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SEGMENTARY LINEAGE THEORY AND SHEIKHANZAI PRACTICE*

by

Bahram Tavakolian

In defense of a segmentary perspective on nomadic pastoralist social organization, Philip Salzman offers useful distinctions between «segmentary organization» and «segmentary lineage systems» and between «corporate groups» and «corporate action» (1979: 123). In his middle-ground position, Salzman agrees with some of the criticisms offered by Peters, Marx, and others of a uniform segmentary lineage model adopted from research in colonial Africa and transposed to the Middle East, but he argues that a segmentary agnatic ideology also has an on-the-ground sociological reality to it. Although the folk model of lineage organization in nomadic societies need not always be found in practice, tribal ideology may be used «to maintain the availability of an alternative model of organization» when the need arises (1978: 69). Among the conditions in which Salzman proposes that such a form of organization would serve adaptive purposes are those in which «political pressure from external groups and...encapsulation within a state system» contribute to «corporateness and collective action» (op. cit.).

Just such a situation is characteristic of western Afghanistan, and this paper uses field research data obtained in 1976-77 among Sheikhanzai Durrani nomads to show how conditions of inter-ethnic economic and political competition, in the absence of effective external political authority through the policies and officials of the central government of Afghanistan, promote the use of segmentary lineage organization as a basis for corporate identity and collective adaptation. Specifically, in access to pasture and water, in cooperative intra-group economic relations, and in marketing activities, segmentary principles of organization are not only ideological, but significant social realities. Furthermore, a segmentary orientation is not only characteristic of the self-serving interests of camp and lineage leaders, as Eickelman implies (1981: 88), but also of the «common tribesman» who has his economic and political position defined and secured through the benefits and obligations of lineage membership. Conversely, camp and lineage leaders have their relatively greater economic standing levelled off through sponsorship of the production, marriage, and ritual activities of kinsmen and other camp members. Additionally, somewhat in contrast with Salzman's views, the segmentary organizational principle is not only an alternative enacted under conditions of severe external pressure, but it is also a metaphor for group structure and social action in more favorable economic and political circumstances.

The major thrust of this paper is thus to argue that Sheikhanzai lineages serve ecological as well as ideological purposes, and that actual patterns of social identity, responsibility, and action compare favorably with unilineal, corporate, and segmentary principles. In addition, an intriguing aspect of Sheikhanzai lineage organization, and one which bears

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investigation among other pastoral nomads as well, is its dependency on relationships between men and women, particularly between brothers and sisters, and not solely between male lineage members and their male affines. Through a focus on women's contributions to lineage and camp organization, we may counteract the implicit male bias in segmentary lineage theory without dismissing the analytic value of investigating agnatic ideology and organization (see Eickelman 1981: 103 for a different view).

Sheikhanzai Society: Agnatic Ideology and Social Practice

Briefly, Sheikhanzai social organization may be characterized as dependent upon cross-cutting linkages between corporate descent groups--patrilineages--and nomadic camps. Although individual households are both politically and economically independent to join within a wide variety of camp-groups on the basis of lineage, marriage, friendship and partnership ties, the agnatic ideology of the Sheikhanzai extends the genealogical metaphor to include camp members who are more distant kin within the realm of lineage relationships. Thus, lineage rights to grazing land, and obligations of economic and political support to lineage members, are conceptually and socially extended to a generalized category of cousins, kakazadeh (literally father's brother's children), within each camp-group.

Within and between camps and segmentary lineages, the sharing of resources includes rights to common pasture, rights to water, use of surplus animals--especially camels--owned by one household for the transport and food needs of other households, collective sale of animal hides, wool, and dairy products, the collective purchase of wheat and animal fodder, and joint rental of pasturage where usufruct rights do not exist. Social disputes and political conflicts, frequently in connection with shepherding arrangements, are adjudicated by assemblies of male lineage elders, and such councils vary in size according to the genealogical proximity or distance of disputants within the segmentary lineage structure.

In the main, the segmentary kinship structure is less important as a basis for mobilizing collective economic and political action throughout the population than it is for providing a common conceptual and ecological basis for appropriate social action at the local level. Larger scale mobilization and collective action remain structurally possible, ideologically held in reserve as Salzman suggests (1978, 1980), but rarely need to be made operational. Instead of emphasizing group-wide economic and political action among the Sheikhanzai, which is infrequent at best, it is more fruitful to focus upon the economic and political context of their collective adaptation to the wider society of western Afghanistan.

Ethnicity and Encapsulation: Contexts for Collective Adaptation

The Sheikhanzai are a Pashto-speaking population which is closely related to, and politically unified with, other Es'hakzai pastoral nomads who were relocated in northwest Afghanistan in the 1890's during the reign of Amir 'Abd al Rahman Khan (see Trapper 1973). They, and the other 200,000 Es'hakzai pastoral nomads who occupy winter pastures in the northwest and summer pastures in the central highlands of the country, represent a population which is both ethnically and economically distinct from the surrounding

population of Dari-speaking sedentary villagers, or «Farsiwan» and «Aimaq» peoples as they are known to the Sheikhanzai.

Ethnic and linguistic separations between the Sheikhanzai and villagers are reinforced through their respective economic specializations as well as through strict patterns of endogamy. Although Sheikhanzai must exchange surplus animal and dairy resources with sedentary populations of villagers and urban merchants to obtain the wheat which is the most important non-dairy staple in their diet, their relations with non-nomads are restricted to those of the marketplace and do not extend to ties of a regional political nature nor to interaction within common social and religious institutions.

In addition, the nomadism of the Sheikhanzai has allowed them to avoid the obligations imposed by the central government on sedentary populations. Not only do the Sheikhanzai recognize only their own political leaders and local means of conflict-resolution, but they also refuse birth registration, compulsory education for their children, military conscription, and taxation as their personal duties to the Afghan state. In response, the role of the central state in the region has been increasingly to encourage and to protect the expansion of village cultivation into Sheikhanzai pasture areas and, thus, to attempt to reduce the economic and political prominence which nomads have enjoyed in western Afghanistan for the past century.

The ideological and social bases for Sheikhanzai adaptations to this ethnic and political context are to be found within segmentary organization. The Sheikhanzai and other Es'hakzai have never literally had control over their territory in western Afghanistan. From the time of their arrival in the area a century ago, they have been outsiders, if not interlopers, in the view of the sedentary population. They have competed directly with other ethnic groups for land as well as for a place in the pastoral economy of the region. Since villagers in the area practice a mixed economy in which animal husbandry plays an important role, what economic symbiosis exists in the area between pastoralists and farmers does not cross ethnic lines between Pashtun nomads and Farsiwan villagers.

Although the Sheikhanzai do not control the territory they occupy in either seasonal pasture zone on a tribal basis, lineage usufruct rights and pastures which are legally owned by individual Sheikhanzai families are shared with camp members who belong to other lineages. It is specifically membership within the broadly defined group of «cousins» which provides Sheikhanzai with access to grazing and water resources. Sedentary villagers are thus forced to contend with tent-households united with one another throughout the pasture region rather than with individual households or camps which compete with each other for pasture. As grazing may be abundant in different regions of the overall pasture territory in different years, the Sheikhanzai camps form and subdivide and relocate to adapt to a pattern of microecological variation over space and time. As village cultivation or grazing may be extended into choice Sheikhanzai pasture areas, so too are lineage grazing rights extended to more distant Sheikhanzai relatives by those who have secure rights to land. Furthermore, such a pattern of corporate action is used by Sheikhanzai to secure seasonal land rights which are in dispute by having early arrivals into pasture regions prevent villager

cultivation or grazing on lands later to be occupied by lineage relatives in other camp-groups.

Contrary to Marx's claim that «Pastoral nomads who have lost control over their territory and whose tribes are no longer corporately organized... have no need for tribal genealogies» (1977: 354), the Sheikhanzai demonstrate a need for lineage-based structuring of their ecological adaptation and economic activities within just such a situation. As relative new-comers into the region, and as migrants who left behind a large portion of their tribe in southern and south-western Afghanistan at the time of their relocation by 'Abd al Rahman, the Sheikhanzai use their tribal genealogy as a means of incorporating more distant kin within common activities and relationships. Rather than operating according to «the governing interest of the moment» as Marx insists (1977: 355), Sheikhanzai corporate groups have been re-structured and re-combined so that the segmentary lineage model is generalized and applied metaphorically while still retaining basic elements of corporateness and segmentation with respect to collective identity, responsibility, and adaptation.

Also, rather than serving as a conceptual basis for justifying, or even creating, individual economic or political prominence within the segmentary structure, leadership positions entail greater obligations and responsibilities for assistance to more impoverished and politically weaker kin and camp-group members. Levelling mechanisms operate through almsgiving, hospitality, bride-price payments, and the sponsorship of communal feasts and ritual to maintain wealth differences to a minimum. Since excess wealth is siphoned off by increased social responsibilities (e.g., higher bride-price expectations of a prospective groom from a wealthy family, requests for «loans» of animals, etc.), there is little ability or reason to manipulate lineage ideology for purposes of personal or family aggrandizement.

On the other hand, local investment of surplus wealth offers as repayment both political support and economic security in hard times. Since wealth in the form of animals is highly vulnerable and easily lost through accidents, disease, and climatic misfortune as well as through theft, there is considerable variability over time in the identity of the more wealthy households. Especially since the drought years of 1970-72, there has been considerable turnover in camp and lineage leadership but with no diminution of sharing and reciprocity as intrinsic aspects of lineage-based adaptive strategies.

Women are Agnates Too: Sheikhanzai Women and Segmentary Lineages

Thus far I have sought to point out that Sheikhanzai lineages serve as a foundation for more than the ideological order; they provide means of social and economic cooperation, political corporateness and autonomy, and collective adaptation within an ethnically diverse and economically fragmented region. One aspect of the social process which has been neglected up until this point is how it is that the temporary social charters of Sheikhanzai nomadic camps are drawn up on the basis of the symbolic model represented by segmentary lineages. How, that is, are relations of corporateness and segmentation generalized to include camp members from different segmentary divisions of the society?

For an answer to this question, we must break loose from the misconception that women are important in patrilineal segmentary societies only for their role as links between agnates and affines. Simply stated, women, and sisters in particular, are agnates too! It is ironic that criticisms of the male bias in segmentary lineage theory have themselves perpetuated the view that women are insignificant in their own patrilineages even if they do help to create interconnections between brothers and husbands belonging to different lineages. An obvious alternative perspective is that sisters, as agnates, hold positions of economic and political importance in their own right within their patrilineages and camps. For this reason, connections between Sheikhanzai households need not be based upon either lineage or camp relations, but may be based upon both in a mutually reinforcing pattern.

The dilemma resulting from a contrast between an emphasis on a patrilineal ideology and a more flexible and variable set of camping, grazing, and political alternatives is resolved by Sheikhanzai who view married sisters as continuing and contributing members of the patrilineage. Relationships with and through women are not extraneous to the social system; they are part of the practical reality of how households, camps, and lineages are inter-related with one another both in ideology and in practice. Diversified and multi-stranded networks preserve and promote ecological and political adaptiveness, but they do so within the framework of patrilineal organization.

Sister-brother ties bind Sheikhanzai society together and control against ecological and political pressures towards fissioning and fragmentation. Surplus animals are frequently grazed on pasture lands of kinsfolk in other territories, and the most common distribution of animals in such fashion occurs among affines and matrilineal relatives. In both cases the Sheikhanzai conceptualize such ties in terms of sister-brother ties rather than in terms of marriage. That is, they suggest that the animals are being care for by their female agnates, which is literally true with respect to dairy production activities, rather than by their brothers-in-law. Furthermore, these animals should not be sold or otherwise re-transacted, but should remain under the control, through not explicitly the ownership, of a sister.

In matrilineal relationships as well, a mother's brother becomes responsible for assistance to a sister's son who, well before his birth, had a portion of his potential patrimony given by his father's family to his mother's relatives. As in the affinal relationships, the linkage is specifically recognized as being between sisters and brothers and not between inter-married households and lineages.

Sister-brother ties, in the context of patrilineality and segmentary lineages, also intensify the cooperative relationships between patrilineal cousins who may become affines as well as agnates. In the broadest sense, of course, all Sheikhanzai are cousins who are interrelated with one another through agnatic ties, through marriage, and through residence. The latter two forms of relationship are not contrasted with agnatic relations, however, since both are, in practice as well as in ideology, alternative means by which agnatic ties are expressed and consolidated.

To be sure, for each individual Sheikhanzai, these ties represent «an extensive network of personal links,» as Marx suggests (1977: 357);

however these personal networks are not merely based on ad hoc considerations of practical advantage, but on established and on-going relationships between sisters and brothers, and between cousins, within a patrilineal and segmentary kinship structure. Through the maintenance of patterns of endogamous marriage principles of segmentation and corporateness based upon both male and female agnatic links ensure adequate and extensive access to pasture, flexible and reciprocal patterns of economic cooperation, and the political bases for a collective response to external pressures from other ethnic groups and from the Afghan central state.

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