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Folklore, Water and Development

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ABSTRACT The folklore of water use among the subsistence farmers of Eastern Africa is based on the principles of neighbourhood having priority over individual needs. This is now under pressure from population growth, political leaders replacing traditional ones, the ideology of development and central governments' combination of administrative inadequacies and political hopefulness. This has led to the decline of effective folklore control over water use. These difficulties are augmented by technical experts seeing the production of water as an automatic good without considering its place in the overall environmental situation. Folklore control may slowly reassert itself as a more efficient way of coping with water's limited availability.

RECORDED AND UNRECORDED FOLKLORE

If we can define folklore as the system by which individual societies control their own affairs, we can presuppose that it would result in the long-term with some societies such as Japan and Tikopia surviving or failing to do so leading to their extinction such as that of Easter Island (Diamond, 2005).

We can certainly presuppose that a contemporary society which has entered the modern world of planned development has the potential for finding efficient ways of managing its own affairs so that the environment in which it exists can remain adequate for the needs of a balanced population.

We can also presuppose with or without archaeological evidence that currently more or less intact 'traditional' societies have had their folklore systems in existence for some time. In addition despite that both existing folk memories and assertions that what they are doing now is what they have always done, their folklore systems have been continually adaptive with or without the ability to think out and record what they have adapted to and why.

We have to understand that folk lore and folk law of water control or any other aspect of social life, are two totally different systems of social control in which the former is constantly and quickly changing under the largely non-literate control of the people themselves. The latter on the other hand is not controlled by the people themselves and is administered by literate outsider bureaucracies.

In the early 50s the Sukuma law and custom was recorded (Cory, 1956) in consultation with their elders who were in general agreement with all that was then printed in both English and Swahili the national language and then provided for use in every local court. Even then there was virtually no possibility of the folklore which had been recorded being part of the ongoing lives of the Sukuma since what had been recorded were general principles but not how they adjusted these principles to individual and local situations. The then government as indeed all subsequent ones have consistently misunderstood the nature of folklore thinking that recording it was a necessary part of the development of orderly government as seen in developed societies .The Sukuma by and large settle their own disputes within neighbourhoods and avoid civil actions through the courts.

Those consulted have produced folk understandings of a socially inherited commitment to some sort of ideal continuity; a composition of biased memory and the very human hope for ideal small scale communities. Thus such recordings as that of the Sukuma folklore have in fact become a recording of what the surrounding national society hope will be the orderliness of folk law.

When it comes to adjudicating their own small scale intra-neighbourhood difficulties and adjustments, idealism is adjusted to the realities of inter-personal variation under almost any factor that can be considered. So it would seem to

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outsiders that they have no rules at all since they readily break those which they have themselves put into print. The fact remains that the unwritten folklore of every small scale community is always adapting itself to the need to retain people there by never defining any dispute in terms of its antecedents but rather in terms of the compromises that promote this; the lowest common denominators of neighbourhood necessities.

Then into these folklore systems came the ideology and practice of development which involved a number of enduring factors. It is imposed by agencies which operate from centres outside the communities affected and to whom they are not responsible. It is initiated by agencies whose overview is perhaps somewhat limited by the material, economic, political and psychological demands of their specialisations. Finally that although there is usually an overall development plan, each part of such plans has primarily sectional effects on the communities in which parts of these plans have been put into practice.

THE WATER FOLKLORE OF DRY SAVANNAS OF EASTERN AFRICA

Let us examine principally the folklore of the five million cattle keeping and farming Sukuma of north-western Tanzania who except for the minority who live along the southern shore of Lake Victoria, live in dispersed households in a sparsely watered cultivation steppe with irregular and often inadequate rainfall. There is only one permanent water spring in the whole area and all the rivers are seasonal and drain into Lake Victoria (Malcolm,1947).

Since water and grazing has always been in short supply for a people who combine agriculture on not very fertile laterite soils with an ideological and economic preoccupation with livestock, we have to ask why they did not concentrate along the lake shore where their cattle would always have had water and grazing, their wives would have always had water nearby and they could have grown rice and sweet potatoes in raised water based beds In fact the population along the lake shore is more related to work opportunities in the provincial town of Mwanza than for easier subsistence farming.

What then are the factors accounting for the Sukuma pattern of widely dispersed land occupancy which they must have developed and maintained for several centuries; their decisive rejection of villages and which required a coordination of functions. Their experience of low soil fertility and irregular rainfall, led them to cultivate strips of land down hill to use a variety of soils, planting crops in small quantities over periods supported by the planting of drought resistant cassava as famine reserves, the sensible need to live near their fields and to spread out the grazing of their livestock combined with their practice of exogamy and a segmentary system of family change. Their dislike of their neighbours with whom they are in disguised rivalry combined with complex networks of reciprocity with law and order problems covered by their vigilante 'basumba batale' youth groups.

No water source is privately owned even if they have been dug by a single individual so that there are well dispersed neighbourhood facilities. The only way in which a water source could be privately owned would be for the digger to build his own house over the spring or well which could be difficult to do with any known or prospective water source. Thus water supplies are not only well dispersed but neighbourhood controlled with small numbers of people and live stock using each source.

With an irregular rain fall in total in which there is no monsoon and even falls of rain being very local within the social horizons of a single neighbourhood, it made good social and environmental sense to live well dispersed. Once security was no longer an issue when there were concentrations of population round the residences of their constitutionally appointed and popularly supported chiefs because of their ritual ability to provide rain..

There was also the pattern of valley bottom grazing reserves 'ngitiri' into which neighbourhood livestock were put when dry level grazing had been exhausted and also the practice of loaning out cattle 'kubililisa' in networks of reciprocities so that livestock were dispersed and more able to survive disease and drought.

So overall the Sukuma through their independently developed local self-governments had created and maintained a system of living which dispersed the population into small groups fitting into the soil and water distribution and of course this dispersed occupation of land had cropped down vegetation which kept the tsetse flies from entering into the settled areas and infecting their livestock.

Whether or not this pattern of survival was

consciously or unconsciously developed what we see here is a rationally understandable system of environmental use and its limitations which was that surplus population always was able to move into vacant land to south and west. Nevertheless it is a system which depended on a population of people and livestock which has been kept from rapid increase by high infant mortality, cattle disease, epidemics, drought and famine. What they are now confronted with is an escalating population of people and animals by the control of mass diseases and the publicity of political ideologies.

THE ENTRANCE OF DEVELOPMENT PLANNING AND IDEOLOGY

If we open any work on the folklore of separately identified peoples we find it neatly divided up under the headings of marriage, divorce, landownership and water use etc This is very similar to the way that development agencies divide up their responsibilities for the betterment of the lives of these same people; there will be departments for water, family care and agriculture etc.

Both of these ways of looking at the folk law rather than the folk lore of these people fail to notice that they experience their lives as unified wholes; they do not have traditional experts who are responsible for narrowly defined responsibilities; they are generalists with particular flairs. Everyone has a wholeness and a memory bank of issues which may come up in their lives but each issue is always put in terms of the whole.

This is why development is often a failure because it looks at a problem through the eyes of specialisation and tends to ignore that other parts of peoples' lives will be modified by the changes they engineer. But are not social scientists making much the same mistakes by dividing up people's lives with equally discrete sections but water is an indivisible part of all peoples' lives.

Much of development has sectional experts coming into subsistence communities and inferring that what they have done successfully for centuries is out of date by their own specialised understandings. Of course there are committees of specialists but with specialisation there is a technical arrogance which cannot fit easily into village public opinion working to find solutions which will be acceptable to them in their wholeness and not the sectionalised parts of their lives; specialists are also impatient.

In the post-war era development came into view to deal with the political need for trying to raise the living standards of entire populations without much regard for the long-term effects of whatever might be achieved. Initially this was done by small scale efforts combining local communities with minimal financial outlay. It then became part of the national political programme and the popular optimistic vote .

This involved the digging by hand of local rather than chiefdom small dams. This led to increases in the holdings of castle out of proportion to what the surrounding grazing could sustain in an average year between the two extremes of drought and deluge.

The provision of drilled wells requiring the maintenance of pumps for which there were not enough maintenance engineers and spare parts. A study of funded water supplies in developing countries found 40% out of order after 5 years and after 7 to 10 years between 70 and 85% were out of order (World Bank.1986).Thus the pattern of this mechanical development shows that for those living nearby there cannot be any dependency on water being available; in practice it would appear to be a well meaning programme which functionally must be assessed as inferior to their folklore supported system of limited dependable supplies under local control.

An inspection of all funded boreholes in one part of Sukumaland found that some had not been sunk at all, three quarters of the diesel oil, half of the cement and one third of the steel pipes had been stolen (Price Waterhouse,1989). This amount of criminality suggests widespread corruption and the inability of the state to control such depredations. It is prudent to remember that the contemporary partial abolition of corruption in Western public life took a long time to develop. 'It is not easy to describe this(corruption in)a leader's pubic life which necessarily entails an understanding of African life in general and its tolerant attitude. It is first of all necessary to abandon European ideas of standards of integrity in office and to realize that words which arise in our thoughts of court cases for defamation of character do not have any unpleasant sound to the ears of the villagers but rather describe as natural privilege of power and influence. Therefore to say that headmen have regular sources of income on the side is rather like saying

'water is wet'. It would be utterly incorrect to call public life corrupt since the word 'corrupt' or 'not corrupt' are completely meaningless in this connection. The only question that matters is whether the procedure remains within traditional limits' (Cory.1954). So it would seem that in the development of water sources by means which are outside the control of folklore are unlikely to succeed.

Should water supplies to be developed to the extent planned by politically based national plans this would in the context of the Sukuma environment probably lower the water table significantly by enabling a rate of water use per person beyond which the level of the water table could not sustain. Where the water sources were working this encouraged their use by large numbers of cattle causing local erosion and perhaps also over-breeding.

Finally the dominant single party government enforced a national villagisation project forcing the Sukuma to live in villages on the assurance that extra social facilities would be made available to these new concentrations of population which were not in fact provided because of financial difficulties and administrative incapacities.

Overall this resulted in widespread irrevocable disruption. There was a food shortage and the erosion of fields near to these new villages which destroyed the Sukuma traditional system of balanced ecological, demographic and social environment. It doubled the time taken to cultivate by adding the time taken to walk to and from their now more distant fields, the extra haulage at harvest times and it involved the neglect of fields from nocturnal predators as well as undercutting the abilities of women to exercise neighbourhood influence as the new villages became localities of unbalanced male dominance (McCall,1985).

Development thinking may be based on a general pattern that assumes non-literates with no scientific training are not using their environment with the optimum efficiency that science states that it can always provide. The scientists are newcomers whose conclusions do not involve the filling of their own stomachs and while the pragmatic Sukuma know that environmental mistakes can cost lives; there is rarely the assumption that the latter might in fact be making the best of their environment .

The small village communities of the Ssonjo who are the only East African people to live by irrigation by canalling the springs out of the Rift valley wall in seasonal aqueducts into their small fields into which water is distributed at night by star time. They use digging sticks for their main crop of beans and peas. This way of farming was assessed by developers as being the height of primitiveness although iron hoes had been available .locally for centuries. The iron hoes broke up the soil too harshly and increased the loss of their very scarce water so they turned them into gongs for dancing music (Gray, 1963).

The surrounding Maasai who move their cattle and huts to allow for the availability of water and grazing , have had their mobility reduced by the provision of large scale water points This has resulted in serious erosion on the approaches to these concrete watering places and overstocking in relation to the grazing available.

Surely the approach which developers should use would be to find out not so much the folklore over the use of water but why these particular practices have evolved and continue to be used in these particular circumstances. So we can surely assume that these people would not continue to use their water in this way if they could be see for themselves that it has adverse effects in average and poor years. The Gogo to the south of the Sukuma have been found to run their economy on the assumption that there will be famine one year in five which might well be the same for the Sukuma. It might also be prudent for developers to assume that every community at whatever level of literacy has a proportion of highly intelligent people who know much more about their own environment than the short term enquiries of visiting specialists can possibly find out.

THE EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUALISM AND EDUCATION OVER THE USE OF WATER

If the communal understandings of how their environment works should be based on a sense of practical communal understandings, thus anything that detracts from these activities, is likely to have an adverse effect on the environment. Diamond wrote 'My New Guinea highland friends who spent their childhood years away from their village to pursue an education , found on returning to the village, that they were incompetent at farming their family gardens because they had missed out on mastering a

large body of complex knowledge (Diamond, 2005: 281).

There is also the factor that development thinking is based on and comes through the individualistic pattern of Western thinking and social practices to which the interests of communities come second. Small more or less self contained communities with a folklore which they themselves have developed within the communality of public opinion to which all can contribute without the quickly arranged literate formalities of voting, allowed for individuality but not too obviously at the expense of others. No Sukuma would be allowed to pump or divert water from a communal source for his own fields as it could not be done without diminishing the water available to others. Even if he created his own borehole, it would be difficult for him to prevent others using it and to maintain his position as a neighbour..

Even without the imposed programme of villagisation 'few peasants, if any, were prepared to trade their own institutions for the concept of equality. Nor were they voluntarily going to work communally in order to support the demands of the other classes when this in fact collided with their own needs. Ujamaa (family neighbourliness) as a radical strategy of development at the national level could not be reconciled with its objective of promoting development from within the peasant order' (Hyden,1980).

With the decline of traditional local government culminating in the abolition of chiefs in 1963 the people lost control over their immediate lives since those responsible for their welfare were no longer controllable by local public opinion. The imposition of locally elected officials and a political structure which considered that it had the mandate to improve the lives of the Sukuma by whatever means they thought appropriate.

THE ABRUPTNESS OF WATER DEVELOPMENT

If we look at the development of Western nations we can see that this has been a lengthy and gradual process in which political ambitions and plans have been correlated to a growth in administrative efficiency and public morality. These societies had a large number of competent people at all levels; an adequate number of plumbers, pipe layers as well as planners and politicians.

These newer states had leap up social mobility for politicians which indeed is a constant feature of all political systems but it has not had their politicians adequately controlled either by public opinion or by an administrative structure of independent competence. Politicians in plenty but not enough electricians, secretaries and works foremen.

These are societies in which the laudable ambitions of the politicians to improve the lives of their people has overloaded the national financial administrative and technical structure so that they have been unable to fulfil their political promises because of a shortage of middle grade staff and insufficient money to pay enough in salaries to avoid corruption.

This has resulted in a decline in the organisation of Sukuma self help schemes for water development since there is a feeling that the state should provide these improvements out of the taxes which they have paid. There is no real understanding of the costs of installation and maintenance as well as a feeling that water development is now a technical matter which outsider technicians should manage. There is also the conviction that newly elected officials are corrupt and money collected for schemes has disappeared without adequate explanations as to how it has been expended.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SUKUMA WATER FOLKLORE

The effectiveness of the Sukuma folklore is based on their recognition that they live in a predominantly dry savanna with seasonal periodic and uneven rains. It is a culture pragmatically evolved for an environment which is not particularly friendly to either agriculture or pastoralism. Their folklore has yielded a reasonable livelihood in most years by a combination of adaptable and adapting styles. There are certainly rules but ones which are related to endlessly varied social situations.

The processes of development as politically marked out tends to be monolineal in which each specialisation tends to press its own case without assessing its effects on other aspects of Sukuma culture. Providing more water for cattle was not tied in to compulsory destocking which at ten percent was less than their own rates of disposal and with the decline of customary formal marriages the number of cows which were distributed as bride-wealth has declined.

Development as part of the political ideology

of a newly independent state has tended to create an imbalance in the Sukuma environment which past understandings of folklore cannot control or change quickly enough to make any differences in populations which are now demographically unstable.

THE POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD

The Sukuma traditional folklore about the conservation and use of water and grazing can no longer apply because conditions under which it evolved have changed but more importantly have changed rapidly because of factors which are largely out of the control of the Sukuma themselves as users of water

At the same time we have to accept that the vast majority of human inter-relationships are controlled by folklore which is largely outside the boundaries of literacy whether we are considering Banaras or Berlin. There is no reason to suppose that 'custom is no longer king' or indeed in any way substantially modified except insofar as electronic communication and written documentation have created new developments for inclusion.

So we can expect that folklore will adjust itself to the new situations facing the Sukuma. This would appear to possibly develop in response to two different social and environmental situations. Firstly in the old core areas attached to the main road and railway line between Dodoma and Mwanza with its trading settlements and the possibilities of commuting to work in the new conurbation of Mwanza with a population profile of older men and a predominance of land-working women.

This environment in which the relics of their traditional folklore might have survived, has been effectively destroyed by the compulsory villagisation campaign and its subsequent abandonment allowing people to move back into their well dispersed areas. This has now created there new conditions of living and understandings as a whole culture cannot be disrupted and then returned to its previous form as if nothing had happened.

Since much of the farming will now be done by women without husbands or having absentee ones, it can be expected that women will become more in control of domestic water supplies but may have little say in the maintenance of larger water sources. Men as the owners of livestock will have a continued interest in the development of water points in which they will exclude strangers from using and in maintaining the traditional system of valley grazing areas.

At the same time there will be the development of the buying and selling of land for housing and cultivation which has existed near Mwanza municipality for fifty years (Tanner, 1956) over which there are no traditional folklore controls, but which can be expected to develop folklore systems of neighbourhood control similar to those in Western societies.

Secondly the vacant areas to the south and west into which the expanding Sukuma population has moved with a more sexually balanced and younger demographic profile. Here each group of households will have an extended family or affinal basis or even a client-patron foundation as newcomers will have to be fed until they have cleared their own land, planted seed and harvested their first crops. Water sources will be exploited and maintained according to the same folklore principles of neighbourly communalism rather than any new concept of individual ownership.

As these new farmers cut back the trees and shrubs, the tsetse flies will disappear and the richer live stock owners will move their cattle into where there will be better grazing but depending as always on the availability of water.

Overall in less well developed societies we can expect the failure of any development schemes that go beyond the abilities of the people in neighbourhoods to develop and control their own folklore for survival and their use of water.

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