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CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON NOMADIC PASTORAL SOCIETIES

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"Culture" has a bad name among many students of nomadic pastoral societies, in part due to more general issues of theory or method in anthropology and the social sciences, and in part due to the specific inheritance of a literature on pastoralists. In this essay, I will try to review cultural factors both valuable and necessary for understanding livestock-keeping socio-economic systems, and at the same time reflect on the more general utility of a cultural perspective in anthropology, in general and in several specific guises. What is at stake is not saving a reputation or salvaging a name, but rebuilding out of the residue of several influential theoretical polarizations a powerful and holistic approach to understanding the ways of living and means of livelihood of communities seen as pastoralists.

Few current writers on the subject today fail to subject Herskovits' notion of a cultural "cattle complex"[1] in East Africa to a ritual flagellation, and at a time when knowledge about East African pastoralists has so dramatically exceeded what was available to Herskovits' when he wrote a cultural sketch from existing library sources, his essential position still commands attention as the epitomy of a cultural perspective. His account emphasized nonrational or "value" aspects of pastoralism, with "prestige" rather than interest being seen as the essential motive of livestock accumulation and "cowdolatry" as the basis of cultural elaboration of, and psychological focus on domestic animals. In addition, then, to the practical sin of ignoring empirical evidence of economic factors in pastoral systems, in search of an irreducible cultural complex, he is often taxed with the theoretical sin of idealism, since - in the German tradition - he concerned himself primarily with ideational data in search for a cultural Geist, a program with roots in the Hegelian tradition.

Much recent work on pastoral systems, especially in East Africa, represents - consciously or unconsciously - a backlash against Herskovits' misinterpretation of data and his generalizing method, which ran against the strong current of British anthropology concerned with social rather than cultural factors and - in part by virtue of the field work methods - particularizing rather than generalizing. The critics occupied firm and broad ground - through systematically investigating and describing the economic basis for pastoral practice, seen as individually rational through the observable calculations and strategies of herders responding to subsistence needs and ecological variations, and demonstrating a systems rationality

through functioning as a successful subsistence adaptation c human communities to arid and semi-arid conditions Socio-economic and ecological studies have clearly demonstrate the functional principles and the individual and system rationality of pastoral systems, and have clearly won the da against naive assertions - most often attributed to Herskovits of the nonrational basis for extensive and specialized anima husbandry.

Ironically, the only contributors to the debate who stil cite Herskovits are the most "hard-nosed" of the ecologists an development economists, who are often in the paradoxical positio of at once dismissing "cultural" perspectives and embracing the by asserting the irrationality of pastoral practices of husbandr and resource use and recommending they be changed, thu confirming the power of cultural factors while opposing them i the name of development. They in effect accept the notion that modes of pastoral accumulation represent pre-modern forms of conspicuous consumption or ostentatious display (c.f. Konczacki 1979), rather than pre-capitalist forms of capital accumulation, or more simply a set of methods to achieve subsistence sufficiency over time through stable rates of growth. This perpetuation of the myth of pastoral irrationality is, of course, linked to the practical advocacy by its proponents of animal conservation (against domestic husbandry) and rangeland development through sub-division, enclosure, and privitization. Thus their apparent confirmation of a rejected form of cultural analysis is united with a utilitarian formalism - demonstrated in exemplary form in the "tragedy of the commons" argument[2] - which makes sense only when seen as part of an essentially political attack on pastoralists. In a nutshell, their argument is that pastoralists now practice culture, but should be encouraged - or forced - to practice sound economy and ecology. This argument reveals in the most vivid form the theoretical dualism which distinguishes culture and the "practical" domains of human activity on the ground of rationality. But in such a problematic, what is lost?

Much of what we call "theory" in anthropology represents paradigms rather than propositions, that is, ways of organizing our inquiry into and thinking about the experience of community life rather than assertions amenable to test and falsification. Most often, we "enter into" a theoretical framework and within it produce knowledge; we rarely are able to assess the validity of the paradigm vis-a-vis other paradigms, other than in terms of its fertility or satisfaction rendered. In this sense, the critique of the culture-area concept by ecological and economic perspectives is essentially tautological. Within the framework of a marginalist economics we find the rationality of pastoral behavior, and within the context of a cultural ecology we discover the adaptive nature of pastoral institutions of subsistence production and resource use. It is useful to understand the factors bearing on herder decisions regarding herd composition, milk production versus calf reproduction, or herd

and household movement between pasture and water resources of differing quantity and quality. How illuminating it is to consider the principles of specialized pastoralism as an adaptation to subsistence needs in an arid land, a solution to the problem of carrying human population in a non-arable region or of producing wealth which is mobile and expandable, as are cattle - rather than localized and static, as is land and agricultural produce.[3] Such arguments tend, however, to be either reductionistic or dualistic, explaining the elaborations of culture and society as outgrowths of resource use and production, or dismissing them as irrational or nonrational and of little consequence.

While theoretical paradigms tend to imply criticism of each other, this criticism tends less towards falsification or refutation and more towards satire and "embarassment". Reductionist perspectives do not, in actuality, refute Herskovits' culture-area concept or the notion of a "cattle complex", but merely embarass it by its inability to account for the enormous subject matter of animal husbandry, pastoral economics, and resource use. Similarly, economic and ecological perspectives generally are not susceptible to refutation at the theoretical level, although within those frameworks substantive issues of fact and analysis may certainly be raised. Rather, they are to be embarassed by the residue of subject matter left unaccounted for, and their failure at dealing with linkages between levels of society or between human experience and institutional structures.

If "cultural perspectives" claim to address the "residue" of the two most influential and powerful theoretical perspectives in the field of pastoral studies today - the economic and ecological - this can be done in three ways, or at three levels of increasing fundamentality. In the first way, the dualism of culture and practical life is accepted, and the claim is made that analysis of pastoral economy or rangeland ecology leaves unexplained the nature of religious practices, food taboos, kinship terms, and cosmology, to mention a few. A determined cultural materialist[4] might dispute such criticism, claiming that adolescent circumcision, prohibitions on simultaneous consumption of meat and milk, Omaho kin terms, and myths which divinely sanction pastoral dominance, are cultural expressions of the adaptive demands of arid-land specialized pastoralism. Indeed, the holistic impulse behind such ingenious claims is compelling. Most observers would, however, accept an academic and theoretical division of labor, leaving study of the "cultural residue" to those who find it of interest, who might use such symbolic, interpretive, structural or semiotic appraoches as seem appropriate. Perhaps, it is thought by the reductionist, the nonrational residue needs such extreme remedies.

In the second way, this theoretical dualism is seen to fragment an anthropological concept into a "two-dimensional man"[5]

and to sell all too quickly the anthropological birthright of holistic science of human cultural variations and social action which requires contextualization of human practice. To make th point most strongly, reductionist perspectives on pastoralist tend to lack an adequate account of the specific cultural an historical form by which the subject matter of economy an ecology is defined, creatively shaped, and only then appropriate for practical use. In short, intent on the importance o economic and ecological subject matter, the reductionis perspective is left without an adequate theory of the mediatio between what is naturally and historically given, and huma action and thought.[6] Either pastoral systems are predicated or the calculated responses of individual herders (as if thei decisions and perceptions were made de nuovo, out of the context of a cultural system, received or produced anew by a community), or they are seen as reflexive adaptations to ecological conditions, a particularly prominent part of an arid landscape (as if what is selected out of the arid environment did not depend on a structure in place, which transcends particular ecological niches). At the second level, a cultural perspective would claim to account for not just the nonrational but the very means by which practical life is carried out, its "cultural rationality". To pursue examples from the previous paragraph, adolescent initiation is the way East African pastoralists reproduce the values of animal husbandry, an age-based division of labor, a production unit, and a military force, but none of these functions historically explains initiation; food prohibitions result in a more even distribution of food, but this function cannot explain the association of these prohibitions with human honor or symbolic symmetry; Omaha kin terms may structure in language the global distinctions between one's agnates and the affinal group between which critical exchanges of livestock occur, reinforcing pastoral distribution of resources and enhancement of economic security, but Omaha systems are universally distributed and not to be explained by livestock exchange which the system influences; and myths of the origin of pastoralists and their productive talents, which are associated with higher degrees of honor and status than alternative forms of occupation, certainly serve as charters for the pre-colonial domination of East Africa by pastoralists, but such myths are widely distributed and are symbolically structured in such a way as to reflect a global set of themes and cosmic contrasts.

In the third way, cultural perspectives can contribute to the analysis of pastoral systems, mediations by culture become relevant not only for understanding pastoral systems of thought and action but also for understanding our own practices of participation, observation, and analysis. An assumption of the cultural perspectives (thus not very amenable to refutation) is that the essential units of concrete pastoral practice and the assimilation of the world through practice - in both intellectual and physical senses - are symbolic, and that the most reliable access we have to those units of practice is through the meaning they bear for active participants, either rendered consciously or rendered by inference from the nonconscious. A cultural

phenomenology of practical life might pursue the influence of symbolic age/sex distinctions on the division of labor, the terms by which risks are defined and weighed, or the role of the assessment of livestock values on marketing. But from a cultural perspective, the series and systems of symbols represent the objects of study, the mediations by which the diverse and complex forms of action can be grasped. That is, the terms of indigenous signification are the best analytical tools we have for understanding what people are up to.

But it would be naive, a reassertion of the empiricism and postivist goals of reductionist anthropology, to suggest - having given up the notion of direct and unmediated access to the practical life of pastoralists - that as outsiders or insiders we have direct and unmediated access to symbols or meaning systems of those communities. If cultural life appears in part transparent to participants, it is because the structure of symbolic mediation has been developed and assimilated through a lifetime of experience, which allows immediate inference of status, derivation, and personality from apparel, for instance, or dictates the sequences of the task of watering animals, without additional thought. But even for cultural participants, much human action is not transparent and human motives do remain obscure. Participants, however, have repertoires of notions and schemas of motives which allow them to make plausible, though not always correct, inferences about motives, interests, and actions. An individual rushing over the pasture looking for a lost calf can be distinguished, albeit provisionally, from one hurrying to a lovers' rendez vous. But what implicit mediations, or series of guiding notions and expectations, can the outside observer, or the insider rendered an outsider by virtue of the investigative task, use in confronting the inevitable obscurity of human action? They can use, and cannot but use, their own cultural preconceptions and theory.

But this observation would seem to turn us back from a belief in the transparent accessibility of cultural life, often held by reductionists, to a belief in the ultimate inaccessibility of another culture, which is inevitably seen through the tinted lenses of one's own culture. And, in truth, reductionists have been accused of imposing their own culture-bound frameworks of interpretation on the activities they observe, at the same time as they interpret - in mirror fashion - their own preconceptions as their objects of study. Thus we find pastoralists described as economic men, early capitalists, or utopian socialists, as quintessential conservationists or as environmental ravagers, as Hobbesian or Rousseauian. In this sense, the two naivities, of extreme universalism and extreme relativism, are bound together, as the relativism of one culture becomes the benchmark of the universally valid. But what other choices does a cultural perspective offer, apart from the two extreme options of reflectionism and relativism? And, to return to the question of the relation between signs and reality in culture, how can we theoretically deal with the constructive and

creative role of cultural signs and meaning and at the same time recognize the intransigence of nature to our own understanding?

This way of posing the problem, beginning with a separation of subject and object, cultural and non-cultural systems, sets up, as it were, the estrangement of the two, resolvable in theoretical terms only by the encompassment of culture by the giveness of non-culture, or the encompassment of non-culture by culture. If, however, we refuse the choice, how do we deal with a dialectic between apparently incommensurate things, ultimately reducible to manifestations of mind or matter?

Cultural systems are not simply the basis for subjectivity, since they are in a sense objects in their own right. Or, to be more precise, as signs they embody both subjectivity and objectivity, since a cultural unit represents the specific form which an object takes as it is effective, as it functions or as it is subjectively grasped and used. For instance, an East African zebu has many physical properties, among them high degress of heat resistance, drought tolerance, stamina, and an ability to survive dramatic weight losses. Some of the properties are perceived by pastoralists and play a role in their conscious discourse. All of these properties, however, are implied by the cultural system of husbandry they practice, and thus are significant; they are effective units of a practicing culture, and unite the functional and meaningful zebu. There are, of course, properties of the zebu which are neither perceived nor functional and thus may be said not to play a role in the pastoral system.

This is an issue which Marvin Harris misconstrued in his idiosyncratic definition of "emics" in terms of consciousness and "etics" in terms of the demonstrably and behaviorally functional, from an analytical point of view. This usage is quite different from that of Pike, who coined the terms in order to depict phases in the process of describing linguistic behavior.' At the outset, one uses "etic" terms, either linguistic notation or one's own linguistic structure, to construct a provisional phonetic account of the language under study. As one's familiarity with the second language grows, these externally defined units are gradually amended until the account is phonemic, constructed out of the actual functional units of the lingustic sound system. Later, a phoneme might be abstracted from the phonemic system within which it is able to signify, and compared to other phonemes from other systems; in this case, it functions "etically", outside its own system. Good informants may become more or less conscious of the units they use, but the ultimate test of an emic unit is not whether it is consciously perceived or is manipulated in meta-discourse as an object, since this depends on many other factors, such as the object of "meta-linguistic" or "meta-cultural" discourse, the analytical sophistication and motivation of the informants, and the effective loading of the unit. Even sounds can be repressed if,

for instance, associated with a low status accent. The ultimate test of an emic unit does not rest with the analyst, who must judge whether and how it serves as a functinal unit in the system and what its structural relations are with other such units. One might wish for an ultimate conscious arbiter but the only satisfactory confirmation of the validity of a unit is how it serves to functionally discriminate within the system of linguistic practices. The informant's or actor's practice is an ultimate test, not his or her reflective consciousness unless informants tend towards the sort of analytical inquiry practiced by social scientists.

Much of culture is, of course, linguistic, and our best access to cultural signification is through the analysis of meaning in discourse. Even a study limited to observable behavior invariably relies on oral report of just what is being done, or what was done, and the answer and its impact is not just strictly behavioral but is meaningful: "The herder is guiding the herd towards water", reflects the symbolic significance of a complex and heterogeneous set of activities. Since the herder may also be engaged in song, play, competition, or malingering, it is evident that our account will necessarily depend on our own interests and orientations, which guide and influence our observations and descriptions. The same activities may also be accounted for in various theoretical terms, as economically rational, as merely habitual or routine, as resulting from individual decision-making or reciprocal transactions, as adaptive or intentional, or as instrumental or aesthetic. Our theoretical questions and presuppositions, then influence our accounts and our explanations. But, contrary to the extreme relativists, I would suggest the structure of investigation we bring to our observations and explanations do not intrisically represent distortions of the subject matter, but merely the way it is grasped. The analytical confrontation is not, then, different in kind from the confrontation of subject and object in any kind of action, in which the terms of anticipation, definition and selection construct the object and make it accessible in its practical actuality, rather than in its ever inaccessible potentiality. Perception, cognition and practice represent actual encounters, however, with a pre-existing and intransigent reality, but the pertinence of that reality never lies in the object itself but in the encounter, which is subjectively constructed.

Thus it is that both reflectionism and relativity prove inadequate in their extreme forms, since both are unable to deal with the reciprocal influence of subject and object which occurs in contexts of analysis in cognition, perception, intentional action. Phenomenologically, then, there is encounter of subject and object which cannot be reduced to one or the other. But any such encounter presupposes an infrastructure of signs bearing functional significance. Any investigation by necessity draws upon such a system or systems of signs - implicit or conscious - which lends to it its specific form and content. The cultural

perspective represents the way observers make explicit and render in their own terms, guided by their own notions and interests, the systems of thought and action practiced by others. In dialectic, the terms and orientations of observation evolve towards more appropriate translation of the terms and orientations being observed, while external and comparative insights shape the directions of observation. Encounter, translation, dialogue, intersubjectivity, all are terms used to grasp the fact that cultural analysis - as all anthropology and most human interaction - ideally represents the creative emergence of a new structure which mediates between two theoretically prior forms of subject and object. The "new structure", our interpretation or account, is merely the best way of grasping and reducing another reality, its terms in terms of our terms.

The sort of considerations dealt with in the last few pages are usually associated with hermeneutic and semiotic theories of culture, concerned both with the interpretative process and objectively constituted systems of symbols and signs.[8] The same issues, however, are at stake when we consider the analysis of social action concerning economy and ecology, though in that context they are too rarely raised and, though implicit, rarely recognized. Many practitioners of economic and ecological analysis claim empiricist methods, and yet are too often content with vague functionalist assertions which ignore most concrete subject matter or dismiss the processes of interpretation and first-level sign use which is the basic data of anthropological investigation. But once the symbolic nature of human behavior and anthropological inquiry, and the embedding of symbols in structural or semiotic systems, is granted, there is no reason a cultural perspective is not amenable to, even indispensable for, a range of functional analyses and theoretical explanations. In this case, a cultural perspective can claim to encompass rather than replace a number of other perspectives, including the reductionst frameworks previously discussed. In sketching out such a cultural perspective on practical life, a few examples will be given from pastoral systems, regarding animal breeding and husbandry, resource use and allocation, labor, and diet.

The domestication of animals is a striking example of cultural intervention into the natural order, and the process continues as pastoralists guide and regulate breeding in such a way as to increase desirable traits and strengthen strong strains in their animals. Insofar as the zebu, for instance, is well adapted to the African arid zone and the demands of highly mobile and arduous pastoralism, it is in part because of the recognition and selection of those traits by generations of pastoralists. It is clear, as well, that aesthetic factors have played a roled in the development of strains of particular colors, bearing, and horn size. Breeding and culling influence not only the strain but also the structure of the herds, which most often show a predominance of productive females in a cultural strategy of milk production.

Animal husbandry involves other decisions and practices regarding herd movements to nutritional resources, grazing cycles, and settlement site placement, all guided by cultural symbols which specify points of discrimination and valuation. Maasai distinguish between high, wet lands (Osupuko) and low, dry lands (Olpurkel), and recognize the distribution of grasses and other types of vegetation between the two. A seasonal cycle of movement may involve oscillation between the two regions, or the use of one or the other by specializing in certain animals, breeds, or productive aims. Herd and house movements are well codified strategies which are brought to, rather than simply emerging from, micro-responses to regional variation in water and vegetal protein. Western and Dunne have demonstrated the relevance of cultural discrimination of soils in the placement of settlements, for soils influence the retention of heat by the earth, and indirectly the health of animals.[9]

Many observers of pastoral societies have avoided the complex questions of resource allocation by falling back on well-worn notions of communal ownership of pastureland and individual ownership of livestock, with ownership of water resources coming somewhere between, associated with families, clans, or lineages which have developed them. In fact, the question of rights in resources appear more complex in two ways. First, most cultural systems define with greater discrimination the differentiation of rights, so "pasture", for instance, may involve rightful use by different groups in different places, by different groups and animals using different resources in the same place, or distinguished by proximity to a periodically shifting household. Second, rights are conceptually asserted and granted in a cultural process of negotiation, which engages social networks and relations. Few pastures are truly "common", or "open", since specific groups exercise proprietary rights through use or occupation. But at the level of discourse, the right of petition remains. Rights in animals are equally complex, as can be seen by forms of distribution of animal products or returns, or the imperative nature of requests for gifts, loans or exchanges of livestock between kinsmen, neighbors or age-mates.

Pastoral labor is another factor of production which cannot be understood apart from cultural concepts of necessary work, the demands of certain species and breeds, a value hierarchy of productive activities, and a division of labor structured by assumptions of the properties of age and sex. Many East African bovine herders identify husbandry with males and milking and milk distribution with females. But camel herders identify both processes with males as do many West African cattle herders. In East Africa, initiation is critical for demarcating childhood and maturity, but this line most critically divides two categories of laborers and different set of ideal activities. Ownership, productive and reproductive roles are shaped by the age system, which becomes the institution essential to the relations of production, although historically developed in geographically and

economically diverse circumstances.

In subsistence herding, the most consequential aim of production is provision of food, and culture values of diet lie at the base of the economic processes. In East Africa, many herding societies assert the value of a purely pastoral diet, usually a combination of various forms of milk, sometimes the addition of blood and meat. Such groups traditionally fell back on trade for cereal and vegetable foods with neighboring cultivators in times of deprivation, and practiced forms of hunting in extreme cases. Today, shops provide more ready access to alternative foods, and now as before, the class of young men may maintain the more honourable and severe diet while women, children and elders diversify their consumption. Such a system of production dramatically skewed towards pastoral specialization must be distinguished from multi-resource or agro-pastoral systems, where emphasis on animal production is combined with other forms of agrarian production, sorghum fields for the Turkana, millet and fish for the Nuer, date palms for the Bedouin. Specialized and diversified forms of pastoralism do not differ so much by actual diet, as by the influence of food values on the process of production. Even then, there may be a single hierachy of food values in East Africa, from domestic meat and milk, through cultivated crops, to game, which is widely shared across groups involved in quite different forms of production and drawing the line of acceptable and ideal foods at different levels of the hierachy. If East African pastoralism is an adaptation of fertile grasslands and absence of tsetse in the region, it is not the only possible one, and itself demonstrates variation which is predicated on cultural differences in the value of foods and forms of production.[10]

These few examples must suffice to demonstrate how the domains of culture and practical life are not in theory easily distinguished, since forms of labor, consumption and allocation of resources and the means and outcomes of production assume a cultural infrastructure. The cultural predicate operates to distinguish or "constitute" the significant categories of social, political and economic life, to shape the particular aims, ambitions and preferences of participants, and to make possible their own understanding.[11] Yet, the cultural systems of pastoralism are not necessarily closed or internally consistent and their participants do not inhabit worlds ignorant of alternatives, variations and contradictions. The meanings inherent in labor, resource and consumption are constructed out of distinctions of honor and value, and the struggle to reconcile global values, social realities and personal inevitabilities is intrinsic to much of the complexity of human behavior. Such complexity - the contextualized assertions and realizations of values and their failures, and the "shifting" attribution of symbolic properties and affective attributes to individuals, groups and activities[12] - does not refute a cultural perspective but points out how essential it is to grasp the terms and objectives of the serious game being played. While a social

science of pastoralism cannot be content merely with rendering the terms of local experience, as if that experience was hermetically sealed off from any awareness of the critical cutting-edge of other experiences, it would appear that it cannot succeed in, or even begin, its task without the firm building blocks provided by the cultural perspective of pastoralists. At issue is not the privilege of cultural over practical domains but the sterility of the very dichotomy and the need - both theoretical and methodological - to grasp practical life in its own terms, so as to make the terms by which we understand and render them more realistic and convincing.[13]

FOOTNOTES

[1] Herskovits 1926.

[2] C.f. Hopcraft 1981; Sandford 1983; Horowitz 1979.

[3] The first argument has been developed by the Dyson-Hudsons (1982), the second by Schneider (1979).

[4] This theoretical approach, though not necessarily the specific analyses referred to, is associated with Harris (1979).

[5] Cohen (1974).

[6] I have developed a similar criticism of reductionism in Galaty 1980.

[7] C.f. Pike 1967.

[8] Much of the preceding discussion has been influenced by theoretical literature in interpretive sociology (Weber 1947) and anthropology (Geetz 1973), hermeneutic theory (Ricoeur 1967), structuralism (Levi-Strauss 1966) and 'post-structural" perspective (Derrida 1978; Drummond 1980).

[9] Western and Dunne 1979.

[10] C.F. Sahlins 1976. For ideas relevant to the discussion in the past two pages, I am indebted to Rigby (1978) on the nature of ownership, Beidelman (1980) on Maasai gender contrasts and Jacobs (1965) on the symbolic significance of

food systems.

[11] At a more general level, a similar argument has been made by Godeiler (1972), and with regard to pastoral societies by Bonte (1981).

[12] On pastoral 'shifters,' see Galaty 1982; on the process of symbolic 'attribution' in ritual, see Galaty 1983.

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