

# Subsistence and Change

Lessons of Agropastoralism  
in Somalia

Garth Massey

Westview Special Studies in  
Social, Political, and Economic Development



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Westview Press / Boulder and London

*Westview Special Studies in Social, Political, and Economic Development*

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This Westview softcover edition is printed on acid-free paper and bound in softcovers that carry the highest rating of the National Association of State Textbook Administrators, in consultation with the Association of American Publishers and the Book Manufacturers' Institute.

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Copyright © 1987 by Westview Press, Inc.

Published in 1987 in the United States of America by Westview Press, Inc.; Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher; 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Massey, Garth.

Subsistence and change.

(Westview special studies in social, political and economic development)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Rahanweyn (African people)—Economic conditions.  
2. Agriculture—Somalia. 3. Cattle—Somalia. 4. Rural development—Somalia. 5. Subsistence economy—Somalia.  
6. Somalia—Economic conditions. I. Title. II. Series.  
DT402.4.R35M37 1987 3381.1'096773 87-6237  
ISBN 0-8133-7294-1

Composition for this book was created by conversion of the author's word-processor disks. This book was produced without formal editing by the publisher.

Printed and bound in the United States of America



The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

## Preface and Acknowledgments

This study is the consequence of several years of research that began as part of an applied project to provide agricultural assistance and improve the infrastructure in Somalia's Bay Region. Project documents called for the performance of a socioeconomic baseline study prior to the initiation of the integrated development scheme. Findings of the study were intended to guide the work of Somalis from various national ministries responsible for resources and government services, as well as expatriate agronomists, livestock experts, plant pathologists and others involved with development efforts in the region. The research was actually contracted for and begun when the project was in its third year.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps fortunately, project activities were slow to get started, and by the time the research was completed little had been accomplished within the various project components that conflicted with the findings of the study or created obstacles to the implementation of study recommendations. It remains the author's hope that with the publication of the present volume, the work on which it is based will have a beneficial effect on decisions to be made with regard to development efforts in the Bay Region's future.

The present examination, however, goes beyond a single development project in one remote part of the world. It addresses the conditions and prospects for positive change in agropastoral societies. Agropastoralism is, for many of the world's people, a means to attain a condition of life that provides favorable odds against what would otherwise be overwhelming environmental uncertainty and material scarcity. A social formation that embraces agropastoralism often exhibits a commitment to subsistence production, and it is this—the agropastoral subsistence-based society—which is the focus of the present study.

The self-assurance that powerful nations seemed to display a quarter-century ago, the assumed capacity to effect predictable results in poor and isolated societies, has been badly shaken by a myriad of failed efforts and the lack of enthusiasm many new nations now have for the countries seeking to direct that change. At least as perplexing has been the social disorder accompanying drought that plagued much of Sub-Saharan Africa in the first half of the 1980s. When not attributable to

misguided schemes that intentionally or inadvertently increased livestock numbers or sought to convert subsistence agriculture to cash cropping, the impotence of the world's expertise to recommend doing more than waiting for the rains gave reason for serious self-doubt among development workers throughout much of the world. This has created the opportunity (and need) to reassess approaches and paradigms of the past. It is in this spirit that the present discussion raises questions about the degree of anticipated change and the usual course of events that have characterized previous approaches to subsistence economies.

The interriverine area of Somalia provides an excellent test case for the thesis advanced here: Effective change with long-term benefits for the country is best accomplished when the people most directly affected have maximum control over the course of that change. In a more detailed form in Chapter One this is referred to as peasant-centered development.

Agropastoralism as practiced by the Rahanweyn is an inventive and fragile mode of production that has not been adequately appreciated for its ability to find solutions to difficulties faced by many societies. While some recent research indicates it may be inappropriate to assume that other societies—nomadic and agrarian—would benefit by the adoption of agropastoral practices, the mixture of subsistence techniques found in the interriverine area exhibits an adaptive capacity that could be relevant to some societies undergoing struggle with environmental and socio-political transformation.

Despite decades of development-related activity in the interriverine area, even as late as 1981 donor groups seemed unaware that the Rahanweyn overwhelmingly display a social formation built upon and supporting agropastoralism.<sup>2</sup> Dividing the population into pastoralists/nomads, farmers, and a third group engaged in mixed production seemed to provide a conceptual clarity that facilitated the organization of activities targeted for distinct groups of people. Livestock specialists could have their bailiwick, agronomists theirs. The complexity that actually distinguishes agropastoralism—and makes it a remarkable mode of production—was not addressed or appreciated. Today that is not possible. It may, as well, become increasingly difficult in other societies where agropastoralism is found but that heretofore have been perceived or approached as if the people were divided between cultivators and pastoralists, a few managing to be both.

Initiated by the conduct of the socioeconomic baseline study of the Bay Region, and drawing from the results of that research,<sup>3</sup> this analysis of Rahanweyn society was made possible by the efforts of many fine individuals who refused to allow the baseline study to be no more

than the fulfillment of a routine obligation now expected of all development projects. Knowing how valuable knowledge of the interriv-  
erine area would be to the success of development efforts there, John M. Halpen, former Project Technical Manager of the Bay Region Agricultural Development Project, gave early and sustained support to the conceptualization and coverage of the project. It was especially Jack's respect for the people of the interriv-  
erine area that provided the impetus for a research approach which sought out the base of local knowledge among the people themselves. Mohamed Warsame Duale, Project General Manager, showed foresight and forbearance to a degree unusual for someone with such great responsibilities and so little personal benefit to be gained from trusting in the research project.

As part of the first international development project contracted by the University of Wyoming in nearly two decades, the socioeconomic baseline study enlisted the help and ingenuity of persons from throughout the campus. At the top of the list is Joan Krueger Wadlow, former Dean of Arts and Sciences and now Provost at the University of Oklahoma, who encouraged her faculty to seize the opportunity and gave steady support to their efforts. Without the tenacity of Harold Tuma, former Dean of Agriculture at the University of Wyoming, in the initial phase of the project, and the gentle but decisive influence of Thomas Dunn, Dean of Graduate Studies at the University of Wyoming, the study might never have been completed. In Somalia Bernie Kolp, University of Wyoming Team Leader and Director of Plant Science, facilitated the work and taught us many lessons in composure.

The research team was originally composed of three husband-wife couples: Nancy Hawk Merryman and James L. Merryman, Anthony P. Glascock and Judith S. Glascock, and Sheila M. Nyhus and myself. The project was later joined by a fourth couple, Roy H. Behnke, Jr., and Carol Kerven. The Merrymans' years of experience working among Somalis in Garissa District, Kenya, and their extraordinary skill as field researchers provided direction to the research in countless invaluable ways. The impact of Roy Behnke's understanding of livestock production systems was also critical to this study. As anyone who has worked on a fieldwork team-project knows, in the course of time it becomes difficult if not impossible to attribute particular ideas, insights and contributions to the individual who made them. Where it has been possible to do this, credit for a unique contribution has been given. In most cases, however, it must be assumed that the information on which this study is based bears the mark of many people. Responsibility for errors and misinterpretations, of course, rests entirely with the author.

Working long days with minimal training and compensation and, for most, in an unfamiliar Afsomali dialect (Afmay-may<sup>4</sup>) put extraordinary

demands on the Somali members of the research team. As well, traveling over rugged terrain day in and day out, and camping for months with only short breaks to rest and recuperate, proved to be a difficult test, but one they passed easily and with good humor. A special place in the memories of everyone on the research team will always be filled by "the guys": Ahmed Mohamed Ali, Omar Moalim Ahmed Mohamed, Zeinab Mohamed Hassan, Abdi Mohamed Hassan, Basra Hussein Ishmail, Cabdulaahi Hassan Shebey, Abdulcadir Sheik Mohamed Gulaid, Ahmed Sheik Ishmail Abdi and Zara Omar Mohamed, as well as the informal member of the team, Omar "Chicago" Mohamed Hassan.<sup>5</sup>

A debt is owed my colleagues in the Department of Sociology at the University of Wyoming who, by filling in during my absences and giving support and advice at critical junctures, allowed and encouraged me to maintain a commitment to the work. In addition, Audie Blevins, Professor of Sociology at the University of Wyoming, provided the demographic analysis presented in Chapter Two. Several students and former students helped out in various phases of the research, including Charlotte Dunham, Douglas Mau, Jeffrey Walsh and Dan Stuhlsatz. Support from the University of Wyoming's College of Arts and Sciences, through a Faculty Development Award during the summer of 1985, made possible much of the quantitative data analysis presented here. Perhaps the most stabilizing force and productive contributor to the project that began in 1982 and concludes with this study has been Carolyn Foster, Senior Administrative Secretary of the Department of Sociology. Thanks go to her and Brenda Johnson who, with patience and more patience, prepared the manuscript and in countless other ways guided this work to completion.

Arthur Stinchcombe wrote in his preface to *Constructing Social Theories* that he "would not have married the Griselda that most authors evidently marry." Nor did I, though it is difficult to imagine how Sheila Nyhus, my wife, colleague and friend, could have been more supportive and vital to the effort that went into this book.

Garth Massey

## Notes

1. The research was conducted under USAID/Somalia Project Number 649-0113.
2. The 1975 National Census of Somalia reported, quite erroneously, that a third of the Bay Region's population was nomadic, 47 percent was settled agriculturalists, and the remainder was involved in other activities (in SDR 1983). Hogan et al. (1981) divided the population into three groups and generally accepted the census figures. Putman (1982:9) reports Ministry of

Local Government figures for 1981 that (incorrectly) put the total population of the Bay Region at three-quarters of a million, of which, ". . . 70 percent are agriculturalists, 28 percent are nomadic livestock owners and 2 percent are town settlers." Schmidt (1981:15), using revised national census figures which reduced the Bay Region's population to an estimated 343,415 people, accepted the view that the region, "is divided into three main settlement categories: i) largely non-agricultural wage-earners (20%); ii) settled mixed farmers, many of whom are also transhumant for at least one to two months during each dry season (47%); and iii) pure nomads, most of whom are reported to reside within the Region but range widely through it (33%)."

3. Information was gathered between June 1983 and June 1984 by means of eighty-three village meetings with assembled adults, a survey administered to a stratified disproportionate random cluster sample of 815 household heads or other adult household member, a survey administered to a purposive sample of 147 adult women, fifty-six interviews with herders at water points, as well as observations and informal discussions (see University of Wyoming 1984,I:Chapter One).

4. The Afmay-may dialect spoken in the interriverine area is said to compare to Afsomali (known as *afmaxaatiri*—'What did you say?'—in the interriverine area) spoken throughout most of the country 'as Spanish compares to Italian'. In the present account Afmay-may terms are used when necessary to impart a meaning not accurately conveyed with an English term. Because Afmay-may is as yet an unwritten language, all spellings are based on the consensus of Afmay-may speakers associated with the research project. In some cases terms used are the same as Afsomali and Arabic terms, but with spellings reflecting the pronunciation of the Rahanweyn. Occasionally referred to as the May-may people because of their language, the author has avoided using the term in favor of the clan-family designation, Rahanweyn.

5. Thanks to the encouragement of Jacques Kozub of the World Bank, five of 'the guys' came to the University of Wyoming in 1984-85 for a one-year program in applied social research. The program, which they successfully completed, was offered by the Department of Sociology and supported by USAID/Somalia as part of the agreement between the University of Wyoming and the Government of Somalia for the conduct of the Bay Region Agricultural Development Project.



# Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i> .....	xi
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i> .....	xiii
1 SUBSISTENCE-BASED AGROPASTORALISM IN THE ERA OF DEVELOPMENT .....	1
The Concept of Subsistence-Based Agropastoralism .....	1
Subsistence and Change .....	10
A Study of Subsistence-Based Agropastoralism .....	24
Notes .....	27
2 SOCIETY AND ECONOMY AMONG THE RAHANWEYN....	30
The Ecological and Historical Conditions of the Interriverine Area .....	30
Household and Village .....	43
The Division and Sharing of Labor .....	65
Institutional Structures and Agropastoral Subsistence .....	74
Notes .....	76
3 THE PROCESS OF A SUBSISTENCE-BASED AGROPASTORALISM .....	81
"Even Smutty Grain Will Get You Sweet Camel's Milk" .....	81
Agropastoral Modes of Production: Three Case Studies .....	83
Similarity and Diversity in the Conditions for Agropastoralism .....	89
Agropastoral Relations of Production .....	109
Priorities in Subsistence-Based Agropastoral Production .....	123
Notes .....	126
4 SOCIAL CHANGE IN AN AGROPASTORAL SOCIETY.....	129
Forces of Change in Southcentral Somalia .....	129
Water and Change in the Interriverine Area .....	137

Engagement in Commercial Activities: A Comparison of Three Situations .....	163
A Note on Social Change and Stratification .....	179
Notes .....	191
 5 AVOIDING A "FALSE START" IN SOUTHCENTRAL SOMALIA.....	 194
Agropastoral Change .....	194
The Need for Peasant-Centered Development .....	209
Notes .....	213
 <i>Glossary</i> .....	 215
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	226
<i>Index</i> .....	234

# Figures and Tables

## *Figures*

2.1	Map of the Bay Region and Somalia .....	31
2.2	Map of Geomorphic Areas of the Bay Region.....	32
2.3	Map of Common Names of Areas of the Bay Region .....	36
2.4	One-Year Seasonal Calendar of the Rahanweyn .....	42
5.1	Hypothetical Sequence of Effects from Increased Agricultural Productivity in a Subsistence- Based Economy.....	201
5.2	Some Potential Consequences of Increasing Livestock Productivity in the Interriverine Area of Somalia.....	203

## *Tables*

2.1	Estimated Population of Rural Bay Region by Ecological Zone.....	44
2.2	Estimated Population per Village and Agricultural Zone by Subdistrict of the Bay Region.....	45
2.3	Population Distribution and Sex Ratio by Ten-Year Age Intervals of Sampled Population, Bay Region, Somalia....	46
2.4	Number of Children and Average Number of Children for Women Ever Married, Currently and Deceased, by Five-Year Intervals.....	48
2.5	Composition of Rural Households, Bay Region, Somalia ....	50
3.1	Conditions Contributing to Four Production Strategies Among the Agropastoral Rahanweyn .....	124
4.1	Hypothesized Features of the Economic System of Villages in Five Situations Varying by the Availability of Water, Vegetation for Livestock and Cultivable Fields.....	135
4.2	Household Composition and Holdings of Sampled Households in Ismaciil, a Village with an Annual Shortage of Water, Adequate Vegetation for Livestock and Minimal Cultivable Soil .....	140

4.3	Household Composition and Holdings in Gel-Gel, a Village with an Annual Shortage of Water, Adequate Vegetation for Livestock and Unused Cultivable Soil .....	145
4.4	Household Composition and Holdings in Lo'ley, a Village with Adequate Water, Abundant Vegetation and Minimal Cultivable Soil .....	151
4.5	Household Composition and Holdings of Sampled Households in Beerayale, a Village with Adequate Farmland, Year-Round Water and Minimal Grazing Land .....	156
4.6	Household Composition and Holdings in Buulo Cadeey, a Village with Adequate Water, Abundant Vegetation and Adequate Farmland .....	161
4.7	Distribution of Farmland by Size of Farm, Bay Region of Somalia .....	183
4.8	Distribution of Cattle by Size of Herd, Bay Region of Somalia .....	184
4.9	Distribution of Camels by Size of Herd, Bay Region of Somalia .....	185
4.10	Distribution of Goats and Sheep by Size of Herds of Both Species Combined, Bay Region of Somalia .....	186
4.11	Proportion of Standardized Value of Holdings of Farmland, Cattle, Camels, Goats and Sheep, and All Combined by Household Deciles, Bay Region of Somalia .....	187
4.12	Percent of Households with Good Access to Water and Marketing Opportunities, and Mean Household Size, by Property-Holding Deciles .....	188

## Subsistence-Based Agropastoralism in the Era of Development

### **The Concept of Subsistence-Based Agropastoralism**

In the classification of societies agropastoralists, along with horticulturalists who apply shifting cultivation techniques (swidden or slash and burn) and nomads who practice animal husbandry, are usually situated between societies of hunters and gatherers and those engaged in sedentary subsistence agriculture.<sup>1</sup> In each of these societies there is an absence or very minimal amount of marketing, the principal unit of production and consumption is the household or family and—most importantly for the outside observer—there has been relatively little response to entreaties from or penetration by societies whose economies are keyed to the generation of surplus production.

In the Wallersteinian world system perspective, one would locate subsistence-based societies 'beyond the periphery', often even beyond the pale of the primitive accumulation of capital. This is the implication of Daniel Thorner's (Thorner 1969:96) distinction between subsistence economies and 'peasant economies', the latter including both peasants who produce mainly for household consumption and the towns where trade goes on and whose, "townspeople must be fed. . . . When you have a case of a *pure* subsistence economy, then you may be sure that it is not a peasant economy, as here defined. There may be such pure cases on the upper Amazon or deep in the interior of New Guinea. . . ." As he implies, societies engaged in purely subsistence production are becoming increasingly rare in the world today, are often quite isolated and are unexceptionally poor. They are areas for the most part unincorporated into the world capitalist system (con. Stuckey and Fay 1981), though they have not been overlooked by states that may have, for the present, only a strategic geopolitical interest in them. Nor can they be expected to remain for long immune from the lure of commercial entanglements.

*Subsistence as Production for Need*

The notion of subsistence admits to some confusion, but a general consensus seems to have been reached in the past two decades. While criteria for designating 'subsistence' vary, most tend to converge, as Wharton (1969b:18) demonstrates, leaving little disagreement about which societies are and are not properly considered subsistence societies.

The favored criterion for subsistence has to do with consumption. "When the purpose is merely to *measure* the degree of subsistence the proportion of output going to the household—the *home consumption ratio* alone should suffice" (Krishna 1969:186). Exactly what the ratio between home consumption and sales must be for a society to be considered a subsistence or 'typical subsistence' society is not always agreed upon. Shaner et al. (1982:216) are comfortable with the criterion of farmers, "producing primarily for their needs," while Mosher (1969:7) prefers the requirement that more than 50 percent of all household production be consumed by the household. Wharton (1969b:15) tends to concur in suggesting that, ". . . the subsistence farmer is best described as one who consumes a majority of his production. The ratio of production sold to total production can be used to determine his degree of subsistence orientation," thus allowing for the exclusion of farmers who sell most of their production (including non-edible products) but remain self-sufficient in all or most of their needs.

Still, if producers sell only in order to meet their 'basic needs' and nothing more, if their economic activity is oriented for this, and not for accumulation through commercial transactions involving the market, it is probably accurate to consider them subsistence producers. Unfortunately, 'basic needs' is an even more vague and controversial concept than subsistence (cf. Galtung et al. 1980:43–47; Lee 1959).

Many researchers have sought to locate subsistence within the framework of nutritional requirements (e.g. Clark and Haswell 1964; Harris 1982). This and approaches that concentrate on energy expenditure in food production (e.g. Harris 1974, 1977) have been criticized as overlooking the, "appropriation of non-edible resources and edible and non-edible resources for exchange. Such activities often have a very significant ecological consequences . . . in an analysis of the ecology of sustenance" (Ellen 1982:174). That is, a society is more than the process of food production and the expenditure of energy to accomplish this alone. While nutritional approaches such as Clark and Haswell's recognize a diversity of activities, it remains highly conjectural just how much production is actually needed to provide for the maintenance of a society as complex and poorly understood as most

that are classified as subsistence societies. To some degree, the term 'subsistence' implies a bare minimum for meeting basic nutritional needs, yet few social scientists equate subsistence with bare survival. Unfortunately, the term itself invites confusion by directing attention to basic needs rather than the features of a social system, including production, consumption, distribution and exchange, that display characteristics distinctly different from those of a market or commercially-oriented society. It is in regard to these characteristics that the notion of a subsistence-based society makes the most sense.

In few if any societies do people actually live at the edge of the 'survival threshold'. Indeed, households and individuals may find themselves above or below this level in different parts of the year. Some families may chronically be below it to a point where their health and capacity for social reproduction are impaired, but they may continue for some time to engage in a normal round of activities. In many other cases the people engage in subsistence production and live well above what is strictly necessary for survival. A subsistence economy provides their 'life support system', but this does not mean their life hangs in the balance year in and year out. Rather, they produce directly for their needs, exchanging or selling little outside their village or extended family, and then only to acquire what they consider necessities. They are largely self-contained and attain self-sufficiency outside the scope of market relations and monetization because their "goal is for family production rather than commercial sale" (Wharton 1969b:14).

### *Subsistence Versus Commercial Systems*

The household in a subsistence-based society usually provides most of the labor for its own holdings, only occasionally and usually informally acquiring help from others (Cerneja 1981:126). It is because the household serves many purposes in addition to its economic functions and, in contrast to the firm, is guided by principles and values which may run counter to rational economic organization that many observers perceive the household to be an obstacle to increased productivity.

Not only familial values, but a host of other sociocultural influences found in the subsistence-based social formation seem, to some observers, to contradict practices embodying economic rationality.

For example, the particular crops chosen . . . and the subsequent distribution of the product is made along societally or culturally determined lines rather than on purely economic ones. . . . [T]hose farmers with less external contact or who have a high 'localite' focus constitute the peasant or subsistence farmer. . . . [They have] stronger interpersonal relations than modern or commercial farmers. This criterion also tends

to distinguish those persons who preferred 'familism' from those who are more individualistic in outlook. (Wharton 1969b:16)

Though adopting a perspective that stresses the means-end rationality of pastoralists, Haaland doubts their capacity to foresee all consequences of their actions, suggesting something akin to what Max Weber has called instrumental versus substantive rationality.

Nor do I maintain as anthropologists frequently do that since their culture has evolved in a very long process of adaptation to the natural environment pastoralists have a complete understanding of the effects of their activities on that environment. . . . Such a process of selection does not however mean that the culturally shared ideas of a group at a specific historical time gives an adequate basis for action under the circumstances facing the group at that time. (Haaland 1977:190)

Hyden (1981) has shown in his analysis of the 'economy of affinity' in Tanzania that there need be no considerable conflict between economic rationality per se and various sociocultural factors, such as 'familism'. What is really at issue in distinguishing the subsistence-based economy is not an absence of economic rationality but an absence of involvement in and responsiveness to market forces. Rada and Neville Dyson-Hudson's analysis of subsistence herding among the Karimojong makes this point well:

The absence of market rationality in traditional herding systems is beyond dispute. . . . Too often, however, the absence of market rationality in traditional herding systems is taken to be the absence of rationality of any kind. Tribal herders are given no credit for intent and design in their livestock operations. Quite commonly innate cultural backwardness or mere ecological ignorance is invoked to explain the nature (and remarkable persistence) of traditional herding systems. . . . In the ecological system actually presented by the subsistence herding of the Karimojong it is hard to see how their rationality can be improved on. The same conclusions probably hold for the other traditional herding systems found throughout Africa. (Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson 1969:76,89)

The concept of subsistence in studies of pastoral societies is usually set opposite commercially-oriented economic activities. In Ingold's incomparable study of reindeer management, his three-fold classification of hunters, herders and ranchers seeks to improve on this dichotomy, favoring instead a distinction between, "two spirals of accumulation, one distinctively pastoral and based on the natural reproduction of herds, the other distinctly capitalist and based on the exchange of



products, through the medium of money, for factors of production" (Ingold 1980:3). In his rejection of the notion of market-oriented pastoralism, however, Ingold does not actually disagree with others who employ the dichotomy he seeks to reject. One of these is John Galaty who accepts the distinction between commercial and subsistence economies by focusing on differing intentions of the herders and strategies of herd management. Drawing on the work of several scholars, he concludes that, "Pastoralism is subsistence strategy" (Galaty 1981:7). The pastoralist is producing for need, with little or no response to the market. The market for the pastoralist is not a set of forces but a place where the pastoralist obtains those things that cannot be produced by the herd.

This makes a market subsistence possible without the commercialization of the livestock sector. The obverse of production *for* the market is consumption of goods acquired *from* the market. One motivating force for the sale of livestock . . . is the need to acquire the means for purchase of necessary commodities including subsistence. . . . While there are various degrees of dependency upon the market for subsistence, some involvement in market consumption would appear to be ubiquitous in pastoral societies today. . . . For each subsistence-oriented sector of a pastoral society, the market involvement . . . is narrowed to a few essential commodities. (Galaty 1981:8,9)

To this Cole's (1981:131) analysis of the Bedouin lends concurrence: "[H]erding does not now and probably never has provided nomadics with enough return for their basic subsistence." While the market—as a place to procure the things that cannot be produced from livestock—has its role in the lives of pastoralists, the forces of the market play a negligible or nonexistent role in affecting the production strategy of pastoralists and subsistence agriculturalists alike.

Analytically, a subsistence economy is not synonymous with non-monetized relations of production. In actual fact, however, the two usually go together. This is implied strongly in Myint's observation on the passing of subsistence-based societies, and the corresponding (though uneven) growth of monetization.

[T]he peasant economies of the underdeveloped countries are at different stages of transition from the 'subsistence' to the 'money' economy, and the scope and intensity of 'monetization' vary considerably. . . . [E]ven with the full spread of the exchange economy in the markets of producers, there may be considerable variations in the spread of the money economy to the markets for factors of production. (Myint 1969:99)