

Political Economy, Power and Indigenous Knowledge: Erasures of IK in Pastoral Communities in the Maghreb and Afghanistan

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In the nineteenth century, the majority of the population in both the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) and Afghanistan were pastoralists, many of them nomads. These peoples possessed a sophisticated body of ecological knowledge concerning their arid, stochastic environments and an equally advanced veterinary knowledge of their livestock, their diseases, and treatments for the animals. These knowledges and the political/economic structures at the time facilitated a use of the natural environment that was, by and large, “sustainable.” This indigenous knowledge system began to be eroded early in the nineteenth century in the Maghreb with the French occupation of Algeria, and later of Tunisia and Morocco. Transformations of the political economy under French colonialism had profound effects on the ability of the local populations to continue their traditional lifeways. Land and forests were appropriated for the French state that reduced grazing areas severely, common land management techniques like firing for pasture regeneration were criminalized, and later in the colonial period, the practice of traditional veterinary medicine was curtailed and criminalized. These changes and related changes in trading systems and the imposition of western veterinary medicine and land management techniques effectively reduced indigenous herding and range management knowledge and practice, completely destroying it in some areas. These trends continued during the post-colonial period and have been exacerbated by many “development” projects and programs over the last several decades, especially under neoliberalism. It is indeed related “development” projects in Afghanistan that currently threaten to destroy the sophisticated indigenous veterinary knowledge of nomads (the Koochi), especially amongst women. These women have a sophisticated knowledge of animal health and disease that surpasses that of the men in many areas. This precious knowledge, highly valued by Koochi women, is being eroded, and their cultural position marginalized, by the implementation of patriarchal, Western-led development projects operating in a conservative and ideological religious climate during the reconstruction of war-torn Afghanistan.