

Social constraints to the adoption and expansion of work oxen in Sierra Leone

by

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Abstract

Development programmes have generally placed emphasis on the technical and economic benefits of technologies but socio-cultural concerns may be more important to farmers deciding whether or not to adopt animal traction. Farmers give great importance to factors such as the social division of labour, cultural identity and compatibility with traditional patterns of life. The separation between herders and crop farmers strongly inhibits the development of animal traction in Sierra Leone. The differences in agricultural practices are reinforced by cultural distinctions, social barriers and prejudices, which all restrict cross-association. In general crop farmers fear cattle and neglect animals. They often consider ox handling to be of low status and a source of ridicule. Conversely cattle herders have difficulty in obtaining land for cropping. Within villages, secret societies, litigation and local politics are very time-consuming and tend to prevent farmers from investigating and adopting technological changes. Docile work animals can become prime targets for attack during the social unrest of elections. Animal traction is still perceived by some decision-makers as an archaic technology.

Introduction

The field of animal traction has been largely dominated by agricultural engineering and agricultural economics. Thus development planners are often baffled as to why the rate of adoption of animal traction is frequently very low, despite apparently overwhelming economic arguments. The various theories on the peasant decision-making process, such as "drudgery averse", "optimising peasant" and "risk averse peasant", indicate that there is no

clear-cut understanding of the factors that influence peasant decisions. What such theories do highlight, however, is that purely technical and economic advantages are often secondary to socio-cultural factors like social division of labour, cultural identity and compatibility with traditional patterns of life. This is crucial for animal traction programmes in Africa, in general, and Sierra Leone, in particular. Here the pace of change is not dictated by the availability and cost of the key factors of production as in the United States of America and Japan.

What is presented in this paper is not a systematic analysis of data collected in the field but rather observations made during the course of general extension work and specific research into the indigenous technical knowledge of the Fulani. Emphasis will be placed on the need for research into the factors which influence peasant decisions in Sierra Leone in relation to work oxen.

Ethnicity and social division of labour

The traditional rigid separation of arable farming and livestock husbandry that characterises most of traditional African agriculture is applicable to Sierra Leone. Livestock ownership is mainly, but not exclusively, confined to the Fulahs and the Mandingoes. This does not preclude the fact that many wealthy non-Fulah and non-Mandingo farmers and civil servants invest in cattle as a hedge against inflation and the fulfilment of social obligations. The distinction between arable

farming and livestock also corresponds to tribal and even national distinctions. These themselves correspond, at the psychological level, to different socio-cultural identities. Cattle rearing is mainly the preserve of Fulah herders in the Northern Province where the ecology is very similar to that of Guinea, from whence the Fulahs originate. The traditional Fulanis have maintained a strong attachment to the Islamic faith. Since they live in remote areas with no electricity, schools or hospitals they have, over the years, earned the reputation of being "uncivilized". Such an impression has been gained within a population that has been influenced by "western" education and ideas since the 18th century. The caste system within the Fulani social structure that distinguishes "town Fulani" (*Fulani Gidda*) from "bush/slaves Fulani" (meaning cattle Fulani) (*Fulani bororoje*) only serves to emphasize this stigma. It is not uncommon for other tribes to refer to town Fulah pejoratively as "Kayboos", meaning uncivilized bush Fulah. Even town Fulahs may dismiss the shortcomings of a fellow Fulani with "what could be expected of a *Kayboo*".

The effects of these perceptions of the Fulahs on cattle production in general, and work oxen in particular, have been tremendous. In the first place, cattle production requires all-year round labour and the seasonal rainfall necessitates transhumance. This hardly suits the other tribes who have been accustomed to seasonal labour peaks followed by periods with few agricultural demands in which they could find time for litigation and secret society activities. Secondly, the image of Fulahs has discouraged indigenous farmers from taking up herding of cattle, even where it is obvious that it is much more profitable and less risky than crop farming. For example, it is not uncommon for wealthy farmers and civil servants, when faced with dishonesty in a herder, to keep on changing one contractual Fulah herder for another. In similar circumstances in other areas of life, the normal "common

sense" action would be to train a relative to take over.

From these observations, it is apparent that, over the years, the myth has developed that only Fulahs can herd cattle and that cattle can only respond to the Fulah language. This myth is reinforced by a general fear of cattle in the rest of the population. Cattle are seen by crop farmers mainly as a source of meat. The Work Oxen Programme, on the other hand, would like the farmers to see oxen as a power resource capable of solving the labour constraints in rural farming.

Cattle handling has such a poor image in Sierra Leone that there have been problems in recruiting and maintaining the services of ox-handlers in villages. The simple labelling of an ox-handler as a "*Kayboo*" or even a "Fulah" is enough to discourage some potential recruits and trained ox-handlers. This can have grave consequences for maintaining and expanding the use of work oxen in Sierra Leone. Recently one development organization (Plan International) had to withdraw about half the oxen it had placed in villages in the Mabole Valley, because non-Fulanis were reluctant to accept the social stigma of ox handling.

Attitude towards animals

For a "westerner" accustomed to proper care and affection shown to pets and farm animals it is very easy to expect the same in rural Sierra Leone. While there does appear to be some concern for animals (some people object to the castration of bulls and the use of animals for work), the general attitude towards animals in rural areas is one of neglect. Sheep and goats are only tethered in the rainy season to prevent crop damage. In the dry season they are left to graze and forage by themselves, as are pigs. Cattle and work oxen require much care and supervision, and such attention to animals is common only among the Fulahs. This creates a problem in non-Fulah areas where work oxen have been introduced on a communal basis. In such cases, there often appears to be a monopoly of the

use of oxen by chiefs and prominent men in villages. However, in general this is a reflection of the fact that only one person takes care of the animal during the off-season. Naturally he deserves first use of the animals followed by his clients.

Access to land

Though Sierra Leone is characterized by abundant land and sparse population, oxplowing is limited to stump-free uplands (which are very uncommon), swamps (which are limited) and "bolis" (wide flat grasslands subject to some flooding or waterlogging). Boli plowing often coincides with the peak dry season period when animals are moved to better pastures. Swamp plowing coincides with the period when the main upland crops have already germinated and so require protection from cattle. This effectively precludes cattle herders from using ox traction, even when they are aware of the benefits. Furthermore, as "foreigners", herders have no permanent access to land and have to rely on negotiations with chiefs for land in which to graze their cattle. This is decided upon annually. With population pressures there is increasingly a shortage of fertile land so that it is difficult for the Fulah herders to acquire both grazing land and arable land (especially swamps).

Labour "companies"

Originally "company" labour was a reciprocal arrangement by which each family provided labour for various farming operations in the village to overcome labour shortages. This has now become highly commercialized especially with the migration of the young and able-bodied men to towns and mining centres. Rural deprivation, coupled with the government's import substituting industrial policy of the 1960s and 1970s, has led to an exodus of young people to urban areas in search of education and jobs. Mining of gold is also proving so attractive to young boys that not only is it becoming difficult to find new ox-handlers,

but even trained handlers are leaving the oxen schemes for the mining areas. This severe shortage of labour increases the desire and the need to participate in communal labour organizations. It is further reinforced by the fact that these "company" groups are of the same age group and belong to secret societies controlled by the village elders. These associations can act as welfare systems, and are obligated to help in marriages, funerals and other activities requiring resources beyond the means of an average farmer. It is difficult for a family to withdraw its sons from such an organization that performs multifarious roles. Thus it is extremely difficult for a family to take on an unfamiliar technology: there are risks involved (such as diseases and theft), there is the constant fear of the "evil eyes" of enemies and there is the need to conform. These together exert more pressure on an average farmer than the technical and economic arguments.

Village politics and litigation

The often rosy picture of peasants living in communal bliss is misleading. There are enough tensions in rural villages in Sierra Leone to occupy farmers for the better part of each morning in the wet season and the whole day during the dry season. In fact one of the reasons advanced for not growing second crops in the swamps is the enormous time spent on litigation and secret society activities during the dry season. In Kapethe, in the Bombali district, for example, the ox-handlers could not start work on time because they had to attend local court proceedings. At Roruks, in the Yoni Chiefdom, repeated attempts to convene planning meetings in the off-season were frustrated by local court proceedings. Village politics also affect the introduction of work oxen through village cooperatives that are based on equal commitment and responsibility in villages. The outcome of litigation can sometimes disenchant the losing party so much that ill-feelings extend to cooperative schemes, such as the use of work oxen.

National politics

Though it may appear far-fetched, general elections have been marked by so much violence that this has discouraged and disrupted work ox schemes in some villages. Communities become divided into factional and/or tribal groupings and each tries to do havoc to the property of the other group. Cattle in general, and well-trained, docile oxen in particular, are easy targets especially if the initiator of the scheme is directly involved as a candidate or a major supporter. This was the case with the ox schemes in Taiama (Southern Province) and Bumban and Senda (Northern Province). The former has not yet been revived whilst the latter is still trying to recover from the elections. These developments are enough to scare other individuals and groups who know that election times may be used to settle old scores or make fresh wounds. National politics also affect ox schemes if the initiator of the scheme (a Chief or other prominent person) is not a favoured candidate but one who has been retained by a political patron. The people may decide to withhold cooperation. This was the case in Magboama, where the trained oxen were not hired at all because the Chief had been imposed on the population by a highly placed politician. In such circumstances the locals may well look for an opportunity to destroy the scheme.

Gender issues

The international decade for women together with concerns for welfare, equity and the population explosion, has put pressure on planners to address the problems of rural African women. This development is welcome: women are much more involved in production and reproduction than men. However, with regard to ox programmes in Sierra Leone, it is not a simple question of directing inputs towards women. Since the dwellings of pastoralists are remote, non-herders have seldom observed the role of women and children in herding and milking. Arable farmers and people in urban centres have the impression

that herding involves men wrestling with wild cattle that are destined for the slaughter houses. This picture evokes fear of cattle in both men and women and this may affect the expansion of ox schemes. In one women's cooperative scheme in Kasasie in the Mabole Valley, young girls were trained to work with the animals. However, as the girls married outside the village, the whole scheme was placed in jeopardy. In the end the women dropped the idea of training girls, and boys were trained as ox-handlers instead.

Perception of work oxen

Even where the use of oxen has been demonstrated to be more effective than hoe cultivation, it must not be assumed that this will automatically lead to its adoption and expansion. Some "southerners" object to castration of the bulls whilst Fulah herdsmen are generally opposed to nose-punching. One herdsman in the Mabang Chiefdom categorically stated that he would never sell bulls to a customer who might nose-punch them. Other people see animal traction as cruelty to the animals or as a technology for lazy people. The most lamentable view is held by some intellectuals and policy-makers who are accustomed to tractor-hire schemes. They perceive animal traction merely as an archaic technology, even when it has been shown to be appropriate in the prevailing economic circumstances.

Conclusion

If animal traction is to be sustained and expanded, it is clear that the sociological aspects of ox traction should be addressed at least as much as the technical and economic issues. Both policy makers and donor agencies have concentrated on the technical and economic issues, with severe consequences for rural development schemes. It is farmers who ultimately determine the success and the adoption of technology packages. When this is realised, it becomes obvious that their perceptions, attitudes and decision-making processes must be taken into account when rural devel-

opment programmes are planned. Farmer perceptions should be properly researched and not simply assumed. This calls for location-specific research, so that effective means of communicating with farmers and rural households can be found, and inappropriate generalizations avoided.

Résumé

En général, les responsables des programmes de développement de la traction animale accordent plus d'importance aux arguments économiques et techniques qu'à des facteurs socio-culturels qui peuvent être de première importance pour les paysans en train de décider ou non d'adopter la culture attelée. Les fermiers attachent une grande importance à des facteurs comme la division du travail, l'identité culturelle, le respect

des modes de vie traditionnels. La séparation entre éleveurs et fermiers freine fortement le développement de la traction animale en Sierra Leone. Les différences entre les pratiques agricoles sont renforcées par les valeurs culturelles, les barrières sociales et les préjugés, qui sont autant de blocages à toute forme d'échanges. En général, les agriculteurs ont peur des animaux et les négligent. Ils considèrent que toute activité associée à des animaux est socialement dégradante et source de ridicule. Par ailleurs, l'accès à la terre est très difficile pour les éleveurs. Dans les villages, les conflits, les sociétés secrètes, la politique locale accaparent les fermiers et les empêchent d'évaluer sérieusement les perspectives offertes par l'adoption d'une nouvelle technologie. Les animaux de trait dressés et dociles peuvent devenir la cible des rancœurs allumées par les tensions électorales. La traction animale est encore trop souvent perçue comme une technologie archaïque par certains décisionnaires.

Title photograph (opposite)

*A team of oxen being led by a woman in the Kara region of Togo. A steel-wheeled ox cart is in the background.
(Photo: Paul Starkey)*