Review

Cyprian Ekwensi’s Burning Grass: A Socio-Economic Perspective of Fulani Herdsmen Culture in Nigeria

Prof. Amakievi, O.I. Gabriel*1 and Sarah Blackduke2

1,2Institute of Foundation Studies Rivers State University Nkpolu-orowurukwo, Port Harcourt

Accepted 20 November, 2018

Traditionally, the Fulani in Nigeria were predominantly herdsmen, and many of them are still fully engaged in this occupation. Burning grass, Cyprian Ekwensi’s fictional prose lucidly explains the simple lifestyle of the traditional Fulani people. This discourse examined the socio-economic aspects of the traditional Fulani herdsmen culture which can be gleaned from the text. This rich culture that makes it possible to understand and accommodate the Fulani herdsmen as they enjoy their nomadism largely depended on the book and other secondary sources related to the culture of the Fulani ethnic group. The authors discovered that there were forces of change that produced cultural change but did not result in acculturation within the period the text covered. Again, it is plausible that aridity of the Sahel and northern regions, advancing desertification and extreme weather conditions influenced the migratory movement of the herdsmen and their families in their search for luxuriant vegetation particularly towards the south of Nigeria. Herders versus farmers conflict in this period, early in the post-colonial era was not evident in the text yet there were forms and farmers spread in the savannah. However, the Fulani dealt with severe challenges such as cattle rustling, invasion by tax collectors, extreme weather conditions, threats from wild animals and conflicts with some other people. All these are still experienced in this twenty-first century. Understanding the culture of the Fulani ethnic group would facilitate an intergroup relationship that is devoid of major devastating conflicts, particularly those that involve the killing of human beings across the country in recent times. The introduction of nomadic education towards the last decades of the twentieth century challenged the Fulani herdsmen and has yielded positive results. Consequently, engaging in cattle ranching would probably douse the tension and devastating conflicts witnessed in this twenty-first century.

Key words: Herdsmen, Socio-economic perspective, culture, cattle rustling, sharro.

INTRODUCTION

Burning Grass by Cyprian Ekwensi vividly describes aspects of the social and economic lifestyle of Fulani Herdsmen in Nigeria. Being a nomadic group, moving from one camp or settlement to the other in search of lush pasture for their cattle exposed them to a lot of risks and conflicts with non-

*Corresponding author’s e-mail: Kzakiem@gmail.com.
appreciated for peaceful coexistence and development.

This paper explored nomadic Fulani culture as described by Cyprian Ekwensi in the text, “Burning Grass”. The social and economic activities in the book show some traditions that are dear and are transmitted from one generation to the other. Though they exhibited a simple lifestyle yet, it was a complete whole that satisfied their needs and daily sustained them until death. The traditional Fulani culture in the later decades of the twentieth century and this twenty-first century has been challenged by modernity in several ways. This paper also explored these challenges and noted that the traditional Fulani people play a significant role in the nation’s economy and are a distinct group amid other ethnic groups.

Traditional Economic Activities of the Fulani Cattle Rearing

“When they begin to burn the grass in Northern Nigeria, it is time for the herdsmen to be moving the cattle southwards to the banks of the great river” (p1).

This statement clearly shows the significant economic activity of the Fulani and around this primary occupation revolved other secondary economic events that were also basic to their existence. A cattle rearing among the nomadic Fulani is a trans-generational occupation. While the grass was burnt Mai Sunsaye and his sons, Rikku and Hodio were also with him, as their cattle grazed. This traditional occupation has been reasonably sustained despite the availability of training and access to other economic activities.

“He and his son lifted their eyes and took in the undulating hills, the rivulets and rocks. And it was lonely. But they were nomads, wandering cattlemen, and loneliness was their drink. So they rested under the dorowa tress not talking, the son leaning on a stick…” (p1)

Hodzi was down by the stream with some cattle that grazed. Jalla, Mai Sunsaye’s eldest son was also a herdsman according to their tradition. Jalla was popular and had one thousand cattle to the astonishment of his father, Mai Sunsaye having lost contact with him and other members of his family. Jalla also had a good rapport with Dr McMinter, a British veterinary doctor popularly known by the herdsmen as Bodejo. He injected their cattle against the rinderpest disease, and this helped Jalla to avert the loss of cattle. At Jalla’s camp, Mai Sunsaye inquired how many heads of cattle Jalla had:

“Jalla smiled ‘Two hundred’ Two hundred are here: But remember, one does not always want to pay the tax on all one has’ There are eight hundred in other places” (p21).

The Bodejo and his assistant, a forest officer called Chikeh visited Jalla’s camp and inquired if there was any recurrence of the rinderpest (Chikeh interpreted whatever the Bodejo said) and Jalla replied:

“My Lord since you gave them the injections, there has been no sign of it” He looked at his father “Kai… that disease! It nearly ate off all my cattle” (p22).

The Bodejo looked around the camp with Chikeh who made notes in a black book. Being satisfied, he smiled warmly at Jalla and told him to report any suspicious symptoms. Mai Sunsaye was wrapped in adoration of his son and remarked,

“Jalla you are the most important of my sons! “Just see how the Bodejo takes care of you and your cattle”.

The rinderpest disease was a significant challenge to the herdsmen since it could easily devastate their cattle, is an infectious viral disease of cattle, domestic buffalo, antelope, deer, giraffes, and others. Another serious challenge for cattle and humans was tse-tse fly induced “sleeping sickness’. In fact, according to Ekwensi (1962) led to the destruction of Old Chanka town in chapter six of the text. After that, a New Chanka town was built for those displaced from Old Chanka town. Sleeping sickness causes fever, chills, pain in the limbs and anaemia, and eventually affects the nervous system causing extreme lethargy and death. Fortunately, the Bodejo also cured persons who suffered from sleeping sickness.

The establishment of New Chanka was a challenge to the traditional lifestyle of the cow Fulani. Here, Mai Sunsaye’s second son Hodio resided and adopted a new economic activity that of sugar-making from sugar canes. Sunsaye shook
his head in disapproval after watching Hodio and his sugar production process and said:

“You have given up cattle, just for this? You whom I brought up with the cattle in your veins?” (p43)

Hodio unfortunately, had become a town dweller in his neatly thatched and well white-washed rectangular mud house. There were wells from which little boys and girls wound out bucketfuls of water rather than the guinea worm infested stream water that the herdsmen usually used. New Chanka was free of tse-tse flies and had a clinic where people were treated of sleeping sickness. Instead of baobab and other trees that attracted tse-tse flies, guava and orange trees were planted by the health workers.

The new economic activity required new technology, and Hodio coped with the challenges. At new Chanka, He learnt to make sugar and bought a mill that crushed sugarcane for its juice. A horse was harnessed to the mill to supply power (energy) that crushed the sugar cane. The sugarcane juice was boiled in a syrup and poured into moulds that were baked in an oven before they were used for food and drinks. It is plausible that Shehu’s attack on Hodio during which Fatimeh (Hodio’s wife) was forcefully taken away from him also left him stranded as there was no evidence that Hodio had any cattle left with him to continue as a herdsman. Being stranded and with the opportunity of acquiring a sugar mill on hire-purchase/instalment payment in New Chanka, Hodio made the best decision to engage in a new economic activity rather than the traditional cattle rearing economy. Every culture is challenged by forces/triggers that bring about change. The degree of change that occurs is the issue. For the Fulani in Nigeria, it is not yet acculturation. Hodio’s response to his father’s surprise about sugar production occupation was couched in these words:

“I was too happy with Fatimeh to worry about work. It was after that fight the man who owned her came after me with two ruffians. They overpowered me and snatched her away. Well, I heard of this village, New Chanka, so I came here with them. I heard about the sugarcane mill, and they helped me to buy this one. I pay back money every month from what I earn. Someday it will be my own, with nothing more to pay” (p43).

Hodio fled to New Chanka to avoid Shehu to whom Fatimeh (a Kanuri) was a slave. She ran away from his master Shehu to Mai Sunsaye who sent five cattle to Shehu through his servant so that Fatimeh could remain in Sunsaye’s household. Shehu’s servant warned Mai Sunsaye:

“As long as you keep Fatimeh with you, you shall have no reprieve! Shehu will pursue you and kill you one by one. He never forgives!’” (p3).

Mai Sunsaye laughed. He had heard about Shehu who was widely known to be a swash-buckling ex-soldier discharged from the Cameroons campaign of 1914-1918. He lived to fight and cause confusion. Like an elephant, once offended he never forgot and never forgave; therefore, it would be unsafe to anger him (p2).

The literature on the pastoralist economy in Africa has hardly reflected herdswomen. Cyprian Ekwensi’s Burning Grass vividly documented herdswomen such as Ligu and Fatimeh. Ligu of the thousand cattle as well as Ligu the champion cattle grazer; of whom they sing at the sharro sport were apt accolades with which other herdsmen and the people of the veld described her. Nkeokelonye (2017) noted in this regard that the Burning Grass became a story, not just of cattlemen, but of cattlewomen too. The gender sensitivity and balance in the book showed the uniqueness of the Fulani culture at that time. Consequently, women were not merely relegated to perform domestic chores as women in pastoral Somaliland. They coped with the rigours of household chores and the challenges of cattle rearing and management and childbearing. Ligu had workers who assisted her in grazing her cattle as other herdsmen had. Rikku, Mai Sunsaye’s son, was one of Ligu’s assistants whom Shehu captured and was to take away from Nigeria across the desert. Ligu mobilised her men who rescued Rikku. She was a courageous woman. Fatimeh had many cattle, and they were all white. After Shehu snatched her away from Hodio, she ran away again from Shehu and served a herdsman who did not have a child. The man taught her the use of efficacious roots and herbs and gave her two cows and a bull (all white) when they parted. Fatimeh moved with her cattle from one part of the savannah to the other at night only. She also had a lion that she acquired as a cub after killing its mother with her poisoned arrow. The killing of a lion by a herdswoman and movement with her cattle...
showed great courage. She needed the lion to save her from the threats and menace of other wild animals in the veld environment. On meeting with Mai Sunsaye, she recalled that she became a herdswoman in Sunsaye’s household as she said to him, “You taught me to be a herdswoman. Fatimeh had twin babies who died at infancy. Having these babies, even though only one transformed her from the status of a slave who had no right to love a free-born man to the status of a non-slave or free person. In her conversation with Sunsaye she said:

“As a slave, I had no right to love a free-born man like Rikku. But now I have been cleansed, for I have brought forth” (p101).

Sunsaye replied:

“You have brought forth, and by custom, you are no longer a slave” (p101)

Fatimeh cured Mai Sunsaye of Sokugo (the wandering disease) with her knowledge of roots and herbs.

Hunting was another occupation. Hunters lurked around the edge of the flames of the burning grass with their dane guns, bows and arrows to catch the animals that ran out of their hiding places. Hunting was a secondary economic activity that did not develop in the narrative. However, it was an activity that required a lot of skill and specialization because as Ekwensi (1962) wrote, the hunters trained their eyes to catch the faintest flicker of beasts hastening from their hiding places else they missed their targets. Fulani people do not eat meat from cattle. It was forbidden particularly by herdsmen. It is partly for this reason that game animal was an important part of their cuisine. However, poultry, goats and sheep among others were reared and provided alternative sources for protein.

Belmuna who accompanied Rikku was a hunter with a stout heart and brave, but he died on the way when there was cattle stampede as tax collectors accosted Rikku and himself. After three days walk on this journey, it was a Duiker which they ate for dinner that he caught. Describing the agility and skill exhibited by Belmuna in this process, Rikku said:

“In one bound he leapt out of his hiding position and over the crest of the hill. Rikku stood up and peered after him. A thicket hid him from view, and when he reappeared a duiker was slung across his shoulders, a smile furrowed his face” (p53).

Belmuna had his bow drawn taut, and his muscles were tense and glistening as he aimed at the duiker while crouching behind a rock. Hunters were all over the savanna environment, and they were among herdsmen, travellers, men, women and children to whom Mai Sunsaye interacted with as well as asked questions as he wandered about searching for members of his family and under the influence of the Sokugo (p78).

Hunters in the savannah were unable to kill Fatimeh’s lion and wherever they saw the lion’s pug-marks, there they also saw that of the cattle but they never at any time saw a dead beast on the veld (p94). The closing chapter of the text also revealed the hunters’ ubiquity and skill, yet they did not form a formidable association but their environment necessitated their presence and spread in this statement:

“Indeed it was time to be moving the cattle southwards to the banks of the great river. Everywhere on the veld, the hunters were burning the grass, and people could smell the acrid smoke that choked the beasts and brought them running from their holes” (p114).

Herdsmen always carried bows and poisoned arrows as their cattle grazed. This equipment was used to kill animals that threatened their cattle, so they too had hunting skills though it was not their primary occupation. A typical example was Baba with whom Mai Sunsaye spent some days at Old Chanka who was not a hunter but shot and killed a partridge with which he prepared their food. Mai Sunsaye’s was surprised because he had merely gone to the stream for ablution that morning and came back within a short period and found Baba plucking the feathers off a partridge he had shot that morning (p39). Baba would have done this to please Mai Sunsaye because Sunsaye, being Fulani would not eat the meat from cattle which was forbidden by herdsmen (p38). Moreover, their night meal the previous day was merely sweet potatoes and roasted peanuts after some kneaded flour in sour milk that Baba bought from New Chanka.

**Dairy Production**

“The girl was silent enough. She learnt a lot and
quickly. In one month she could milk the cows, separate butter and cheese from the milk, ferment the milk”… (p5).

This was Mai Sunsaye’s remarks about Fatimeh, Shehu’s slave he brought into his household. This remark depicted a predominant economic activity of the traditional nomadic Fulani women. It is still practised in this twenty-first century. At Jalla’s camp, before he left for Malendo, his mother and sister also engaged in this women’s economic activity.

“With heavy hands, Shaitu and Leibe were churning the sour milk near the huts…” (p52)

At a herdsman’s camp where Sunsaye spent some time with them, the herdsman’s wife was also engaged in this economic activity as seen in this passage:

“When Sunsaye got to the camp he found his host’s wife sitting on a tiny stool, her wide shoulders trembling as he churned the milk, separating the butter” (p62).

Milk, butter and cheese were natural by-products from cows. Women and boys milked cows from which butter and cheese were extracted for household consumption and commercial purposes. Jella sold milk and butter as some maids who were on their way to market informed Sunsaye (p18). Mai Sunsaye’s host’s wife prepared large calabashes of sour milk (fermented milk) and cheese balls for sale. Fulani herdsman families ate pounded and buttered millet in soured milk, ground wheat in sour milk, rice and butter, kneaded flour in sour milk, sweet potatoes, roasted peanuts, and so on. Women produced and processed dairy products and used proceeds from their sales to provide food and some other family needs. Consequently, most Fulani women and men too engaged in trading.

Trading

Mai Sunsaye’s wife Shaitu accompanied by Fatimeh hawked sour milk before Fatimeh was able to find her way to and from the town where she sold dairy products (p5). Shaitu went to sell sour milk when her husband Mai Sunsaye was struck with Sokugo the wandering disease. In his search for his son Jalla, Sunsaye met two lovely Fulani maids carrying gourds of milk while on their way to market.

Donkeys served as vehicles for transporting human beings and their wares to the markets. Some of the goods sold in the various markets in the towns within the veld included: yams, sugarcane, wheat, millet, cloth, calabashes, spoons and so on. A typical scenario by Ekwensi (1962) captured what their markets were like:

“In Jalla’s company, Sunsaye walked through the market. It was crowded. All classes of people from all over the scrub had gathered, for it was held once a week. Shining combs from England were displayed side by side with roots and herbs and monkeys teeth, and fly-ridden beef. Donkeys, cattle, zana matting, open fires with the meat sizzling (suya): women with empty gourds, chewing sugarcane. Donkeys, their forelegs tied with rope, hopped about picking sugarcane skins with their lips” (p20).

On another occasion, Jalla sold one of his bulls and used the money to buy some cloth in preparation for his marriage to Fiddiggo. No matter how remote a community is and whether modern or not there is always a commercial relationship where exchange could be in cash or kind (barter). No human group is an island on its own. There is usually interdependency; groups depend on one another to meet their needs. The Fulani herdsman and their families achieved this.

Other Economic Activities

Women dyed cloths in wells. Cloth dyeing is a complex and demanding occupation. That women had wells where they dyed cloths showed that cloth dyeing was a well-organised trade. Cloth dyeing involves creativity in designing and mixing of colours so that the cloths colours do not run. Different fabrics required different periods of soaking in dyes. Dyes of different colours were produced from kolanut and other local herbs.

Blacksmithing featured in the text, and this is not surprising because there were hunters who bought guns from blacksmiths. Similarly, all daggers, swords and knives were not imported through the Trans-Saharan trade and Trans-Atlantic trade from which the Fulani benefited. These blacksmiths produced some of them. In preparation to set Rikku free from Shehu and his men who also kidnapped Chikeh (the forest officer and assistant to the Bodejo, doctor McMinter) Mai Sunsaye drew his sword from the scabbard, belted two small daggers around his upper arm and set out for the fight that
later ensued. Ligu’s men who had set out for Rikku’s rescue were also armed while the Arabs who fought on the side of Shehu drew their knives and used them in close combat. It is necessary to recall Ekwensi’s (1962) opening remarks in the text in this regard:

“When they begin to burn the grass in Northern Nigeria, it is time for the herdsmen to be moving the cattle southwards to the banks of the great river. And the hunters, lurking on the edge of the flames with dane gun, bow and arrow, sniff the fumes and train their eyes to catch the faintest flicker of beasts hastening from their” (p1) hiding places.

Farmers were another group of persons who needed the services of blacksmiths for their occupation. Farmers were widespread in the savannah environment of the Fulani herdsmen. As Hodio galloped out on his horse from New Chanka in pursuit of Shehu and his men who visited New Chanka, he observed that:

“The scrub was practically empty, except for one or two stragglers, farmers who reared their heads, hoe in hand, squit at him” (p46).

The blacksmiths also produced razors for barbers apart from hoes and other metal instruments needed by farmers. Jalla often took his cattle round through Dogo’s farm. Dogo always liked their dropping (27). Cattle dung was a source of organic manure for farmer’s crops and is more soil and crop-friendly than chemical fertilizer. While farmers benefited from cow dung, the herdsmen enjoyed the crops farmers produced, and they included: sweet potatoes, groundnuts, millet, yams, rice, corn, sugarcane and others.

Ekwensi’s (1962) account of herdsmen and farmers relationship in the text was devoid of conflict but was somewhat symbiotic. This is far from many and intense farmer-herder conflicts that are on the rise in Nigeria and many parts of Africa. For Nigeria, Lake Chad started shrinking in the 1960s due to changes in climate patterns. This phenomenon made large numbers of herdsmen to search for alternative pastures and sources of water for their cattle. This movement has partly contributed to conflicts arising from encroachment on farms, settlements, cattle rustling and crop damage among others. Ekwensi’s discourse generates the feeling of nostalgia concerning farmers – herdsmen’s conflicts in recent times given loss of lives and properties, displacement of persons, insecurity and so on. Do modern Nigerians have anything to learn from the farmers-herders relationship in the text Burning Grass?

**HERDSMEN CHALLENGES**

“It is time too for the harmattan to blow dust into eyes and teeth, to wrinkle the skin... The trees were skeletons bleached in the sun-barren with peeling skins bruised by decades of thirst and hunger” (p1). An extreme weather condition such as cold in the veld during the Harmattan was harsh to human beings, the cattle and plants for their food/grazing. For this reason, there was always a movement towards the south in search of green grass. At other times they had the challenge of rain as typified by Rikku and Belmuna’s experience:

“Steady downpour, accompanied by claps of thunder and a storm that threatened to root down the very walls of their shelter. Rikku and Belmuna, wrapped in straw rain-capes, went round the fences of the cattle, making sure they were safely ensconced for the night” (p54).

In spite of the risk to their lives, sleepless in the night, harassed in the day time, both of them crouched, one at either end of the enclosure, watching the cattle through the night. This behaviour is not surprising because the Fulani herdsmen believe as Jalla stated:

“Father we are men of cattle. Our cattle come first, and since it is our wish to take them to better pastures, all else must succumb to that wish” (97).

Wild animals such as leopards, lions, hyenas and pythons such as cobra were sources of threat to the herdsmen and their families. To stem this challenge from these wild animals as well as keep their cattle warm at night, they lit the big smudge fire that kept away the wild animals. The Fulani were well known in Northern Nigeria for their art in magic. Consequently, to cope with threats from wild animals, they applied magic and that was why they did not fence their camps, and no lion seized their cattle. As Ekwensi put it, ‘By magic and superstition they lived and died’.

By magic and superstition they lived and died’. It is also partly for the herdsmen safety that they always
carried knives, swords, bows and poisoned arrows, daggers and dogs. Ligu had dogs, but these dogs could be poisoned with magic meat as Rikku did when he attacked Ardo in revenge.

In all these every herdsman must acquire the skill necessary for this primary occupation as exemplified by Jalla in this quotation:

“The cattle mooed. The wide span of their sweeping horns clacked against one another. Their humps danced. This was always the most difficult part of it, arousing them from their lethargy and getting them moving. Once they understood what was afoot, it was not so difficult. But the smaller ones would always be in the way. Jalla lashed out with his whip. Kail, He made clucking noises with his tongue, bullying this, calling out to that one by name. A good herdsman must know each one of his cattle by name, colour and habits” (p25).

Mai Sunsaye who watched Jalla performs this task smiled at his son’s expert herdsmanship. Similarly, a teacher should know his/her students by name and character. This facilitates supervision and control. Belmuna on the third day of their movement towards Ligu’s camp began to get the cattle on the move, but it was difficult, but with the display of his herdsman skill, he got them on the move. He made clucking noises, and there was a mighty rumbling of bodies thudding against bodies, of horns clashing, clucking noises, and there was a mighty rumbling, the cattle lumbered in a thousand opposing directions.

With the assistance of Rikku, Belmuna’s companion who ran in front and around them trying to mobilize them cursing, using all the skill his father had given him. It was a nerve-racking affair. Rikku wanted to sit down and weep but encouraged by Belmuna; they got the herd settled down to a good steady pace (p56). Cattle herding is not an easy task it requires special skill which is acquired over several years.

Traditional nomadic pastoralists, for this reason, introduce their children into this occupation from childhood, and over the years they inculcate the necessary skills in them.

Cattle Rustling

Cattle rustling underscores pastoral culture and tradition. It is undertaken for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it is for replenishing stock after losing herds to drought and other forces. For Sunsaye’s family, their loss of cattle was to Ardo and his men. Ardo was Sunsaye’s greatest rival for the chieftaincy of Dokan Toro. At night after Ardo had struck Mai Sunsaye with the wandering disease called Sokugo by the Fulani, he went with a group of men and stole Sunsaye’s cattle and burnt his huts (pp14-15).

Rikku and Belmuna were attacked by cattle rustlers while they were on their way to Ligu’s camp at Kontago. They lost some cattle and hoped to recover them in the morning the next day. The reason for this experience was not given but when the blacksmith who hosted Sunsaye complained that they had been having thieves raid their locality, stealing then was a social vice among the Fulani. Stealing is still a social vice that occurs among human groups. It is the spate at which it occurs, and the loss involved that is worrisome.

TAX PAYMENT

Fulani herdsmen were usually apprehensive and suspicious of government officials who collected tax paid for cattle rearing. It is plausible that they were not educated on why they should pay tax for rearing cattle in their homeland. What was tax collected used for? How did they benefit from paying tax? Herdsmen, therefore, devised various means of evading taxation. Jalla told Rikku:

“We shall split the herd in two;” Jalla suggested. This was an old ruse to foil the tax-gatherers who might waylay them. ‘Rikku you will go with some cattle to Ligu’s camp’ (p.52).

Unfortunately, tax officials caught Rikku and Belmuna, but they played a trick on the tax officials. They stampeded the cattle, some charged at the tax officials, and it was difficult to count the cattle to assess their number for payment. Rikku had trained the cattle to disperse in different directions, but to reassemble in one spot. In this way, tax payment was foiled. Regrettably, Belmuna and a thief who had attacked them died as a result of the stampede.

Despite this escape, the Bodejo (European) and tax officials arrived Ligu’s camp assessed the cattle, but they paid a large sum (p84 and p02). Ligu lamented that she went to the border country to escape the tax, but she was found and made to pay a large sum. These challenges associated with cattle herding are still experienced by the nomadic Fulani in Nigeria.
Social Perspective of Burning Grass

Human behaviour has consequences on society and vice versa. This section of this discourse examined and explained the connections between the Fulani herdsmen and members of their families’ behaviour and the structures of the society in which they live. Essentially, it was through their social institutions and their customs, values, proverbs, norms, beliefs that their social life was examined.

MARRIAGE

Marriage is a universal social institution, but that of the Fulani herdsmen has some unique features. For example, both Hodio and Rikku were strongly attracted to the slave girl, Fatimeh who was recused from Shehu’s household with five cattle. Fatimeh initially refused Hodio’s suggestion for both of them to elope. Fatimeh was knowledgeable of their culture and recalled that a slave girl could never hope to marry a free blooded and proud Fulani like Hodio Sunsaye (pp5-6). Hodio knew that too but insisted that they eloped and lived in a town where no one cared about tradition and custom. Eventually, both of them eloped to the chagrin of Rikku, and this negatively affected Rikku’s productivity in milking the cows and taking them to graze (p6). Bringing Fatimeh back as Rikku insisted became a task for Mai Sunsaye his father despite his advise that Rikku betrothed another girl.

Hodio lost Fatimeh to Shehu but again eloped with his elder brother’s (Jalla) ‘wife’ Amina whom he claimed had not been brought into Jalla’s hut.

Hodio explained:

“But father, it is legal. Custom says that a woman is not a wife until she is brought under the hut. And I captured Amina she became a bride. So, by custom, she is mine!” (p42).

No wonder Hodio was comfortable in New Chanka where there was a mixed population, not only the nomadic Fulani whose custom would have influenced his proper behaviour towards marriage. He did not undergo Sharro, a test of manhood a unique tradition of the Fulani.

The sharro, the test of young manhood for the Fulani youth was compulsory in the sense that whoever had not taken a flogging at the sharro would never find a maiden to marry him (p65). This rite of passage was always well attended and with music at the background provided by an orchestra. The players’ musical instruments included gourd horns, violins, calabash rattles and others. Jalla stood in the ring with feet astride, hands interlaced above his head, motionless. His opponent had a long whip, the leather hide or koboko to flog Jalla. Having successfully taken two rounds of the koboko, the girls came out from the orchestra as was the practice and chanted his praises, stuffing kolanuts in his mouth to the rhythm of the music. The tallest of the girls whispered something in his ear and smeared anointment in a cup over the face of the welt so that it shone (p67). Infuriated by Jalla’s men, he rubbed something on the second koboko for the next round of strokes. As the koboko descended, Jalla ran out of the ring into the scrub without anybody pursuing him. The crowd parted in small groups while some girls wailed (p69). Indeed, he was struck by the dark magic. Jalla did not have his magic. He was brave all through but as the dark magic caught him the game ended in disappointment.

For a successful sharro at another opportunity, Sunsaye advised Jalla to bury his kobokos in the grave of a former champion sharro so that the prowess of the dead would pass in spirit into Jalla’s whips. There were other herbs and unguents he would give Jalla as well as charms against the baduhu (the giver of darkness pp70-71). Jalla eventually married Fiddiggo after sending her cloth and six head of cattle to her father. The marriage lacked drumming, dancing and a bridal night that is the usual ceremony. Jalla stressed that his preference was to move his cattle southwards given the season. He remarked

“Father, we are men of cattle. Our cattle come first, and since it is our wish to take them to better pastures, all else must succumb to that wish” (p76)

Custom demanded that Jalla be absent from home when his wife arrived, so he quickly built a hut for her and prepared a bed (p77). Jalla slipped away from the camp into the scrub for Fiddiggo to be brought to him as a wife.

Sokugo

Mai Sunsaye, the major character in the text was struck with Sokugo, the charm of the Fulani
cattlemen: magic that turned studious men into wanderers (p10). It was Ardo who inflicted Sunsaye with sokugo through a dove that had the sokugo talisman on its foot.

According to Shaitu, Sunsaye’s wife:

“A talisman could bring luck... A man may strike his enemy down by calling his name aloud and firing a needle into the sky. A man could send his enemy wandering to his death by striking him with the sokugo, the wandering charm” (p12).

The cattle Fulani were ruled by their customs and ardent beliefs for which they could not find a logical explanation. Shaitu’s belief in omens and portents was steadfast. This behaviour was cultural. Although the sokugo charm made Sunsaye to wander aimlessly in the veld supposedly, he was able to find and relate with his son’s Jalla, Hodio, Rikku and other members of his family, Shaitu (wife) and daughter Leibe. His contact with Fatimeh who had for a very long time left his home brought about his cure of the sokugo. Sunsaye returned to Dokan Toro his home town (village), set up a camp and wrested his chieftaincy from Ardo. The night Sunsaye and Rikku attacked Ardo, they tied the mouth of his dogs with magic meat and so they could not bark. Ardo’s huts were burnt as he ran out of the village in scanty clothes. Sunsaye and his supporters marched through the town in the morning the day after Ardo had been banished from Dokan Toro. There was much feasting and rejoicing as the maidens played the gwogie violin and rattled the calabashes while the young men engaged in gymnastics and feats of manhood. The flutes sang, the drums thudded, and anklets jingled on happy feet (pp117-118). Sunsaye’s return was also celebrated because it ended Ardo’s tyrannical reign. Sunsaye indeed was a custodian of Fulani herdsman culture.

**Culture-Mix-Lovers Night**

At the mining camp was a celebration, a party to welcome the European Miner’s wife who visited from her country. Jalla and other Fulani men, male youths and girls attended the party. Molere, the European Miner and his bride, also European sat in chairs which looked like thrones. There was a massive campfire in the middle of the clearing, and the Fulani girls danced. Their deft hip-swings and the words of their song impressed the men, Molere and his wife who stared steadily at the girls and into the heart of the fire (p72). Here featured a culture mix of European and Fulani nomadic pastoral group. Both groups enjoy nightlife particularly the type set out for lovers. As soon as the girls retired after their singing, the men followed them into the dark corners. As Ekwensi (1962) wrote:

“From the shadows, young men and young women were returning in pairs to the campfire, their hands linked. This was a lover’s night, and Jalla spoke passionately to his chosen girl. They wandered off into the shadows and talked while from a distance they heard the music of the entertainers but did not mind. They sat on a log and talked far into the night, planning their future” (p72).

Other Aspects of Sunsaye’s Life

There were other activities Mai Sunsaye engaged in that were a replica of Fulani herdsman behaviour. He was a devout Muslim who during his wandering in the veld always found time for his ablution, tolling of his chaplet and prayers. He was versed in the knowledge of the Koran which he always studied, and he was also fluent in spoken and written Arabic language.

He prepared charms and amulets which the Fulani believed in. He was also a Fortune Teller and was well patronized. He had deep knowledge in the preparation of the charm baduhu (giver of darkness). Hodio, his son, used it to defeat Shehu and his assistants during their visit to New Chanka. One of his regrets apart from Jallas sharoo disappointment was Rikku’s love of town Fulani lifestyle having enjoyed that when he lived with Kantuma and her elegant manner of doing things. No wonder he made excuses and did not marry Fatimeh.

Sunsaye lamented and said:

“Thus it is that our people are drifting more and more away from the hard life to the soft life of the city”. He shook his head. Even you, my son!” (p115)

There were other activities Mai Sunsaye engaged in that were a replica of Fulani herdsman behaviour. He was a devout Muslim who during his wandering in the veld always found time for his ablution, tolling of his chaplet and prayers. He was versed in the
Conflicts

Conflicts arise from social interactions, and so it is well reflected in the text. In the family (a universal institution), Hodio eloped with Fatimeh and this deeply hurt Rikku who was also in love with her. Rikku insisted that Sunsaye brought back Fatimeh to him, Sunsaye sneered at him and said:

“There’ll be trouble. Trouble enough; for Hodio will always be at war with you. Brother against brother. O abomination! In our own family! Broken is the family: gone is the pride of the Fulani” (p8).

There was a conflict between Ardo and Sunsaye over chieftaincy which made Ardo inflict Mai Sunsaye with sokugo, stole his cattle and burnt his huts. Sunsaye much later got Ardo banished from Dokan Toro, wrested his chieftaincy title from Ardo and ruled his people again. Other conflicts included those of Shehu and Hodio over Fatimeh, the rescue of Rikku from Shehu by Ligu and Sunsaye, Hodio and Jalla because Hodio captured Amina who was betrothed to Jalla, Shehu and Fatimeh who on two occasions ran away from his enslavement.

Proverbs

Some Fulani herdsmen proverbs provide us with insight into their culture. For example, Baba at Old Chanka told Sunsaye:

“If a fish comes out of the water and says the crocodile has one eye, who has been there with him?” (p35).

“No one but Allah”. Sunsaye grinned, warming to the man’s proverb. Baba remained in Old Chaka as he refused being moved to New Chanka. This he explained to Sunsaye in his common proverb as he said:

“Where is the business of the fish with the tick?” (p36) Baba also said ‘A maiden is one of those things a man must not trust because Sunsaye insisted on searching for Fatimeh to please Rikku.’ And the others? Sunsaye asked.

Baba replied “A prince, a river, a knife and darkness. A prince because his word changes with the weather; a river because in the morning you may wade across it, but in the evening it has swollen and can swallow you. A knife, because it knows not who carries it. Darkness, ha! Who knows what lurks in it. Certainly, all evil things (p37). This shows uncertainty in relationships.

“The curiosity of the goat that leads him to salute the hyena” (p81) is another proverb, and this shows betrayal. ‘He who waits will see what’s in the grass’. This teaches a person to be patient.

CONCLUSION

Cyprian Ekwensi’s perspicuous style made Burning Grass an exciting novel to read but more importantly an insight into understanding and appreciating Fulani herdsmen culture. Nkeokelonye (2017) also writes that the interesting nuggets of information, the character of Mai Sunsaye gives on the Fulani’s helps in understanding their uniqueness. Through him, we learn about the life and values of the Fulani Herdsmen. The Fulani have a rich culture as expressed in their customs, proverbs, festivals, and ceremonies, other social, economic, religious and political activities. The sore point is their cattle that they value above every other thing. This understanding should regulate relations with the Fulani herdsmen. They were content in their traditional setting as many of them resisted town and sedentary lifestyle which has also kept them distinct from other groups and this is a unique identity. It is no wonder too that nomadic education programme since 1987 has not successfully stopped young Fulani boys from cattle rearing. However, given the increase in conflicts with farmers in recent times in this twenty-first century, it would be advisable as Nnoko-Mewanu (2018) suggested that there should be rules to resolve migration – related conflicts, procedures for obtaining permission to move cattle and compensation for damaged crops or livestock.

Similarly, special grasses Nkemdiche (2018) stated can be grown in specified localities for herdsmen who should be encouraged to put their cattle in ranches. Times would change to affect nomadism adversely. A readjustment, however gradual, should be adopted by the Fulani Herdsmen towards integration into modern lifestyle fifty-seven years since Cyprian Ekwensi wrote Burning Grass.

REFERENCES

Fulani of Northern Nigeria. London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd

