

## Introduction: the specificity of nomadic pastoral societies

**CLAUDE LEFÉBURE**

The International colloquium on nomadic pastoralism, held in Paris in December 1976, was not planned with the aim of exploring an empirical field; it was, rather, the result of the desire of its organizers to develop theoretical questions which had been raised by the project they had adopted: to study the socio-economic specificity of pastoral societies. And indeed, this meeting did provide an opportunity of discussing, among other topics, the kind of hypotheses and propositions normally connected with this research approach and, more generally, of debating the different theoretical and methodological approaches that have inspired the most important contemporary work on nomadic livestock raising societies. Virtually every one of the members of our group “*Ecologie et anthropologie des sociétés pastorales*” represented in this volume deals with certain of these hypotheses and propositions. Other findings arising from their joint investigations, and presented in their introductory reports to the different working sessions, have not been included in this volume. So it has fallen to me to summarize, by way of introduction, and doubtless with inevitable personal overtones, the major ideas that are under discussion and which we would like to see pursued. I shall at least try to outline these in their logical sequence.

The feature common to all societies referred to as nomadic pastoral is that they all, to a greater or lesser degree, rest upon nomadic pastoral productive activities, i.e. on exploitation of the primary producer (the herb layer) through the intermediary of gregarious migratory herbivorous flocks or herds under the management of a human group; these societies, moreover, are located in sparsely inhabited environments, in regions which, whether from natural or from historical causes, are either not very suitable or totally unsuitable for regular cultivation. But while this particular pattern of appropriation of nature allows the geographer to identify an original *genre de vie* (type of production activity) and to list and classify its variants, it does not, by itself, define a specific form of social evolution. In our view, the nature of pastoral productive forces, however exclusive they may be (and they are never entirely so), is not the determining

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factor in establishing the originality of the forms of economic and social organization developed by the pastoralists. In themselves, to be sure, these productive forces entail varying degrees of constraints, some of which are from time to time extremely harsh, and these do delimit a determinative field that is well worth exploring. But it is necessary to study as well the conditions in which the processes and the products of pastoral labour are appropriated at the different levels of social integration (whose internal structure and functioning are themselves factors of production). It is surely significant that the all too few studies of the sociological implications of the material bases and technical practices of pastoral societies that have been made, have rarely obtained more than findings expressed in terms of limitations, of limiting factors, viability thresholds, and so forth. With the aid of mathematical simulation procedures, our understanding of the theoretical growth capacity of a herd – based on its age and sex structure, the species of domestic animal under consideration, and on a variety of other circumstances – has recently been enhanced (Dahl & Hjort 1976) by developments called for by certain ecology-oriented anthropologists (Dyson-Hudson 1972). But given the inadequacies underlying the theory of productive forces, how could they make the fullest possible use of this contribution? Some studies, however, do appraise the impact of constraints specific to nomadic pastoralism in other terms. They do so in terms of the consequences of spatial mobility upon political organization, for example: specialists of Iranian pastoral societies have dealt with this question in the past (Barth 1961; Salzman 1967) and the hypotheses they put forward are now coming under discussion, as in the contributions to this volume of Tapper, Digard and Lefébure.

If this type of analysis of productive forces were to mask the importance of studying the conditions surrounding their appropriation, however, we would soon end up with a kind of materialist reductionism. We may take it that societies that practise nomadic animal husbandry today constitute the typical form assumed by the structure of relations of production to be described; but there is no reason why other productive specializations may not correspond to it also. For example, low-mobility stockbreeding combined with shifting cultivation, with the latter supplying the bulk of resources, as in the case of the Tanzanian Gogo (Rigby 1969), or even shifting cultivation alone. Nomadic pastoral societies that have settled and become agro-pastoral have preserved their initial productive organization; the striking contrasts between these societies and village communities in the Sudano-Sahelian zone with whom they have close contact, provides evidence of the irreducibility of the two socio-economic systems.

In non-stratified nomadic pastoral societies we find a tissue of social relations characterized by a particular combination of domestic and community patterns of production.

Production is, in the first place, organized within domestic groups that are chiefly based on a family nucleus, although it may equally be founded upon

relationships other than those of kinship. These livestock-owning groups supply the labour necessary to the upkeep, growth and reproduction of the herd while simultaneously making use of its polyfunctionality for their own reproduction purposes: livestock are both consumable and a source of consumable products and goods, including offspring; although few pastoralists may refer to this, livestock has a market value; it serves to establish and cultivate social relations, including community ties when the latter are renewed through sacrifices to the deities. However personal rights over a given head of livestock may be, even when the beneficiary is external to the domestic group (as in the case of animals received for safekeeping, on loan or in association), the group, and its herd, constitute an autonomous unit of production. Pastoralists do not exclude the possibility of broader forms of labour organization: if certain domestic groups are short on labour, they may cooperate in carrying out some activities (guarding animals, defence, pastoral movements, commercial expeditions, etc.), and this cooperation is generally accompanied by co-residence. However, these forms tend to be temporary and shifting and can be unpredictable as well.

It should be pointed out here that this first feature requires a certain equilibrium between the domestic group and the herd. Primarily, this entails balancing the sizes of human and animal units (Stenning 1958; Leeds 1965). It is even more important to note that families and herds develop along parallel lines. Each stockbreeder seeking to found a new production unit and to ensure its reproduction is faced with two requirements: first, he needs to acquire livestock and one or more wives; second, he must be able at least to maintain the size of his herd and to beget heirs. The controlled circulation of women through marriage, which implies the circulation of a portion of the herd through different matrimonial payments, and the gradual transfer of rights over animals (pre-inheritance), which starts with the birth of an heir but which is often followed by the division of the domestic herd only after the marriage of that heir, and sometimes later still; all these combine to produce the parallel evolution mentioned above. Consequently, we cannot explain the matching sizes of the domestic group and its herd solely in terms of the human unit's subsistence requirements and its labour capacity. Rather, the size of the herd corresponds to a moment in the domestic group's developmental cycle; in other words, this group's food requirements having been satisfied in one way or another, herd-size is a function of the intensity, at the time in question, of the technico-economic, matrimonial, political and symbolic practices designed to ensure the group's reproduction.

The exchange of animals on the occasion of marriages or other occasions serves to establish, or to revive, social relations. As a result, the parallel reproduction of families and of herds is also, simultaneously, the reproduction of a part of the extra-domestic social relations that count among the conditions underlying the autonomy of the domestic production unit.

This is because nomadic pastoralism is also organized within a community

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structure. The domestic groups making up the community enjoy access to grazing land, wells, natural salt licks and salt springs, in other words, to natural resources that have been more or less transformed and are collectively developed and administered. In conceiving and implementing their own strategies, herdsman seek to manipulate the different characteristics of this environment to their best advantage: nature and location of grazing areas, first, and then their productivity (which is variable in time), as this represents the most binding factor of the ecosystem. One resultant factor is the mobility of domestic units of production and the fluidity of their consequent aggregates. This would not be permissible were it not for the collective appropriation of the resources of the grazing lands or failing that, the recognition of generalized personal right of usufruct. Each herdsman, however, possesses no more than access rights equivalent to those enjoyed by his peers.

At the level of production, therefore, the community may take the form of a territorial community, appear as the spatial projection of defensive bonds or of ties of cooperation, or co-residence, or exchange of animals. This is so both in cases where variability of these ties is the rule – as with most cattle-breeding societies – and in those where, on the contrary, these ties are apparently governed more or less strictly by the political organization, as in the case of segmentary lineage societies. This territorial insertion is but one of the bases upon which the community may be identified, and it may indeed be absent in cases of rapid expansion (as in the case of the migratory group of the nomadic Fulani, the case of the Turkana section, and also, perhaps, the case of the Reguibat when they switched in the nineteenth century from breeding small animals to breeding the dromedary). In such cases, the unity of the group depends entirely on its consciousness of a shared cultural heritage.

In all cases, though, it would appear that the real existence of the community entity and property depends on relations established in the course of productive activities by the different domestic groups, within which “the economic totality is contained, in the final analysis”. Even when land-rights are strictly laid down, territory does not, contrary to what happens in village communities, appear to be a “natural assumption underlying production”, but as a “collective appendage of traditional individual establishments”, to quote Marx. We may indeed, as Bonte (1974) has shown, apply Marx’s analysis of the so-called Germanic form of transformation of the “primitive community” (as expounded in the *Grundrisse*) to nomadic pastoral societies.

Among the Germanic tribes, where the individual family chiefs settled in the forests, long distances apart, the commune exists, already from *outward* observation, only in the periodic gathering-together [*Vereinigung*] of the commune members, although their unity-*in-itself* is posited in their ancestry, language, common past and history, etc. The *commune* thus appears as a *coming-together* [*Vereinigung*], not as a *being-together* [*Verein*]; as a unification made up of independent subjects, landed proprietors, and not as a unity. (Marx 1974: 483; original emphasis.)

The distinction between community in production and community founded –

prior to any form of productive activity – at a superstructural level turns out to be particularly appropriate and fruitful. As the outcome of an inversion in the herdsman's consciousness of the objective conditions underlying economic and social life, the community "in itself" (*en soi*) – the structural principles of "society in its spontaneous purity" – is what would appear to determine the activity of domestic units, the community pattern of production and of reproduction of society. In Nilo-Hamitic pastoral societies, for instance, where in addition to language, history, and so forth, various age-set and ritual organization systems go to make up the backbone of the community "in itself", members of a tribe believe that their coexistence is justified by a series of indispensable collective religious duties. The social conditions of production and reproduction are disguised owing to the fact that they appear to be the outcome of the circulation of livestock among men on the one hand, and between men and the supreme god on the other; the group's own delimitation of itself reifies the limits of the system of reciprocal livestock rights. The reproduction of natural conditions is similarly conceived as forming part of an imaginary relationship, albeit sustained through animal sacrifice, with the divinity.

Among the neighbouring Nuer (whose community organization differs, but to whose religion particular attention has been paid, in contrast to the usual reticence of functional anthropologists in this respect) the inversion of social relations in people's consciousness is validated by the myth of a congenital association between men and cattle followed by a parallel evolution of the two species; individually, the Nuer experience this through identification with a favourite animal, whose loss may even lead to suicide (Evans-Pritchard 1956). In segmentary lineage societies, where the characteristic feature of the community "in itself" is the importance attached to the genealogical principle, the properties that are liable to result from this in connection with spatial organization, e.g. the matching of territorial to lineage segmentations, directly define the herdsman's rights of access to the collective resources. Unlike the case of age-set societies, where no connection can be drawn between the general pattern of the community and the blood-ties which structure the domestic group, the superstructural conditions for the realization of the community may in this case seem to correspond to the kinship relations actually involved in the productive activities of minimal units. It should be borne in mind, however, that at the level of the segmentary community "in itself", genealogy is an ideology that the cult of the ancestors frequently tinges with religiosity, whereas within each family, descent and sibblingship are effective ties even if they can be manipulated. In any case, there is reason to think that it is because the community only really exists on the basis of relations established and sustained by the domestic groups, because its territorial status itself is merely a consequence, that it requires some form of ideological guarantee and that its conditions of reproduction call for some basis external to the objective conditions of production.

To sum up, in our view, the structural specificity of non-stratified nomadic

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pastoral societies lies in their particular combination of a domestic with a community pattern of production, the whole being characterized by the autonomy of the domestic animal husbandry units on the one hand and on the other, the *de facto* character of the actual community organization. This trait goes hand in hand with the pre-eminent function of the community's own ideology in the reproduction process. Seen thus, this specificity seems to us to constitute an original historical evolutionary path of which, following Germanic societies between Caesar and the great invasions, still undifferentiated nomadic pastoral societies may be regarded as a typical product.

If we were now able to go on to demonstrate that inequality, on the one hand, and the centralization of power on the other, become institutionalized in these societies according to specific patterns, then the hypothesis concerning their socio-historic specificity would be close to validation. We shall refrain from attempting this until we have first made clear in what way nomadic pastoral societies can be considered to be egalitarian.

It is commonly held that these societies favour the preservation of political equality among their members (Goldschmidt 1971), and certain authors are even prepared to deduce this simply from the frequency of the segmentary lineage system among pastoral societies (Schneider 1974). Lewis' book, *A pastoral democracy* (1961) certainly does deal with a Somali group organized along these lines, but in age-set societies equality between members of a given set may also be recognized (Gulliver 1958; Spencer 1965). Whichever type of organization we examine, political equality clearly concerns heads of family and not individuals as a whole; women and young men may be respectively equal among themselves, but they remain – albeit temporarily in the case of the latter – dependent upon the head of family. Spelling this out more clearly, equality applies to heads of family in their capacity as representatives of autonomous domestic units; it reflects the structural equivalence of these groups within the productive community and the equality of their access rights to collective resources.

But these same conditions also serve as a basis for the economic inequality that has always been found among nomadic pastoralists. Each productive unit is more or less responsible for coping on its own with most of the natural and social factors involved in animal husbandry. The family's labour supply is mainly dependent on its ability to produce the requisite offspring; the family relies on the individual capacities of its members, and in particular on the head of family's talents as manager and strategist; it is subject to climatic, epidemiological vagaries and historical vicissitudes; and so forth. All these factors serve to generate unequal pastoral results, and any difference is amplified by the high productivity of animal husbandry. The plurifunctionality of livestock – when one thinks of the impact of its circulation – also amplifies these differences.

Among Nilo-Hamitic herdsmen, for example, a man who owns large herds may enjoy a proliferation of “livestock relations” through marriages and loans. He may weave around himself a web of economic and social relations that can subsequently prove of great advantage. He will be more resilient, recovering more quickly from the consequences of drought, animal epidemics, enemy raids, etc, as the network of reciprocity that he has constructed will enable him to rebuild his herd more rapidly. Through his wide-spread social relations, he will have access to a choice of grazing lands and wells; so much so that among the Karimojong, for example, one herdsman may enjoy access to as much as four or five times the amount of space within the tribal territory as the least-favoured of his peers (Dyson-Hudson 1966). He is in a position to pay or otherwise secure the services of a shepherd. Above all, his wealth will affect his social status, giving him greater influence in the council of the elders. A newly-rich herdsman may therefore acquire the rank of notable or leader. This promotion cuts both ways, however, as one of its consequences will be to undermine the basis of his prestige, since his new position will oblige him to redistribute portions of his accumulated herd, on the occasion of rituals, for example, when a notable is expected to display his wealth by supplying the animals for sacrifice; he is also expected to slaughter his own animals in order to tide the community over in periods of scarcity. The combined interplay of the different institutions therefore works permanently to re-establish the structural equality of production units, and this process is often accompanied by a genuine egalitarian ideology.

Returning to the question of high labour productivity, it should be pointed out that this is not a constant. Such advances as this may enjoy in the broadened process of reproduction are more than likely to exacerbate the above-mentioned inequalities. This may well lead to intensified efforts to redress the balance in favour of equality. But the heightened labour productivity can itself lead to over-accumulation of livestock on the part of the community as a whole, ultimately threatening the reproduction of the natural conditions of pastoral activity (irreversible deterioration of pasture land and of the environment). This crisis, which reflects the difficulties standing in the way of community control over the domestic units, is characteristic of the contradiction between forces of production and relations of production in pastoral societies. With the exception of situations where this may actually lead to the conquest of fresh pasture lands – significantly, in age-set societies, this is carried out by the younger generations – or where it results in a transformation of social relations in such a way as to ratify inequality, this crisis will be resolved by either a sudden or a gradual fall in numbers and hence in labour productivity. Where this fall is brutal, it is usually the result of grave military defeat or of “natural” catastrophes (in fact the disastrous consequences of the group’s heightened sensitivity to these dangers). At their last apogee, the Maasai thus exposed themselves seriously to the effects of the outbreak of cattle plague at the end of the nineteenth century. Their neighbours, the Turkana, were spared these ravages owing to the fact that

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their herds were smaller and more scattered; they were able to benefit from this circumstance and to take over the grazing land that had now become useless to the Maasai. The gradual pattern of resolution of crises of over-accumulation can take the form of an intensification of cultivation, inasmuch as the society is characterized by a sex-based division of labour, with work in the fields being the exclusive preserve of women. Because of its rather dubious efficiency due to environmental conditions and to the techniques employed, agriculture is merely a source of supplementary income; but the fact that it restricts the mobility of domestic production units at precisely the moment when the contrary is required means that it serves to lower the productivity of animal husbandry. Under these conditions, it becomes possible for part of the society to specialize in pastoral activities and, ultimately, to accede to autonomy: this would account for the cyclical development of Nilo-Hamitic pastoral societies and their splitting off from a common origin (Gulliver 1952). In this way, the structural equality and the autonomy of domestic production units may be restored through the very process of unequal accumulation of livestock which this system encourages.

While it seems thus to be established that inequalities resulting from the herdsmen's autonomous strategies do not directly pave the way to a weakening of the structural equality of units of production, we should avoid exaggerating the effectiveness in all circumstances of the institutional mechanisms and natural avatars normally supposed to work permanently against these inequalities. In the Maghreb and the Middle East, ritual sacrifices, collective feasting and massive death of herds never reach the proportions nor the regularity they do among East African pastoral societies. With their bigger herds, and frequently, more rational use of space – transporting livestock in lorries, for example – the big herdsmen enjoy a superior capacity to exploit grazing land and they are constantly adding to it. While the community's segmentary organization and its egalitarian ideology continue to survive, these herdsmen nevertheless frequently manage virtually to appropriate common property to themselves, amounting to a quasi-expropriation of their "peers"; and there is nothing temporary about this expropriation. Here, the fact that part of the pastoral population may switch to settled farming doubtless takes on a different significance. To begin with, this division of labour is not seen as leading to a fall in labour productivity; on the contrary, the moment it occurs or spreads, it often increases this productivity. Secondly, the impoverished families that do settle often do so acting for newly-rich stockbreeders seeking to diversify their sources of income, so much so that certain observers have seen in these non-egalitarian relations one of the conditions for the reproduction of the agro-pastoral system in question (Digard 1973). Tasks may be divided up differently, with poor people working as shepherds for the wealthy, who are unwilling to endure the hardships of nomadic life. In fact, the two situations tend to work together to the advantage of the better-off, and in some cases the latter even manage to



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avoid any kind of immediately material productive activity whatever. This state of social relations is characteristic, for example, of the settled Twareg societies in the Southern Air (Bonte 1975). In Morocco, through a variety of patterns of pastoral association – which, significantly, have changed over the past few decades from indigenous systems of participation in the growth of the herd to capitalist forms of participation in the increase of its sales value – city-dwellers in the foothill regions of the Middle Atlas actually come to find themselves exploiting high-altitude grazing lands of which they are not the rightful owners. In view of the substantial proportion of settled people of recent montagnard extraction among the local city populations (Beudet 1969), the deterioration of relations of appropriation specific to the pastoral communities in question must be appraised in terms other than – to put it briefly – the opposition between “external factors and internal dynamism”.

Obviously, we shall not claim here to encompass the full diversity of the process of transformation of the non-stratified nomadic pastoral community, but it does seem possible, in the most general terms, to identify the characteristics of a particular pattern of emergence of social inequality. Briefly, it seems as if the initial change is in all cases a modification in the conditions of operating and reproduction of the community in such a way that one group controls the conditions identified as being superstructural for these societies.

As the reader will have understood by now, the formation of non-egalitarian relations of production in nomadic pastoral societies seems to us generally to occur in periods of rising labour productivity and accumulation within domestic units, thereby leading to a sharpening of internal contradictions in the society in question. The fundamental contradiction within the specific structure of egalitarian relations of production, namely the contradiction between the domestic framework of productive work and the community conditions of reproduction, thus seems to be determined by a contradiction between relations of production and forces of production. Where there is no fall in the productivity of pastoral labour, intensive social practices are required in order to maintain the stability of the society. As with problems connected with access to grazing resources, tensions related to the circulation of women and animals become exacerbated between lineages and/or generations and/or between brothers. Significantly, the fission of domestic units gathers speed, which has its synchronic counterpart in the increasing nuclearization of these units when we turn from those agro-pastoral societies that are least specialized in animal husbandry, i.e. the ones in which animal husbandry is least productive, to the most specialized pastoral societies, in which animal husbandry is most productive. This action upon tensions is designed chiefly to influence what are believed to be the ultimate conditions of the community's fulfillment. It thus makes it possible to shift these contradictions onto the level of the community “in itself”, while at the same time preparing the ground for the appropriation of this action by a group specialized in religious or political functions. A good

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example of this process is supplied by the development of a positive devotion to the *laibon* intercessors among the Maasai. These are hereditary section or tribal leaders, and their functions are chiefly magico-religious; during the nineteenth century, however, they seem also to have acquired the power to redistribute families among sections and to appoint to each section its allotted pasture zone. This would appear to have been a highly remunerative form of anthropotry, if we are to believe our sources (Fosbrooke 1948), with the *laibon* accumulating – among other things – wives, which they received without being expected to pay the usual matrimonial compensations. One fraction of society may thus come to secure for itself permanent control over the imaginary conditions of social reproduction, which may provide it with an opportunity of modifying earlier rules of circulation to its own benefit, and first of all of establishing lasting forms of diversion of the surplus product of domestic units intended for the reproduction of the community as a whole. In such cases, social reproduction then ensures the reproduction of the difference between these specialists and the remainder of society.

This initial transformation leads to a gradual reorganization of social relations as a whole, and of relations of production in particular. The historical processes involved may certainly be diverse, and this may be related to the differences observed with reference to the community “in itself”. For example, the relatively closed nature of the politico-religious sphere in non-stratified East African societies undoubtedly tends to encourage the marked centralization of power and hierarchization of the ruling class characteristic of the interlacustrine divine kingdoms. In segmentary lineage societies, where, prior to the institutionalization of inequality, kinship structures functioned as political structures, the evolution towards a class society may occur without affecting the community’s ideological form. Members of the dominant group, in such cases, enjoy equal rights in the exercise of their control. The dominated group itself preserves the attributes of segmentarity, but it is gradually excluded from the political sphere as the latter acquires increasing autonomy. Because the discourse of members of a segmentary lineage society is rooted in kinship relations which are consubstantial with the group, the alteration in the conditions of realisation of the community does not render it obsolete, even though this alteration may necessitate certain modifications. Among the Mongols, for instance, we find a rigidification in the relation of seniority underlying the opposition between the “white bone” (noble) and “black bone” (common) orders. In certain segmentary Muslim societies open to rivalry in honour between endogamous lineages, the semantic merger: “honour/protection” (*horma*) significantly accompanies the emergence of the pre-eminence of an aristocracy.

These differences, however, ought not to obscure what is commonly entailed by the genesis of class relations. Relations of production are changed. Concerning the community pattern of production, the conditions governing the circulation of animals are altered by the newly instituted hierarchy among social