



*You have to keep an eye on them. The Fulani herders keep an eye on the Bambara farmers' cattle, and the farmers want to keep an eye on the herders. This may mean that the herds cannot be moved to distant and better pastures.*

## Herding contracts: for better or worse?

*Animals and labour for herding are exchanged between households in a wide variety of circumstances, and under many different terms. Based on research among livestock-owning farmers in the West African Sahel, Camilla Toulmin looks at herding contracts, whereby a herder is paid to care for farmers' animals. She asks how this practice affects the overall productivity of Sahelian rangelands.*

**Camilla Toulmin**

**W**hen you see a large herd of cattle grazing under the watchful eye of a young man, you tend to think "Ah! That man has a fine herd." But often, you may discover that the herder owns few, if any, of the animals in his care. Instead, he is paid for this work by the livestock-owner.

There are several reasons why animals are looked after by people who are not the owners. Some households with livestock may find it difficult to herd the animals themselves, if they have few people of working age, while others may prefer to spend their time doing something else. Sometimes, richer pastoral families will loan animals to poorer relatives and neighbours, to help them survive hard times.

In recent years, a frequently encoun-

tered form of acquiring labour for herding is by means of herding contracts. A herder is engaged to care for a certain number of animals over a given period, in exchange for payment. Rates of pay and other terms associated with the contract vary between different settings, as do the broader consequences of such contracts for herd management, livestock productivity and pasture use.

### Animal wealth from crops

Bambara farmers in central Mali are renowned for their large harvests of millet. Strong cultural value is placed on being a successful, hard-working farmer, producing sufficient grain to feed a large extended family, pay taxes, and invest in cattle.

In the Bambara village of Dalonguebou, lying to the north of the River Niger at Ségou, several families have built up large herds of cattle, while many others have 3-4 animals in addition to their plough oxen. Those with just a few head group their animals together to make up a herding unit.

Livestock plays an important role in the Bambara farming system, being used for ploughing and weeding millet fields. Cattle dung is highly prized for crop production, permitting the regular harvest of crops from fields around the settlement. Here, millet yields averaged 1 t/ha, and twice as much in exceptionally well manured plots. In addition, cattle are a form of wealth; surplus grain or migrants' earnings are invested in animals, which can be sold in times of need.

During the farming season, people are hired for herding, leaving the Bambara free to spend their time weeding their crops. This makes good economic sense, as the cost of hiring herding labour is much less than a man's grain production in an average year. Also, the Bambara say that several seasons spent away in other activities spoils one's ability to farm and gives a taste of a less exhausting way of passing the rains, which might make one reluctant to bend one's back over the weeding hoe again.

### Mixed wages

The cost to the cattle-owner of using hired labour is made up of several components. Each year, for each adult animal, the owner must pay the herder 10 measures of millet (equivalent to about 15 kg). The herder has the right to all milk from the animals on Mondays and Fridays (on other days it is shared with the owner), and is frequently given help with ploughing a millet field. The herder usually also has the right to the manure from the herd for a couple of months, to help boost grain yields.

### Manual on Sahelian pastures

**Manuel sur les pâturages des pays sahéliens**, by Henk Breman and Nico de Ridder. Karthala, 22-24 bd Arago, F-75013 Paris, France. 1991. 495 pp. FF 160 (people from ACP countries can order via CTA, PO Box 380, NL-6700 AJ Wageningen, Netherlands).

This handbook draws conclusions from a long-term research project of the Netherlands Centre for Agrobiological Research (CABO) on primary production of rangelands in Mali. It gives a detailed description of the nature of pastures and the characteristics of pastoralism in the Sahel, and provides guidelines for evaluating and improving pasture utilisation.

The research results and their potential application are presented in an understandable way, although primarily aimed at researchers and higher-level technicians. It is clearly shown, for example, that vegetation growth is limited by the availability not only of water but also of nutrients, even where annual rainfall is as low as 250 mm.

The length of the book gives some indication of how much knowledge is needed for sound range management based on scientific findings. For those with a good command of French and with scientific interest in rangeland, this book provides a solid basis, is thought-provoking and innovative, and can be highly recommended.

For many herders, this arrangement seems to work fairly well. They gain rights to farm some land while employed as a hired herder. In addition, grain is in good supply within the village, and several herders build up a good and trusting relationship with the cattle-owners for whom they work.

However, there are also significant problems arising, which have adverse consequences for both people and animals.

### Keeping an eye on them

From the herd-owners' point of view, problems arise because they cannot monitor carefully how their animals are cared for. For example, a major part of the herder's pay comes from the milk of animals in his care. Milk production under Sahelian conditions is highly seasonal, peak quantities being available in July, August and September once the rains have brought a green flush to pastures. But even then, milk offtake for human consumption rarely exceeds a couple of litres a day, and is often less than this. Milk offtake must be limited to ensure that enough is left for the calf.

In the three-cornered struggle between herder, herd-owner and calf, all eager to get a share of the milk, it is usually the calf which suffers. Herders are frequently accused of secretly taking too much milk from the cows in their care. In one case in Dalonguebougou, all 12 of the calves born to a herd-owner wasted away and died during the following months, through inadequate milk supplies. The herder in this case was sacked and was forced to move on to find work elsewhere.

Bambara farming villages in this region are surrounded by extensive areas of pasture. In the dry season, animals are often left free to wander, grazing whatever vegetation they can find. Cattle thieves can pass through the countryside picking up valuable mature beasts, which are then trekked at speed to markets for quick sale. When animals are lost, the herder is often the prime suspect, it being thought likely that he let the thieves take their pick, in exchange for a share of the proceeds.

Herd-owners will rarely be willing to let animals be taken a great distance from the village, as this means they cannot keep such a close eye on them. As a result, pastures around the village tend to get heavily grazed and, by the end of the dry season, there is nothing left to eat for a couple of kilometres. This is particularly damaging for the calves, who are herded apart from the rest of the herd and rely on grazing close to the village.

### Herders have little choice

In this region, almost all hired herders are Fulani, an agropastoral people found throughout West Africa, well-known for their knowledge of livestock. Traditional

rivalries between the Bambara and the Fulani aggravate the already difficult relations which exist between herd-owners and herders.

From a herder's point of view, herding contracts have become a necessity, given the loss of animals from many pastoral communities, following persistent drought and because farmers have taken over good grazing lands. Herders must find extra income to supplement what they gain from the few animals they own themselves. Many hired herders may hope that over time they can build up a large enough holding to enable them to give up working for someone else.

Access to farmland around the village is an important benefit for hired herders. In villages like Dalonguebougou, with its sandy soils and good supply of manure, harvests of millet have been reasonable even in years of patchy rainfall. Several herders have been able to gain a major part of their food needs from their millet plots, allowing them to set aside much of their earnings for re-investing in buying animals of their own. However, such benefits depend on remaining employed. Given the vagaries of rainfall and animal disease, a herder can easily find himself out of a job, having been falsely accused of negligence regarding the animals in his care.

### Settling for the worse

As elsewhere in the Sahel, herding contracts in Dalonguebougou satisfy a need, based on the increasing livestock holdings of sedentary farmers and the impoverishment of the traditional pastoral sector. However, this continued shift of cattle

ownership from mobile pastoral systems to settled farmers is likely to damage the overall productivity of the Sahelian livestock economy. The decline in the extensive movement of herds between wet- and dry-season pastures increases pressure on locally available grazing and reduces the use made of more distant pastures. The conflicting claims on milk and the division of responsibilities for livestock care between the herd-owner and hired herder create considerable confusion, and do not guarantee that decisions are taken in the best interests of the cattle. Case studies of herding contracts from Niger (White 1984, Thébaud 1988) provide similar evidence for their disadvantages.

### References

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Hired herders are paid partly in milk. In the 3-cornered struggle between herder, herd-owner and calves for the milk, it is usually the calves which suffer.