

Commission on Nomadic Peoples

“Comment on ‘Segmentary Lineage Theory and Sheikhanzai practice’”

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Segmentary Lineage Theory and Sheikhanzai Practice: A Comment.
by Asen Balikci.

B. Tavakolian has written an interesting paper clearly illustrating the strength, vigor and adaptability of segmentary lineage forms among a Western Durrani pastoral group. The functional importance of segmentary kinship is most easily visible at the local level where it provides both the blueprint for social solidarity and supplementary strategies for better ecological adaptation. Further, agnatic ideology allows the exploitation of brother-sister linkages (surplus animals being cared for by female agnates) thus widening the sphere of social cohesion with apparently important economic benefits. Lineage members, the Kakazadeh, share rights to common pasture, rights to water, distribute among themselves surplus camels and engage in collective merchandizing of animal products and wheat.

We are told that wealthy households do exist but specific levelling mechanisms and the volatile fortunes of pastoralism fail to stabilize leadership. Sharing and reciprocity are considered as intrinsic aspects of lineage based adaptive strategies, democratic communalism thus seems as an expression of agnatic segmentation. The cohesive force of lineage solidarity helps the Sheikhanzai repulse various pressures from both neighbouring sedentary villagers and central government authorities. Tribal ideology and agnatic structure is not maintained only as an alternative form in response to political crisis situations as Salzman suggests,¹ it has a visible and practical relevance in seasonal operations both inside and outside camp units. Central in Tavakolian's analyses is the notion of the «common tribesman» who seems to be the principal beneficiary of lineage membership, he is the object of the wealthy leader's generosity.

There is no reason to doubt the validity of Tavakolian's descriptions and analyses. His discussion however raises a basic problem of «éclairage», giving a privileged position to certain forms probably to the detriment of others. Clearly Tavakolian's analysis is directly inspired by segmentary lineage theory as developed by British social anthropologists working among African tribes (Spooner, p. 24). This approach raises certain questions.

1. It is possible to state in general terms that many Pashtoon pastoralists and certainly others in South West Asia face a deep contradiction with important social effects. On the one hand tribal ideology and lineage solidarity produce an egalitarian mentality in harmony with the «common tribesman» imagery. This is particularly true of Pashtoons pastoral or sedentary and is described by Ahmed as an intense spirit of democracy (A. Ahmed, p. 5). That there are numerous practical translations of communalism and egalitarianism there is no doubt. On the other side, however, we should not forget that sheep are owned individually and basically each household is responsible for its economic fortunes although never in isolation. Further, sheep are definitely a «production for exchange» (Sahlins, p. 82 ff.) tying individual producers to markets. The sheep owner appears as an entrepreneur trying to maximize profits in what is basically a capitalist economy. In view of this the collective merchandizing practices of the Sheikhanzai need to be more clearly described in reference to sheep ownership and revenue from sales.

Dynamic entrepreneurial postures and capitalistic accumulative propensities have produced important internal stratifications based on wealth and this among several pastoral groups (Bradburd 1980, Irons p. 154 ff., Bates, p. 133 ff., Barth p. 101 ff. and Barfield 1978 p. 224). The tendency towards internal stratification seems prevalent and inevitable and it might be possible to grade pastoral groups along a continuum from less to more stratified. It is possible thus to place the Sheikhanzai at the beginning of the continuum and the Arab ranchers studied by Barfield at the end. The passage from kinship based communalistic forms to stratification is effectuated essentially through the increased importance of contract. Now contractual relations do usually benefit the wealthy sheep owner. The replacement of remuneration in kind by remuneration in money is a most important factor in the developmental history of contracts. It is my comment that Tavakolian by focusing on the cohesive and adaptive aspects of lineage organization has probably left out in the dark basic contemporary processes concerned with contract, accumulation and stratification.

2. The solidarity of Kakazadah, a generalized category of cousins raises another question. That Kakazadah camp fellows might form a cohesive and united front against rival groups there is no doubt. Yet the internal solidarity of Kakazadah is difficult to comprehend in reference to what is known about traditional rivalry with FāBrSo in Pashtoon society (tarboorwa). Indeed Ahmed writes: «As Freudian man is charged with hostility towards his father and Malinowskian man against avuncular authority the object of hostility of the Pushtun is his Father's Brother's Son (tarboor)» (Ahmed, p.6

This seems to be a critically important element in Pashtoon ideology and social organization. Although it might be possible to state (and there might be some evidence for it) that rivalry among cousins is substantially stronger among sedentary Pashtoons than among nomads, it is difficult to conceive the Sheikhanzai Kakazadah entirely free from it. Further it is possible to assume that tarboor utilize their entrepreneurial skills, the buoyant characteristics of the pastoral economy and the relative openness of the market to further their rivalry. This is basically what I observed in 1975 among the Lakenkhel of Baglan Province. It was a case of adaptation of a traditional, structural trait, tarboor rivalry, to an expanding capitalist economy. How far are the Sheikhanzai from this type of adaptation?

FOOTNOTES

1. Salzman's hypothesis receives full confirmation from the recent political events in Afghanistan where it is clearly the tribal form at various levels of segmentation which provides the solidary units for military action against the Soviet invaders.

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