



Herders and Their Amazing Economic Impact

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Recently here in Nigeria, a Christian Fulani herder was sitting with a Christian farmer and they were enjoying fellowship together. Their conversation turned to the issue of problems between farmers and herders and the fact that the herders had been sent away from the farmers' area due to increased fear of attack. The herder asked the farmer what would they now do for meat at Christmas time? "I never thought about that," replied the farmer. "But it's true! We usually eat a lot of meat at our festivals, but if the herders and their cows are not around, where will we get it from?"

This disconnect is a common phenomenon. Herders are often spoken of disparagingly and sent away from communities, but the enormous contribution that they and their cows make to the economy and to so many aspects of day-to-day life is not often recognized. This article is an attempt to highlight this important economic contribution that herders make to life here in Nigeria. We pray that this example would be an encouragement to pastoral nomads globally and help them to value their important and significant work. We also pray that this article would inspire settled people worldwide to value, appreciate, and respect the work that herders do.

Food for Every Day and for Special Occasions

Herders and their cows produce so many things that people here in Nigeria love to consume, particularly **meat** and **yogurt** (*nono*). In addition, most vegetable stalls have a bowl of **roasted cow skin** (*pomo*) for sale, and many people also enjoy **butter** (*man shanu*) and **cheese** (*awara*). Due to issues of preservation, milk is not often sold on the streets in the same way as yogurt (*nono*) but commercial companies go to the herders' camps to collect **milk** in bulk to sell in supermarkets as milk and sweetened yogurt. As evening falls, the aroma of **skewered beef** (*suya*) cooking over the fire fills the air. But this is not the only popular meat snack. There is also **jerky** (*kilishi*), **BBQ steak** (*balangu*), **dried meat snacks** (*dambun nama*), and **hot soup with organ meat** (*pepper soup*). These popular food products are sold on a daily basis in markets, supermarkets, and restaurants all over Nigeria.

When there is a festival or a special occasion, the herders' cows are even more in demand. This includes New Year, Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter, Muslim *Sallah* festivals, as well as weddings, parties, and visits of dignitaries such as governors or chiefs, etc. All these occasions see numerous cows slaughtered and much beef consumed as people celebrate and feast together.

Herders Supporting the Agricultural and Food Systems

As well as providing a lot of food that is consumed daily, herders and their cows provide vital products which sustain other aspects of the food industry. The traditional method of fertilizing farmland involves cows grazing crop residue after harvest with the result that their **manure** and **urine** enriches the soil, enabling the next year's crops to grow well, crops such as grains, tubers, or vegetables, etc. **Bones** from cows are burned and ground to make feed for chickens and dogs to provide them with much-needed calcium for growth and, in the case of laying chickens, to produce eggs. Cow **blood** is used to make many varieties of salt licks for goats and sheep.

This means that most food products that we consume are available to us directly or indirectly because of the valuable work of herders, without whom the food supply chain would collapse.

Cultural Products

Every tribe in Nigeria has their important traditions and when we think about it, it is surprising how many use products from herders and their cows. The most commonly used is the cow's **tail** which is often used as a status symbol for chiefs or as a fly swat held in the hand when traditional clothing is worn.

The **leather (skin)** from cows is used to make leather for decorative cushions and wall hangings, as well as handbags, belts, shoes, hats, machete sheaths, drums, etc. Cow **horns** are commonly used for decoration or musical instruments, e.g., flutes. One of the most common musical instruments to be heard in churches on Sundays is the xylophone. The sound is amplified underneath by many cow horns. Sadly, the loud services of many churches can often be heard criticizing herders rather than reaching out to them in love—a sharp contrast with the songs of worship accompanied by the xylophone that the herders have provided cow horns for.

Horticulture

Another overlooked contribution that herders make to our society relates to horticulture. People in Nigeria

love to go to beautiful places with trees and flowers to take photographs for special events such as birthdays, weddings, etc. Many horticulturalists who grow decorative plants buy large amounts of cow manure from herders to fertilize the flowers, bushes, and trees that we appreciate so much. Plus, horticulturalists use manure to grow plants to sell so are able to make money in part due to the manure from the herders' cows.

Providing Employment

Herders provide a lot of employment opportunities for people. Young men from many tribes walk with the cows to take care of them, earning their salary of a cow every year. Then there are employment opportunities for the many people who sell the meat products, such as butchers, roasted cow skin (*pomo*) sellers, and those who cook skewered beef (*suya*) and other meat products. On the commercial side, employment is created for those who collect milk for commercial re-sale or bones for commercial animal feeds. Local crafts people who make leather products, cow-tail decorations, and musical instruments rely on herders to provide the products needed for their livelihood. Then there are the truck drivers who earn their living transporting cows, providing employment for those who make, sell, and repair trucks.

Taxes

The government collects many taxes from people involved in industries related to herding. For example, every butcher that sells meat or every vegetable seller who also sells roasted cow skin (*pomo*) has to pay N50 (\$0.06) per day in government tax for their stall, adding up to millions of Naira/thousands of dollars each year. On top of that, the government collects N1,500 (\$1.95) in tax for every cow that is slaughtered at an abattoir/slaughterhouse.

Herders Adding to the Economy by Buying from Others

As well as these many contributions to the economy through animal products, herders also use their money to add to the economy as there are many items that they need to purchase for their work. These items include rope to tether the cows and salt licks for nutrition.

Then they need to buy clothes to cope with the weather, such as rain boots, coats, and warm clothes. Herders also buy many medicines for their cows when they are sick, as well as preventative vaccinations.

Herders also contribute to the economy by buying food products such as grains, beans, and rice that they do not grow themselves.

Challenges for Herders

Banditry is a huge problem for herders as people come at night and steal cows to sell. This is an illegal but lucrative business, since cows are in very high demand for all these valuable products as described above. The sharp rise in conflict between farmers and herders has caused numerous problems for herders, too. Most herders are peace-loving citizens who just want to get on with their work and provide for their families. But there is a tendency to group all herders together along with those few who are causing violence. This means that it is very difficult for innocent herders to move around peacefully in society. They are being forced away from areas where traditionally they have lived in symbiotic relationships with local settled people. With the increase in chemical herbicides used for clearing larger and larger farms each year, there are fewer places for herders to go to graze their animals. Therefore, cows suffer from malnourishment, hunger, and sickness, which affects the production of these products that are so sought after in society.

The Way Forward

Here are some suggestions for practical steps that can be taken to acknowledge and respect the important contribution that herders make in our society and economy.

- Remember where our food comes from!
 - Prayers before a meal can thank God for the farmers who work hard to provide the vegetables and grains that we eat and for the herders who bring their animals to fertilize the soil so the crops can grow well.
 - When we eat meat, yogurt, milk, and cheese we can thank God for the herders who worked hard to provide these foods for us.

- When we speak to farmers and herders, thank them in person for their valuable work.

- When we worship God in church using xylophones with cow horns, we can pray for herders who provided them and thank God for their life and ask Him to bless them.
- When we meet herders on the road with their cows, we can drive slowly so as not to disturb the animals and we can greet the herders in a friendly way.
- When we have our cultural festivals with so many products from the herders, such as cow's tail, skin (leather) items, and drums, we can welcome herders and invite them to share the celebration with us since they have made so many of our cultural items possible.
- If we hear people speaking negatively about herders, we can speak words of peace. *A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger* (Prov. 15:1).
- Christian farmers and Christian herders can work together proactively to bring peace among their people. *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God* (Matt. 5:9).

Conclusion

As we have seen, herders provide huge amounts of resources for the agriculture and food industries as well as important artifacts for cultural celebrations and church worship. Also, no great festival of any kind is complete without lots of meat which comes from herders. Yet the majority of the settled population do not seem to make this connection between these products that they value so much and the work that herders do. If people could understand the contribution of herders to the economic growth of every country where they live, perhaps herders would be respected and valued, and maybe even peace would return. 