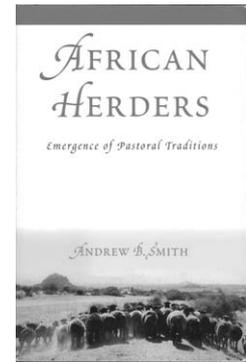

BOOK REVIEW



African Herders: Emergence of Pastoral Traditions. By Andrew B. Smith. Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, 2005, 272 pp., ISBN 0-7591-0748-3 (Paperback), ISBN 0-7591-0747-5 (Cloth). Price US\$ 34.95 (Paperback), US\$ 79.95 (Cloth).

A decade, or slightly more, after his first book devoted to African pastoralism (SMITH A.B. 1992, *Pastoralism in Africa: origins and development ecology*. Hurst, London), Andrew Smith collected and organized a new work entirely devoted to this crucial subject.

Looking at the recent literature, we are well aware of a renewed interest in the historical background of pastoral societies in the African continent, as well as cultural trajectories and social problems – all of them based on ‘archaeological’ data, but with an eye on ethno-archaeological comparisons, animal diseases, rock art studies, and so on (*e.g.*, MARSHALL & HILDEBRAND 2000; GIFFORD-GONZALEZ 2000; HOLL 2004). The work by Andrew Smith is different.

Consisting of 8 chapters, the book opens with an introduction to African herders (Chapter 1), followed by a series of discussions related to the material culture of nomads (Chapter 2); the problem of domestication is analyzed for both Old World (*i.e.*, Near East) and North Africa (Chapters 3 and 4); ethnographic and ethno-archaeological problems are discussed in the chapter devoted to modern Saharan herders (Chapter 5); while the spread of domestic animals across Africa is central to Chapter 6; the position of cattle within African pastoral societies, and particularly in their ritual is seen in Chapter 7; finally, Chapter 8 offers a vision of the future(s) of African herders.

The aim of Andrew Smith (: xviii) is ‘to offer an up-to-date picture of current knowledge, as well as a few ideas that might bridge the gaps’, but I confess

that I liked much more the ‘ideas to bridge the gaps’, rather than the updated state of the art on African pastoralism. This is simply because it is nearly impossible to summarize in a single book such an articulated palimpsest – and Andrew Smith is well aware of that, of course. On the other hand, the reader will have an exciting view on the history and current situation of the studies on pastoral societies.

Chapter 1 introduces the issue of herding societies, approaching many crucial problems in different (but possibly too brief) paragraphs. These vary from *Herding Societies*, to *African Pastoralism*, *Pasture Territories and Resources*, *Raiding among African Pastoralists*, *Cattle Identification*, *Gender in African Pastoralist Societies*, *Pastoralist Children*, *Hunters and Herders or the Domestication of People*, *Domestication of Animals: How Did It Happen?*, *Domestication of Animals: Why Did It Happen?*.

Indeed, this long series of considerations well shows the intellectual sensibility of the author, who approaches issues that are often underestimated, or even neglected in the literature. At the same time, the reader, to better surf the book, would have seen as useful (and probably necessary) a list of contents including these paragraphs as well, and not only the main title(s) of the chapters. This holds true also in the other chapters of the book, and thus will not be repeated again.

In this first chapter, Andrew Smith starts by isolating the basic needs of these groups: water and pas-

ture. There is, of course, a great variation in nomadic societies: in Africa, annual rainfall forces people and their animals to move constantly, together with all their material culture (: 5). It is clear, already from this statement, how mobility and invisibility are considered by Smith essential traits in the definition of these herding societies.

The paragraph *African Pastoralism* summarizes a series of concepts that are essential to a correct definition (and understanding) of this social organization: nomadism, pastoralism, transhumance. It is surprising to note that the author quotes the important and useful monograph by R. CRIBB (1991), but never quotes KHAZANOV's book (1984), where many of these concepts have been theorized through a world perspective for the first time. In the following paragraph, Smith better defines types of movements, referring to the important work done in the 1950s by STENNING (1957). Also in this case, it appears essential to use appropriate terminologies (transhumance, migratory drift, migration) to adequately understand archaeological contexts. Ways of access to land (and then pasture) and water are briefly examined, with a stress on the importance of boundaries between and among groups.

Of great interest, and useful to many scholars, is the paragraph on *Cattle Identification*, as well as the paragraphs on gender and age differentiation. They open the view on important, further implications. Andrew Smith is able to elegantly surf the ethnographic literature introducing many aspects of outstanding relevance: take for example the concept of coat colour within young generations. When reading this paragraph we acknowledge the importance given, by apprentices, to colour in identifying and managing the herds; how should we deal with this kind of information when turning back to rock art, and evaluating colour depictions of cows?

In the discussion of gender divisions and age classes, I would like to underline Smith's useful comments on the position of children in the organization of labour: at the age of 10 (: 11), and often even earlier, they *autonomously* can take care of the herd. It is really surprising to notice how this precious information coming from ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological analysis does not affect (yet) other related disciplines. As an example, I wonder if our age classes based on skeletal studies take into consideration this ethnographic background when speaking of young, juvenile or adult individuals...

Chapter 1 ends with key issues, such as domestication of people and animals, largely inspired by the cru-

cial works by Tim Ingold. Concepts such as control, taming, intentional breeding are always intricate. The problem, as always, is to separate the process from the outcome: according to Smith (: 25), a '*simple (?) definition for archaeological purposes is an intentional manipulation of genetic material of select plant and animal species*' (question mark added). This definition would apply, as the author says, to all contexts where '*humans were choosing the traits that would benefit them*'. Again, the risk of circularity is strong; furthermore, the notion of intentionality is particularly difficult to be archaeologically assessed.

I focused my attention on this first chapter, as it offers an inspiring variety of theoretical and methodological ideas. It also provides a sharp and useful background of archaeological questions.

Chapter 2 considers the material culture of pastoral societies, which '*virtually by definition needs to be light and portable*' (: 31). Important works, as Nicolaisen's research among the Tuaregs and Cribb's in the Near East, are used to highlight the basic requirements of nomad pastoralists. A common feature is represented by the necessity to dismount and move tents and related facilities in order to be transported to the next camp. In this regard, fine and particularly useful (especially for teaching purposes) are the photographs showing the different operations. The author examines the presence of pottery within these societies, and the various ways of procurement. Caches of other, heavier items – such as the lithic equipment for grinding cereals, but also ochre and other minerals – are ethnographically attested, for example among the Himba of northern Namibia.

The information given in *The Archaeology of Domestication* is stimulating, particularly in relation to the timing of size changes in wild populations: according to evidence quoted by Andrew Smith (: 50), this can occur within F3 generation, so that the herders can *directly* observe the process. The following paragraph, *The Archaeology of Animal Husbandry*, covers the issue of herding strategies, organization of herds, seasonal variations and so on.

Chapters 3 and 4 are in a way the 'archaeological' core of the book, which review a wide literature and highlight basic issues such as timing, loci, and effects of domestication in both Old World and Northern Africa. The focus on the Levant, Zagros, Negev and Sinai, where some domestication processes occurred first in the history of humankind, is of great utility. Some