

New Trends in the Study of Pastoral Nomads

by

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This essay examines the contribution made by Pastoral Production and Society (1979) to the study of pastoral nomadism. The book is the end product of an international conference on nomadic pastoralism convened by a French group of anthropologists, The Equipe Ecologie et Anthropologie des Sociétés Pastorales. Held in 1976, it marks the end of an era of research on pastoral nomadism, and ushers in a new one. This seems to be a rather sweeping statement, in view of the diversity of the work included in the volume. It deals with North African, Nilotic, East African, Middle Eastern, European and Latin American peoples, and the themes discussed range from ecology, through stratification, to politics and market relations. Yet on closer inspection one discovers that many of the contributors share a set of common premises about the nature of pastoral nomads. At the same time, they question the validity of some premises, and make an effort to re-examine them. These premises are often only implicit but they can easily be inferred from the argument. A good example is Lefébure's Introduction; it is informed by five major premises.

First, Lefébure argues that pastoral nomads live in «sparsely inhabited environments, in regions... not suitable or totally unsuitable for regular cultivation» (p. 1). Of course, such a statement is only partially true, for many pastoral nomads live in areas fit for cultivation. For instance, large tracts of land belonging to the Baggara Arabs of Sudan are well-watered, up to 900 mm annually (Cunnison 1966:13) and have in recent years been turned to cultivation. And all pastoral nomads need access to some well-watered pastures. While they often spend the winter in low rainfall areas and exploit the lush spring vegetation, during the hot dry summer they must be able to use water and pasture. This is not just a factual error; the matter goes deeper than that. The ecological bias in Lefébure's reasoning has perhaps caused an oversight that has far-reaching implications. For the pastoralists' dependence on summer pastures means that during part of each year they come under the influence of settled populations and the state. This political and economic dependence is not part of Lefébure's analysis. Yet an ethnography that does not take this into account is incomplete.

Second, while aware that some pastoral nomads also engage in cultivation and other economic activities, Lefébure treats them as if they concentrated all their efforts on their herds. He even believes that agricultural activities are harmful to pastoralists (p. 8), and overlooks the fact that nearly all of them subsist on cereals. These are produced either by themselves, by a client population, by farming communities with which they maintain institutionalised relationships, or in market exchange. It is becoming clear that few pastoralists subsist on milk products only; to do so they would require very large herds. Even ethnographers who shared the pastoralist bias of the people they studied, and tend to underestimate the importance of non-pastoral economic activities, report that grains are the staple food (Cunnison 1966:29; Evans-Pritchard 1940:83). How they obtain the grain, whether by farming or by exchange, is an essential part of the anthropological study of «pastoralists».

Third, Lefébure offers the observation that «although few pastoralists may refer to this, livestock has a market value» (p. 3). He implies that he will not go any further than that, and consider the effect of markets on society. Does he think that animals are produced only because they contribute to the diet of their owners, and because they can be marketed in an emergency? I would argue that the assumption should be that animals are usually produced for sale in a market or for exchange against grain and other goods. On the contrary, if there is no market for the pastoralist's products, then this needs explanation. One may surmise that in most instances this may be due to the fact that a colonial or other hostile administration has barred access to the market. In addition, marketing must be part of the analysis because it affects such matters as migration routes, size of herds, patterns of consumption and social inequalities.

This leads to the fourth point: Lefébure tacitly ignores the impact of states and their policies on pastoralists. Or else, how could he believe in the myth of overstocking, when referring to pastoralists who have for many centuries maintained themselves on the land. The notion of «overstocking» is suspect, because it is often not caused by the pastoralist, as the word implies, but by changing conditions and acts of governments over which he has no control. When the state alienates tribal land in order to set up villages or game parks, when it abolishes tribal jurisdiction and opens up areas to the wider public, or when it does not allow the pastoralist to sell his animals on the market (often under the guise of veterinary regulations) in order to promote the interests of ranches, the inevitable outcome is overstocking. But such a process can be fully understood only when the interaction between pastoralists and the state and its agents becomes an integral part of the analysis.

Finally, Lefébure seems to accept the convention that pastoral nomads are organised in segmentary political systems. This is evident in statements such as «kinship structures functioned as political structures» (p. 10), or that «The discourse of members of a lineage society is rooted in kinship relations which are consubstantial with the group» (p. 10). The oversimplified model of so-called «tribal» or «acephalous» societies has bedeviled a generation of anthropologists. They thought that «tribesmen» participate only in two major social frameworks, the family and the tribe. The latter was an overarching unit, a society, which encompassed the whole range of human activities. It was divided into smaller units, each of them replicas of the larger ones, as far as functions and structure were concerned. Yet a closer look shows that the individual, in this case the pastoral nomad, is not just a «tribesman». He is involved in numerous groups and relationships, each of them different in structure and function, each with its distinct membership and with its own dynamic, and all connected in complex ways. Thus the tribe is often a territorial unit, or a unit of subsistence, that never acts as a political unit. Or the tribe may be an administrative territorial unit with an appointed chief, and thus part of the state. Corporate descent groups are political action groups which may join or fight each other as occasion demands, but never do so according to a genealogical paradigm. Members of a descent group may, but do not have to be kinsmen; they do not treat each other as kin, but as corporate associates, who collaborate for clearly defined purposes only. Kinship networks cut across group boundaries, often extending beyond the tribe. This is only a short list that could be extended indefinitely. The segmentary political system therefore exists only as a folk theory, and a pertinent question is why so many nomadic pastoralists in different parts of the world have evolved similar versions of it.

I have singled out Lefébure's introduction for examination simply because it presented a convenient target: it faithfully reflected the thinking of the majority of contributors. The picture that emerges thus emphasises conventional views and does not do justice to the individual contributions, many of which attack and reject some of the accepted theoretical notions. In order to correct this impression, let us briefly glance at the first three articles, all of which attempt to construct generalised models of pastoral nomadism. Each article is critical of some theoretical premise, and accepts others unquestioningly. Goldschmidt's ambitious model of pastoral nomadic societies has nothing to say about market forces or the political environment, and refers to the segmentary lineage as «a structure that links each individual household to ever larger structures until a major section of the whole social universe is incorporated» (p. 23). Note that this statement even includes the household in the segmentary frame, and thus goes further than most adherents of the theory. Goldschmidt is well aware that pastoral nomads often participate in multi-resource economies. But he feels there is no need to deal with the issue, because «whatever other economic activities are engaged in, they are accommodated to the demands that animal husbandry makes upon the people» (p. 16). So he does not see a problem there. Planhol too treats pastoral nomadism as a single-resource closed segmentary political system. His main concern is, however, with the effects of population pressure and security on the nomads. He claims that increased population pressure leads to the development of more rigid political frameworks. This is a rather simple ecological mechanism and Planhol recognises that it does not work for the Kababish of Sudan: these pastoral nomads are thinly spread on the ground, and are governed by a powerful «leading lineage» (Asad 1970). Planhol realises that this phenomenon can be understood in the wider political context, for the leaders of the Kababish are part of the national political elite and occupy a series of strategic administrative appointments. This insight is immediately set aside: «The supreme authority (of the Kababish) is an artificial phenomenon imposed by the colonial power» (p. 34), and presumably should not be included in a sociological analysis. Tapper is a more adventurous spirit. While he still implicitly deals with nomadic pastoralists as engaged in single-resource economies, and takes no account of economic and political forces impinging on them, he questions the validity of «mechanical models of 'tribal genealogical structure' or complementary opposition» (p. 48), because these are not more than native models of society. He identifies two types of groups found among most pastoral nomads: one is an unstable local group built around a core of agnates, concerned chiefly with the exploitation of natural resources and the protection of members (pp. 58-60); the other is a larger, stable, endogamous «primary reference group» (p. 62), about whose functions Tapper is not quite clear. Here is a crude, but worthwhile attempt to break away from the customary preoccupation with segmentary political organization, and to examine the variety of complex interconnected structures at work in society. In other words, Tapper prefers the manner of Evans-Pritchard's *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer* (1951) to that of *The Nuer* (1940), and he deserves credit for this. The passages dealing with the two groups could have led Tapper on to a fuller revision of accepted notions about pastoral nomadism, but perhaps the time had not yet arrived.

An examination of other essays yields similar results. There is almost a standard pattern: they all criticize certain theoretical positions, without pursuing their points, and without attempting a more general critique of conventional anthropological viewpoints. Radical terminology abounds, but one misses radical thinking. Thus numerous authors express dissatisfaction with aspects of segmentary political theory, but no one pulls together the various strands of the argument and mounts a full-scale attack.

This may be a rather jaundiced view of the book, that should immediately be qualified. I found two articles which introduced new arguments and then followed them through with convincing argument, those by Hamès and Swift. Hamès takes European economic penetration of Moorish emirates as the starting-point for analysis. He treats Moorish society as fully integrated into a worldwide political and economic order, and this viewpoint allows him to reinterpret supposedly «internal» changes, such as the rise of the marabouts and the decline of the warrior class. Swift similarly treats Somali pastoralists in the context of changing international commerce. The picture presented in these two articles is strikingly different from most of the others. It is not a coincidence that both authors employ historical data in addition to purely ethnographic observations. The historical material permits them to go beyond the boundaries of time and place. They cease to view the tribe as a closed system with only an internal dynamic and limited links to the outside world. For them the Moors and Somalis are part of a large and complex world, not «tribesmen» or «pastoral nomads».

Some of the authors will probably agree with my critique of their articles. For since 1976, the date of the conference, there has been a spate of studies of «pastoral nomads». They have provided new insights, and made use of older insights that had until then been ignored. Good examples of such innovative works are Bates (1972) and Galaty (1980), but many others could be cited with equal justification. Much of this new work was done by participants in the conference, and it is quite remarkable what change has been wrought in such a short time. The new ideas are shared and propagated through the very active Equipe Ecologie et Anthropologie des Sociétés Pastorales and the IUAES Commission for Nomadic Peoples. This work, one hopes, will soon merge into mainstream social anthropology.

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