 requires considerable data on a range of topics, including regional marketing, household economy, and local land use. Careful consideration of different units of analysis and of the linkages among them are necessary as well. The methodological implications of conducting such a study are discussed later in the chapter, but here it is appropriate to highlight the important units that provide the basis for this approach.