

Ethical predicaments

Advocating security for mobile pastoralists in weak states

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PAUL SCHOLTE

Fig. 1. Our collaborator Saidu Kari (centre) during an overnight stay with absentee cattle owners from the Fadaré area.

Insecurity has been a major theme in our work with mobile pastoralists in the Far North Region of Cameroon, who have suffered deadly cattle raids for decades (Moritz 2005; Moritz *et al.* 2002; Scholte *et al.* 1996). As researchers working with these pastoralists, we have repeatedly informed development projects, NGOs and government authorities about these and other insecurity problems. The difficulty is that the government's response, in particular the use of paramilitary forces, has created its own kind of violence, which has had adverse effects on others. In this article we discuss the unintended consequences of advocating for security for mobile pastoralists within the context of a weak African state, and the ethical predicaments surrounding advocacy in such situations.

The ethics of advocacy in fieldwork

As marginal members of their research communities, many anthropologists have developed a strong personal sense of a moral responsibility to advocate on behalf of 'their people'. However, the question of whether advocacy on behalf of research subjects is a matter for professional or personal ethics is much debated (Bourgeois 1990; Fluehr-Lobban 2003; Kovats-Bernat 2002: 218; Meskell and Pels 2005; Schepers-Hughes 1995). According to the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (1998), anthropologists have 'primary ethical obligations to the people...they study and...with whom they work'. These include avoiding harm and 'respecting' people's 'wellbeing' (AAA 1998: A1).

The code also notes that anthropologists may engage in advocacy, but that this is an individual decision, not an ethical responsibility. Bourgeois (1990) has argued that the code is too narrowly concerned with the ethics of professional conduct in research and education, failing to address ethics relating to human rights and the tragedies that result from structural violence. Similarly, Schepers-Hughes (1995) has pointed out that observing professional ethics codes does not relieve anthropologists of their moral

responsibilities towards the people they study. Calling for a 'militant' anthropology, she argues that anthropologists have the obligation to act when faced with structural violence, because not to speak or act is to condone such violence (Schepers-Hughes 1995). Kovats-Bernat (2002: 218) has been critical of Schepers-Hughes' call to action, raising the important anthropological question of whose ethics are motivating this call to action – are they those of the individual researcher, or those of the people she studies? In addition, there is the concern that intervention or activism on behalf of one group of people may have serious consequences for other groups.

Insecurity in the Far North Region of Cameroon

Pastoralists across Africa suffer from insecurity, indeed, insecurity has been thought to be a pervasive aspect of pastoral systems. However, observers have remarked that the nature of the violence directed at pastoralists has changed over the past few decades (Gray *et al.* 2003; McCabe 2004), displaying an increased destructiveness that is largely due to the influx of small arms and the outbreak of civil wars at the periphery of pastoral areas (Mkutu 2008). Insecurity and violence are endemic in the Far North Region of Cameroon (Issa 2010; Roitman 1998), where we have conducted research with mobile pastoralists since the early 1990s.

The mobile pastoralists who travel with their livestock to the Logone floodplain every year from Chad, Niger, Nigeria and other parts of Cameroon belong to various Arab and FulBe groups, including the FulBe Jamaare, Woila, Alijam, Adanko, Anagamba and Uuda, and they form part of extensive kinship and migration networks that cut across national boundaries in the Chad Basin. All the groups are highly specialized in animal husbandry, with most having no involvement in agriculture or other livelihoods. In most groups the key livestock is cattle, but sheep and goats are also kept to cover small expenses, and donkeys and horses are used for transport. Most mobile

1. IRIN News 2008. Cameroon: Rapid intervention military unit strays from its mission. 29 August.

American Anthropological Association 1998. Code of ethics of the American Anthropological Association.

Amnesty International 1998. Cameroon: Extrajudicial executions in North and Far-North Provinces. London: Amnesty International.

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Bourgeois, P. 1990. Confronting anthropological ethics: Ethnographic lessons from Central America. *Journal of Peace Research* 27(1): 43–54.

Chabal, P. & J-P. Daloz 1999. *Africa works: Disorder as political instrument*. Oxford: International African Institute, James Currey.



Figs 2-3 (top). FulBe Woila children in the camp of Alhaji Sali.

Fig. 4 (second row from top, left). FulBe Woila children in the camp of Alhaji Sali. The one on the right was held for ransom by kidnappers for two weeks.

Fig. 5 (second row from top, right). Suwa Arab herders.

Fig. 6 (above, left). FulBe Anagamba pastoralists.

Fig. 7 (above, right). Suwa Arab herders.

Fig. 8 (left). FulBe Woila man with his three children.

Fig. 9 (right). FulBe Anagamba pastoralists on horseback.





Fig. 10. Cattle belonging to Suwa Arabs returning to camp.

Fluehr-Lobban, C. 2003. *Ethics and the profession of anthropology: Dialogue for ethically conscious practice*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.

Gledhill, J. 1994. *Power and its disguises: Anthropological perspectives on politics*. London: Pluto Press.

Gray, S. et al. 2003. Cattle raiding, cultural survival, and adaptability of East African pastoralists. *Current Anthropology* 44(supplement): s3-s30.

Issa, S. 2006. La prise d'otages aux confins du Cameroun, de la Centrafrique et du Tchad: Une nouvelle modalité du banditisme transfrontalier. *Revue Polis* 13(1-2): 119-146.

— 2010. *Les coupeurs de route: Histoire du banditisme rural et transfrontalier dans le bassin du lac Tchad*. Paris: Karthala.

Kossoumna Liba'a, N., P. Dugue & E. Torquebiau 2010. L'élevage mbororo sédentarisé au nord du Cameroun: Entre adaptation et impuissance face aux insécurités. In: Seiny-Boukar, L. & P. Boumard (eds), *Savanes africaines en développement: Innover pour durer*, pp. 1-10. N'Djamena: Prasac.

pastoralists move an average of 20 times over the course of the year, spending longer periods in different locations according to whether it is the rainy season (*duumol*), the cold dry season (*dabbunde*), or the hot dry season (*ceedu*).

While our current research focuses on how mobile pastoralists manage common-pool grazing resources in an open-access situation, the pastoralists' own primary concern is the ongoing insecurity that threatens their lives and livelihoods, and thus we have spent a considerable amount of time discussing this insecurity in interviews and informal conversations.

Insecurity was already a prominent issue in 1994 when we started working with pastoralists as part of the Waza Logone Project of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The project was aimed at restoring the ecological and economic systems in the Logone floodplain that had been adversely affected by the construction of the Maga Dam and the creation of a reservoir for the irrigated rice fields of state-run agricultural corporation SEMRY (Scholte 2005). While interviewing pastoralists about the ecological effects of the dam, we found that they felt insecurity to be a much greater problem. In the FulBe Woila group headed by Alhaji Sali, with whom we first stayed, a man had been killed a few weeks earlier, leaving behind a wife and three children. Earlier that year, cattle thieves had already killed six pastoralists as they guarded their cattle at night. The pastoralists complained that the authorities did nothing to protect them. On the contrary, the gendarmes would arrest pastoralists who had defended themselves from cattle thieves and effectively hold them to ransom, with families having to pay significant sums to get them out of prison.

We highlighted the insecurity problem in an internal report to the Waza Logone Project, recommending that the project bring the issue to the attention of government authorities and encourage them to arrest the thieves and remove from office the traditional chiefs protecting them. Through the project, we organized several meetings with the pastoralists, including one involving the governor of what was then known as the Far North Province. In each, insecurity emerged as a major issue (Scholte et al. 1996).

Although the project's activities temporarily improved security in the Logone floodplain, the province as a whole continued to suffer from general insecurity, as *coupeurs de route* (highway robbers) held up cars on the main roads and committed carjackings in the cities.

However, when a foreigner working for the Waza Logone Project was shot and seriously injured in a carjacking in the provincial capital of Maroua in February 1998 and the governor himself was attacked in his home, the Cameroonian government sent paramilitary security forces to the province. These forces, popularly referred to as the *anti-gang*, went after suspected *coupeurs*, their accomplices, and the traditional authorities aiding them, as well as petty criminals. They would pick up suspects from their homes at night, summarily execute them, and leave their bodies along the road as an example to others. A local non-governmental organization estimated that more than 300 people were killed by the paramilitary unit in 1998, while others were detained, most likely tortured, and held without legal process (Amnesty International 1998).

In the Logone floodplain, the security forces arrested people suspected of involvement in cattle raids and attacks on pastoralists. Among pastoralists and most other people we worked with, there was support for the government's action, because it had, so far, improved security for them. However, for others in the floodplain, including some people we worked with, the security forces were creating insecurity and terror. During one of our regular visits to a village in the Musgum area of the province, we learnt that the village chief, who we knew well, had been taken by the *anti-gang* a few hours earlier. His brother was suspected of being involved in cattle theft, and had been hiding, probably across the border in Chad. Nothing more was ever heard from the chief, and the assumption is that he was executed for not revealing his brother's whereabouts.

The floodplain 10 years on

Ten years later, in 2008, we returned to the Logone floodplain for a new longitudinal project with mobile pastoralists, after a gap of almost eight years since our last stay. The security situation for pastoralists had again taken a



MARK MORITZ

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- Moritz, M., P. Scholte & S. Kari 2002. The demise of the nomadic contract: Arrangements and rangelands under pressure in the Far North of Cameroon. *Nomadic Peoples* 6(1): 127-146.
- OPEN 2009. Document de présentation des faits majeurs relatifs à l'insécurité dont ont été objet les communautés des pasteurs dans les plaines sèches et humides de la Région de l'Extrême Nord du Cameroun. Maroua: L'Observatoire du Pastoralisme dans la Province de l'Extrême-Nord (OPEN).

turn for the worse. Whereas in the 1990s, pastoralists had to some extent been able to defend themselves against Musgum cattle thieves using bows and arrows, to a degree accepting a certain level of violence as an inevitable feature of life herding cattle in the floodplain, in the 2000s, this was no longer the case. Herders said that cattle thieves were no longer fleeing when they used their bows and arrows. Now, the thieves were trying to eliminate herders completely by killing or crippling them, rather than simply stealing animals. In the group with whom we had stayed in 1994, Alhaji Sali's brother was so brutally beaten with sticks by thieves in 2008 that he lost the sight and hearing on the left side of his body.

In the past two years, pastoralists in the Far North Region have been victims of extortion by heavily armed *coupeurs de route*. These *coupeurs* have adopted a new strategy with the pastoralists; rather than stealing livestock, they are taking hostages, mainly children, and holding them to ransom for millions of francs (thousands of dollars). The hostage-taking has been extremely effective in inducing pastoralists to sell their animals (Issa 2006). It was first practised in the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2004, and later along the Cameroonian border, where Mbororo refugees had fled civil war in the CAR (Kossoumna Liba'a *et al.* 2010; Seignobos 2008). Since then it has spread through Cameroon to the Northern Region (Issa 2006) and the Far North Region (OPEN 2009).

The scale of the violence and its human and economic impact is unprecedented: in the Northern Region in the five months from January to May 2007, 143 people were killed, 354 were taken hostage and more than 1,300 million francs, the equivalent of \$268,800, was paid in ransoms (Kossoumna Liba'a *et al.* 2010). In the Far North Region in October 2009, six children were taken hostage and 31 million francs (c. \$61,600) was paid in ransoms (OPEN 2009). The *coupeurs* are well organized as well as heavily armed, and they do not hesitate to kill. They operate in small groups of three to five, and are thought to mostly be former rebels, army deserters and outcasts from pastoral groups in the Chad Basin. Livestock traders and pastoralists are their main targets, and they operate in

the bush and on secondary roads linking the weekly rural markets. Issa (2010) argues that *banditisme rural* (rural banditry) is an enduring feature of social life in northern Cameroon and, as we have seen, *coupeurs* of various kinds have been operating in the Far North Region since at least the 1990s. It has always proven difficult to control such gangs, however, recently, pastoralists have felt that the situation has been escalating out of control, and that it now poses a serious threat to their lives and livelihoods.

In October 2009, Alhaji Sali's group fell victim to the *coupeurs*. As they were making their seasonal journey with their laden animals from the rainy-season pastures in the Moulvoudaye area to the Logone floodplain, they caught sight of the *kalluBe* (evil ones); three men up ahead, with two following behind. Everyone fled, except for a few of the younger children, who did not understand what was going on. An eight year old and an 18 year old were captured. Boonyo, Alhaji Sali's son, concerned about the two captives, went back and met the *coupeurs*. As others he knew had had similar experiences, he knew the routine, and began the ransom negotiations. The *coupeurs* initially asked for 10 million francs (\$20,000), but Boonyo negotiated it down to eight million and was given some time to sell cattle to get the money. It took Alhaji Sali's group two weeks and multiple trips to the market to sell 47 animals and deliver a finally negotiated ransom of 6.3 million francs to have the two young captives returned unharmed.

Alhaji Sali was not the only pastoralist with whom we worked whose group was affected by the violence. The house of agro-pastoralist Alhaji Bello, who had played a vital role in the creation of the management committee of Waza National Park (Scholte 2009), was attacked in 2009. Alhaji Bello's children were taken hostage and, though they were ultimately returned safely following the payment of a ransom, he was so marked by the event that he retreated from public life.

The government response

The security forces the Cameroonian government sent to the Far North in 1998 to control the problem of *coupeurs de route* have now become the Bataillon d'Intervention



MARK MORITZ



MARK MORITZ



PAUL SCHOLTE

Fig. 11 (top). Research assistant Oumarou Kari explains results from our current research project to FulBe Woila pastoralists.

Fig. 12 (middle). Explaining our current research project to mobile pastoralists and listening to their concerns about insecurity.

Fig. 13 (bottom). Alhaji Bello (standing left), who played a vital role in the creation of the management committee of Waza National Park (see Scholte 2009), and whose children were taken hostage in 2009.

Rapide (Rapid Intervention Battalion, BIR). The BIR was created in 2001 from existing government security forces to combat criminal gangs operating on Cameroon's eastern and northern borders,¹ but it now operates throughout the country. However, despite the BIR's permanent presence in the Far North Region and intermittent successes in eliminating bandits there, overall, the region's security situation deteriorated considerably in the 2000s, with only occasional periods of relative peace and security for mobile pastoralists.

The BIR is an elite unit supported with the newest equipment, including helicopters. It has a large force in the Far North, with a main base next to the region's main airport at Maroua and smaller bases in towns near areas targeted by the *coupeurs*, as well as deployments in villages throughout the Logone floodplain. The battalion receives counterinsurgency training – which includes courses on 'law in times of war' – from military consultants from the US, Israel and France, whose political leaders are presumably concerned about security and stability in Cameroon because of the country's oil reserves and the pipeline between Chad and Cameroon.

The BIR and its *anti-gang* predecessors have long come under scrutiny from local and international human-rights groups for their use of torture and summary execution (Amnesty International 1998; 2009). Evidence suggests that the BIR's strategies have evolved over the years, with an increase in search-and-rescue operations in the field and fewer summary executions of suspects. It is not clear to what extent this change can be attributed to the campaigns of Amnesty International and others, or whether it is partly a product of the foreign counterinsurgency training. In place of summary execution, it seems suspects are now usually taken for interrogation at the BIR's airport base, where they are often tortured (Amnesty International 2009) before being released or transferred to the military prison in Garoua.

Overall, the BIR's activity in 2010 brought more security to the lives of the Far North's mobile pastoralists – there have been no recent reports of kidnappings – but many mobile pastoralists, wearied by the constant threat from the gangs, have in any case left Cameroon for Chad or Nigeria. Moreover, some pastoralists have themselves suffered at the battalion's hands. Some FulBe Adanko have been executed for carrying firearms in the bush, while others have been arrested on suspicion of being *coupeurs*. Though the mobile pastoralists have generally welcomed the BIR forces as a counter to the terror of the *coupeurs*, some are starting to feel, through the BIR, the oppressive force of the state.

Weak states and ethical predicaments

In 1994, we did not foresee what our recommendations to the Waza Logone Project would entail in terms of government response. Although we have no direct evidence that the government security forces active in the Far North in the 1990s made use of the information we collected for the project, such as the quotations from pastoralists accusing the traditional chiefs of floodplain villages of collusion in banditry (Scholte *et al.* 1996), the fact that the *anti-gang* went after cattle thieves and traditional chiefs in a relatively remote part of the province (in addition to targeting the *coupeurs* operating on major roads and cities) suggests that the meeting the project organized with the provincial governor may have played a role.

However, in 2010, when we found ourselves again witness to security problems faced by mobile pastoralists, we decided that we should once more advocate on their behalf, this time through the L'Observatoire du Pastoralisme dans la Province de l'Extrême-Nord (OPEN), a platform made up of NGOs, pastoralists, and traditional and municipal



MARK MORITZ

Fig. 14. FulBe Anagamba pastoralists on the move.

- Roitman, J. 1998. The garrison-entrepôt. *Cahiers d'études africaines* XXXVIII(2-4): 297-329.
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authorities. We did so because we felt an ongoing personal responsibility to advocate on behalf of mobile pastoralists, but also, they demanded it: 'What do you do for us? What is the point of all your questions when we are subject to killings and kidnappings?'

Nevertheless, we know that, in the context of the Cameroonian state, sounding a call for law and order can have serious consequences. Kovats-Bernat writes that:

The states within which many dangerous fields are contained are intrinsically weak, in that they lack the sophisticated infrastructural surveillance tactics that would allow for more subtle, manipulative practices of power (Gledhill 1994). As such, the agents and proxies of such states must resort to kicking in doors, torture, and the institution of death-squad activities to achieve desired ends because internal social control has become dependent on a state's ability to terrorize its citizenry into conformity. (Kovats-Bernat 2002: 211)

This description of the way that weak states deal with issues of social order aptly characterizes the Cameroonian state's responses to the problem of banditry, which have been violent and repressive. Indeed, the state is often the worst perpetrator of violence in Africa (Chabal & Daloz 1999). While the BIR offers security to mobile pastoralists by eliminating criminal gangs, it also generates further insecurity through its own violence and by acting as a state within a state, taking on governance tasks such as regulating herder-farmer conflicts, and occasionally itself extorting money from pastoralists under threat of violence.

In 1998, in response to the violent activities of the BIR's predecessors, Amnesty International wrote that it recognized 'the government's responsibility to maintain law and order and bring to justice those responsible for criminal offences, in accordance with international standards', and that 'the extrajudicial executions carried out by the security forces in the north of the country violate[d] Cameroon's obligations under international human-rights law' (1998: 3). It launched a letter-writing campaign demanding that the government put a stop to and officially condemn the extrajudicial executions, maintain strict control of the

security forces, investigate criminal behaviour by security forces, and bring to justice those responsible for the executions (Amnesty International 1998).

The primary concern of human-rights organizations such as Amnesty is with human-rights violations by states and other powerful entities, not with insecurity caused by criminal activity, unless it is associated with civil war and/or a clearly recognizable ethnic group is being targeted. Thus the plight of the Mbororo refugees from the CAR, who are FulBe pastoralists, received more international attention than that of FulBe and Arab pastoralists in the Far North Region, even though all these groups were systematically targeted by the criminal gangs. In a sense, Amnesty is in a better position than an anthropologist to advocate for human rights. Amnesty and similar organizations stand, theoretically at least, at a distance from all parties; their commitment is to protecting human rights, regardless of person or politics. By contrast, anthropologists feel first and foremost a moral responsibility towards the people they are working with.

We are split. We continue to advocate for government intervention against criminal violence and, like most of the Cameroonians we talked to, we are pleased that more security forces have been sent to the region. At the same time, however, we condemn the security forces' use of torture and summary execution, and support the pressure Amnesty and other organizations are bringing to bear on the government on the human-rights issue. We communicate our concerns here to draw attention to the plight of mobile pastoralists in the Far North of Cameroon who have had their children kidnapped by criminal gangs, but also to condemn the use of extrajudicial violence by the security forces in Cameroon. We have worked with and through local organizations in the field to inform the authorities about insecurity problems and extrajudicial violence. However, it may be that bringing international public pressure on the Cameroonian government and its international partners is a more effective way of protecting the human rights of all in Cameroon. ●