Pastoralism and Class Differentiation among the Lakenkhel

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In a recent paper on the alleged equality of nomadic social systems Talal Asad draws attention to the necessity of perceiving pastoral groups from the outside and examining closely their historic position within global society. Asad argues that the social conditions of the pastoralists' existence are reproduced by this total system. Pastoral nomadism is a technical activity, "un genre de vie", expressive of certain forces of production which can be found in combination with different relations of production in specific historical settings. The crucial questions then refer to the formation and appropriation of surplus by pastoralists, the manner in which pastoral accumulation emerges from specific relations of production and how these are integrated into a dominant mode of production prevalent at the level of global society. More specifically Asad asks how, in each case, a determinate historical pattern of social division of labour comes to acquire class characteristics among pastoralists (Asad, 1979).

With these questions in mind I shall examine the case of the Lakenkhel of Northeastern Afghanistan, a Pashtoon group located in Baghlan province. At the time of the field research in 1975 most Lakenkhel were fully sedentarized; pastoral activities, however, were vigorously pursued in one lineage. The points illustrated here concern the dynamic interdependence of the two main production activities (pastoralism and agriculture), the contractual relations within the pastoral sector and the resulting historic emergence of class stratification differentially affecting specific Lakenkhel lineages.

Until the 1880's the Lakenkhel were established as pastoralists in the area north of Ghazni which they recognize as their traditional homeland. They suffered greatly during the Ghilzai revolt, when their flocks of sheep were destroyed and their leaders severely punished by Abdur Rahman. Following this disaster they moved to the Kohistan region (the southern slopes of the Hindu Kush) as dependent laborers. There they slowly reconstructed their flocks and opportunistically benefited from the newly-established peace and the opening of Northern Afghanistan, by engaging in caravan trade between Peshawar and the bazaars along the Oxus River valley. Their caravan route passed along Narin valley north of the Hindu Kush which was populated by
semi-nomadic Uzbak who combined transhumance with dry farming. The Lakenkhel saw the opportunity of acquiring land in the valley, which they did with the help of the government. Eventually the Uzbak were crowded onto the nearby dry plateaus and increasingly larger sections of Narin valley were brought under cultivation with the help of a tight network of irrigation canals and ditches. This initiated a long historic process of sedentarization for the Lakenkhel. At present the three Lakenkhel lineages (Baramkhel, Radirkhel and Salamkhel) occupy three distinct yet almost contiguous villages. Sub-lineages also behave as residential clusters. But nowadays, pastoral activities are primarily concentrated in one sub-lineage, namely the Baramkhel, while the others remain almost completely sedentary following the loss of their sheep at different times in recent history. There are two types of agriculture in the area: irrigated fields yielding two crops, with fertilizers crucially important to the success of the second crop; and dry fields, with productivity varying enormously from year to year according to precipitation.

The pastoral year begins in spring with the establishment of a lambing camp in the lowlands of Gerdau near the Kunduz River. These pastures are protected by the government and have been regularly used by the Lakenkhel and other Pashtoon nomadic groups for about two generations. In recent years following rapid demographic increase, neighbouring villagers have persistently tried to bring these pastures under cultivation. These encroachments have led to open fighting and hesitant government intervention. In 1976 the Lakenkhel considered these pressures as a danger to the pastoral entreprise and moved to another spring location.

Around early May the lambs are strong enough to undertake the move to the high mountain pastures. Flocks and caravans travel separately. The flocks move slowly around mountain slopes where grazing is available while the caravans travel quickly on the roads at the bottom of the valleys and stop frequently. At the stop in Narin the camels are loaded with summer supplies and the caravans enlarged by the addition of numerous cattle and horses to be fattened at the high mountain pastures. Around early June flocks and caravans reach the Daraykhar valley, at an elevation of about 3000 meters, in the heart of the Hindu Kush. There, the Lakenkhel have traditional grazing rights. According to custom these pastures belong to the Tadjik villagers established in the lower valley who primarily own goats which are better adapted to the bushy vegetation of lower altitudes. These villagers are the subjects of a powerful local chieftain and it is to him that the Lakenkhel pay tribute, the amount of which is renegotiated every year.

The Lakenkhel remain at the green pastures of Daraykhar until the middle of August when the male lambs are sold to related Lakenkhel traders who reside on the southern slopes of the Hindu Kush. Once back home the Lakenkhel pastoral families behave as sedentary villagers, completely separated from the flocks which graze throughout winter on wheat stubs and dry grass in the hills around Narin valley.

Lakenkhel migratory patterns reveal an unstable process of ecological