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“Toward a General Theory of Pastoralism and Social Stratification”

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Toward a General Theory of Pastoralism

And Social Stratification

by Rada Dyson-Hudson

It has long been recognized that the social organization of pastoralists, particularly those in East Africa, is generally egalitarian, in contrast with the more structured, hierarchical organization of many agricultural groups. Some have sought to explain this phenomenon in terms of "the pastoral personality", attributing egalitarianism to a love of freedom, and an unwillingness of livestock herders to submit to authority (e.g. Butt 1952, Goldschmidt 1971, 1979). Others have sought an economic basis for the presence or absence of hierarchical social organization. For example, Schneider (1979) suggests that the number of livestock per person is critical in determining whether a society will be hierarchical or egalitarian. Burnham (1979) suggests that there is little opportunity for social stratification in pastoral societies... "that in a purely pastoral economy, a true 'slave mode of production' based on the massive expropriation of the production of large numbers of slaves is very unlikely, since the over-all production of livestock, in the heavily stocked conditions that normally obtain in pastoral societies, cannot be markedly increased by the use of slave labor" (p. 354). Barth (1961) attributes economic equality among the nomadic pastoral Basseri of Iran to the fact that those who failed became agricultural laborers, while those who were very successful invested more and more money in land, and ultimately became sedentary agriculturalists - an "explanation" for egalitarianism which Asad (1979) criticizes as simply re-defining the differential constraints of a wider class structure in terms of similar qualities of a narrower population aggregate (the 'tribe') (p. 424). Dahl (1979) documents the ways in which the requirements of livestock herding among the Boran prevent the emergence of a high degree of social stratification. A man who is wealthy in terms of animals will divide his herd into sub-units, and will strive to enlarge his own family, for example by marrying several wives who produce children, by adopting children, by marrying daughters to relatively poor men who can be recruited to live uxorilocally, etc. This means that a man who is wealthy in livestock is also likely to be rich in terms of the number of people in his family, many of whom are heirs who therefore aspire to his herd, either at death or before. Dahl (1979) concludes that, even though ecological conditions lead to the creation of differential wealth among Boran, dependence on household labor for herd management, and the ecological advantage of herd dispersion, place a limit on the accumulation by one single herdowner, and to opportunities for transferring accumulation of capital from one generation to the next in a non-egalitarian manner. Wealth which is accumulated is redistributed in the long run, and the limitations imposed by family labor, and by ecology, rather than egalitarian ideology, enforces a relative economic equality between households.

Others have stressed inequalities in pastoral societies. Digard (1973) discusses the inequality in access to land resources in Iran. Bates (1972) emphasizes the differential access to pastures among the Yoruk of Turkey. Irons explores variations in social stratification among the Yomut of Iran. Spooner (1973, p. 34) notes that, although the structure of pastoral societies may offer men equal opportunity, in reality each person's access to power is modified by both social and personal factors. Dahl (1979) points out that limitations on Boran social stratification are very much dependent on the prevailing lack of investment alternatives which are less vulnerable to climatic and epizootic hazards than are herds. When alternatives arise, so that a surplus from pastoral production can be transferred to trade, land-ownership, etc., inequalities generated by ecological factors can become permanent. She found an increase in social stratification among the Boran as opportunities for wage labor, and involvement in trade and administration, increased.

Burnham (1979) suggests that a necessary condition for extreme social stratification -- slavery -- to have an important differentiating effect on pastoral class relations, is the existence of institutional links with surrounding sedentary populations, so that freed labor can be economically utilized. He cites North Africa, where herding requirements are intensive, because of the demands of watering livestock, but where man freed from herding labor have alternative opportunities, as an area where slavery as an institution was prevalent. Bourgeot (1975) notes that among the Ahaggar, "nutritional pastoralism" practiced by the vassals enabled the nobles to engage in trans-Saharan commercial trade, and also "predatory pastoralism". However, in the Middle East, it was more common for pastoralists to exploit and collect tribute from sedentary populations, rather than having slave labor to help with livestock management (Burnham 1979, Irons 1974, 1975).

Salzman relates social stratification and the development of political authority in nomadic pastoral societies to environmental resources. In 1967 he suggested that "nomads living in an area of predictable climate and relatively great resources will have political authority roles and stable group parameters, and that nomads living in an area of unpredictable climate and relatively sparse resources will have no political authority roles, or at best weak and temporary ones, and have unstable group parameters" (Salzman, 1967 p. 128). In a later article, Salzman (1972) suggests that dependence on multi-resources would lead to greater political fluidity and instability; while specialization requires more explicit provision of political control.

Bates (1973, pp. 122-141) relates the emergence of incipient social stratification among the essentially egalitarian Yoruk of Turkey to economic changes -- the requirements of large cash outlays for the critical resource, rented pastures. Increasing fees for grazing tracts have enabled certain wealthy Yoruk, by extending credit to kinsmen, and gaining control over their productive activities to transform a generalized economic hardship to personal gain and economic security.

Others emphasize that the development of political hierarchies is not due to endogenous factors, but rather to interactions of nomadic

pastoral societies with other groups. Spooner (1973, p. 34) states "it is reasonable to suggest that explicit institutionalization of leadership roles in rank or stratified nomadic societies is always derivative and may be traced to interactions with sedentary populations". Irons (1979, p. 362) suggests that "among pastoral nomadic societies, hierarchical political institutions are generated only by external political relations with state societies and never develop purely as a result of internal dynamics of such societies." While Burnham (1979, pp. 357-358) notes that "Politically centralized forms in Asian pastoral societies frequently appear to result from links with surrounding states, trade entrepôts, or sedentary agriculturalists, and often takes the form of loose tribal confederacies whose corporate functions relate mainly to those external non-pastoral influences."

Glatzer (1977) found that among the Pashtun of northwest Afghanistan, the state protects them from external threat, which might encourage the development of hierarchical political institutions, but does not intervene in their internal affairs. Thus they can maintain the egalitarian social organization, advantageous to nomads because it allows individual freedom of movement, and flexible group size and constitution, as responses to conditions in the natural environment.

Beck (1980) documents the vulnerability of the people low in the social hierarchy to ecological or economic perturbations. Among the Qashqai, when poor households find their production does not meet their demands, they become hired shepherds. These people are not only poor in animals, but they also lack personal and tribal access to pastures, and have few affiliations with tribal leaders. When good conditions prevail, hiring additional shepherds allows wealthy herdowners to utilize the multiplicity of resources to which they have access. However, when conditions are poor, few Qashqai herdowners hire shepherds, who are thereby denied not only the wages for shepherding, but also access to grazing for their livestock. Thus, shepherding contracts do not create a more even distribution of wealth in the community, but rather perpetuate a system of inequality of wealth.

These divergent views support Asad's (1979) conclusion that "there is no such thing as a mechanism of equality intrinsic to nomadic society" (p. 426), and Salzman's view that in order to develop substantive theory about social hierarchies in nomadic pastoral societies, the degree to which inequalities exist, and the factors leading to the genesis of inequalities, are important questions in understanding the social organization of pastoralists. (1979, p. 430).

Although climatic, economic, and political factors; the availability of alternative investment opportunities; and the existence of institutional links with the surrounding populations, are all unquestionably important in understanding social stratification in nomadic pastoral societies, it is also useful to look at social stratification in terms of a more general model, presented by Dyson-Hudson (1979) which relates the degree of hierarchy to the controllability of resources. The model is as follows: I. When resources are not controllable, everyone will have equal access to them, and there will be an egalitarian social organization. Temporary surpluses can best be translated into security by redistribution, and the establishment thereby of social obligations. II. When desirable resources are economically controllable

(i.e. when the costs of excluding others is less than the benefits gained by exclusive use), some individual or group ultimately will gain control. In this situation, people who are not members of the 'controller' group have three options. They can 'make do' with marginal resources. Alternatively, they can try to gain access to desirable resources either by affiliation with the controllers, or by overthrowing them. Which of these three strategies an individual or group will choose depends on their perceptions of the costs and the benefits of the alternative strategies.

The degree to which others can be excluded from access to controllable resources, and therefore the degree to which a society becomes hierarchical, depends on the nature of the resources themselves (the more concentrated they are, the more they can be controlled); and also on the environmental, social, cultural, and technological means available to defend those resources (e.g. the larger the controlling group, and the better their weapons and military organization, the more likely they are to be able to exclude others). Agricultural land, particularly circumscribed, highly productive land; and agricultural products, particularly those which ripen over a short period and therefore must be stored, are readily defensible resources.¹ Livestock is also a defensible resource. However, the need for herds to move and disperse when grazing on sparse pastures, means that they are less readily defensible than are, for example, stores of grain. So unless there are institutionalized means for protecting herds, a great deal of effort must be expended by individual herders and their assistants in defending their animals. It seems likely that the need to defend herds, as well as the need to disperse them because of edaphic factors such as epizootics and grazing, is a major reason for the very high people/livestock ratio required in East African pastoral systems, which ultimately leads to the redistribution of wealth (as described by Dahl 1979), and to a relatively egalitarian social organization.

Economic and political events can alter the perceived or actual costs and benefits of defending resources. An economic system can enable people to exchange livestock for more defensible resources (e.g. gold jewelry, or agricultural land near the administrative center), enabling some people to accumulate wealth. Political changes can alter the mechanisms available for defending resources, as when the central government in Iran prevented the Yomut pastoralists from extracting further tribute, and thereby helped the agriculturalists to defend their resources (Irons, 1974). Threats from other groups can increase people's willingness to tolerate the costs of limited access to resources, in exchange for the actual or illusory benefits of protection, thus strengthening the position of the controllers.

This model has not been systematically applied to the analysis of social stratification in nomadic pastoral societies. However, it has proved useful in understanding the very rapid change in social organization which occurred among some of the Maasai of Kenya, after the introduction of group ranches. Within ten years after the introduction of a government-imposed system of land adjudication directed toward establishing private property with individuals and families as the land-owning units, a small number of politically knowledgeable Maasai

acquired legal ownership and control on an exclusionary basis of as much land as they could. Maasai social organization in this area has changed very rapidly from an egalitarian social system with solidarity among age mates, and general, inclusive access to resources; to a system of exclusive control of resources with access restricted to close kin; as the authority and potential coercive power of the national government changed Maasai pastureland from an economically undefendable to an economically defendable resource (Dyson-Hudson 1979).

This model would seem to be able to deal with the wide variations in social stratification found among nomadic pastoral groups, and also with the very rapid changes in the degree of social stratification which can occur within a single group. Furthermore, since ecological, economic, and political factors can all be viewed in terms of their effects on resource controllability, it can be used to make predictions about the effects of specific environmental and social changes on the degree of social stratification in a particular group.²

Footnotes

¹In contrast, extensive agricultural land and crops which ripen throughout the year -- both attributes of most long-fallow agricultural systems, which are generally egalitarian -- are relatively non-controllable resources.

²Since economic development generally leads to changes in both resource distribution and in political and economic institutions, which make resources easier to control, the fact that economic development almost invariably leads to increased social stratification, fits the predictions of this model.

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