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"The Political Ecology of Refuge Area Warriors: Some Implications for Pastoral Nomads"

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THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF REFUGE AREA WARRIORS:

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL NOMADS

by

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In 1955, Julian Steward provided a methodological basis for synchronically typing different kinds of societies according to their environmental adaptations. The notion of cross-cultural type has proved a useful one, and one which goes beyond mere ecological classification to an explanation of causal relationships between relevant environmental features and relevant sociocultural features.

Steward's (1955) method was based on the notion of a cultural core, which included those activities most intimately connected with subsistence and therefore with the environment. In treating the patrilocal band, Steward included in the cultural core both subsistence activities and relevant features of social and political life, while he also felt that certain aspects of ritual sometimes become fixed as part of an adaptive type if they are closely connected to subsistence.

A type of society not treated by Steward is the «tribal» society. By this I mean the segmental type identified by Durkheim (1933), classically described in its segmentary-political aspects by Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Bohannan (1954), and discussed from an ecological adaptation standpoint by Sahlins (1958). Sahlins' tribal types include hunters, fishing and gathering tribes, intensive agriculturalists, forest agriculturalists, equestrian hunters, and pastoral nomads, but he also discusses (rather briefly) «intercultural adaptations,» which remain little studied in comparison to adaptations to the natural environment.

With intercultural adaptations, in effect the external political environment becomes as important to reproductive success as the natural environment, or more so. Thus, Steward's (1955) method must be amplified, if it is to be useful in explaining such adaptations. Sahlins takes as an example the «chiefdoms formed by pastoral nomads in contention with agrarian centers in Southwest Asia or along the Chinese border» (1968: 45). He emphasizes that such societies have a social structure, which although crystallized by external pressure, remains segmental and egalitarian, in spite of the chiefly element which supplies political and military organization needed to resist the better-organized predatory polity.

Aside from discussing resistance to external predation by military means, Sahlins identifies two alternative adaptive strategies. One is to withdraw into an area so isolated that the predator is out of contact, a strategy practiced by some nomads. Another is to blend in socially, by breaking down into social segments too small to be threatening to the dominant polity. But here I shall be concerned only with the military type of intercultural adaptation.

Both warrior tribesmen and tribal people who rely exclusively upon isolation for their political survival live in what might be called refuge regions, in that they inhabit or retreat to land which is economically and strategically marginal to the interests of the better organized, predatory polity. In the typological spirit engendered by Steward, both of these types might be called «refuge area societies,» while for the warriors who are the subject of this paper, a more specific characterization is «refuge area warrior adaptations» (see Boehm 1982).

Montenegro Before 1850

The Montenegrins of what is today southeastern Yugoslavia once comprised a prime example of refuge area warrior adaptation. In the early 1400's the Ottoman Turks conquered much of the Balkan Peninsula, crushing the Serbian Empire and pushing its remnants up into mountains inhabited by pastoral tribesmen who eventually were called Montenegrins. These tribesmen had retained much local autonomy under the medieval Serbian lords who elsewhere destroyed the old Slavic tribal social structure. But after the last of the Serbian lords fled to Venice, the tribesmen it appears accepted considerable control from the Ottomans, for about a century, paying tribute but resisting military conscription. However, beginning in 1604 the Montenegrins (under the leadership of their Eastern Orthodox bishop or vladika) began to resist by armed force the payment of tribute, setting in motion a pattern of conflict which lasted for several centuries.

There were about twenty-four tribes in Montenegro, each formed of various single patriclan or multiclan settlements. A tribe was territorial, numbered between one and ten thousand souls, and only sometimes was rationalized in terms of a common founding ancestor. Clans and settlements had their own leaders, while each tribe had its vojvoda or chief. Certain clusters of tribes (called nahias) fought together regularly and settled their internal feuds promptly. At least once a year all of the tribes met at a general assembly (opsti zbor) under the leadership of the Montenegrin Orthodox Bishop, whose political functions generally outweighed his ecclesiastical functions. He served as commander-in-chief of the ephemeral tribal confederation army and, in effect, as foreign minister. He was selected by the opsti zbor, and he and his monks were the only literate people in Montenegro.

This segmentary system was quite similar to the original «segmental» model which Durkheim (1933) based on the Kabyles of Morocco, and was not very dissimilar to that of the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Tribes feuded, but a fairly efficient system existed for making temporary truces and for effecting more enduring peaces. Disputes between tribes were caused either by conflicts over mountain pastures useful to transhumance, or by individual quarrels involving honor.

The Montenegrin tribes faced a formidable external predator. The Ottoman Empire extracted tribute from the Bosnians, Serbs and Albanians all around Montenegro, and sometimes forced their men to serve in its army. The Montenegrins paid their taxes intermittently, keying their submission to an ongoing and continuous appraisal of local Ottoman power and intentions. Political policy was set at the tribal level by the skupstina, or assembly of all the warriors.

The Montenegrins were able to maintain such unusual control of their own territory for a combination of reasons. First, they lived in a land of economic marginality in which the fertile pockets of arable land and mountain pastures exploited in transhumance were interspersed with rugged mountains of bare or semi-denuded limestone. Thus, for economic reasons the Ottomans were unlikely to commit the very large resources needed for a permanent, genocidal solution to this tribal problem.

For immediate political reasons, the Ottomans did sometimes send as many as 67,000 soldiers to try to wipe out or resettle the fewer than 40,000 Montenegrins, of whom perhaps seven or eight thousand were warriors. This would happen when the Montenegrin confederation became strong and threatened to ignite a general uprising of Balkan Christians. The tribesmen won their share of such campaigns, and when they lost decisively they moved up into the rugged limestone hills to make it impossible for the enemy to exterminate them or to garrison an army of occupation. Guerrilla attacks not only denied the Ottomans their supplies but supplied the Montenegrins with food and munitions, while the Montenegrins always hid their livestock in the mountains before a battle, and if they lost the fight they quickly destroyed their crops to deny food to the enemy.

Montenegrin warfare tactics were classically guerrilla. Operating in small units and relying upon excellent individual motivation, they harassed and disorganized their enemy using long muskets and firing from cover until they saw an opportunity to join forces and attack with swords. The tribesmen took heads rather than prisoners, and the Ottomans did likewise but also sold captured noncombatants into slavery.

If I have given the impression that the tribesmen always either paid their tribute and submitted politically or else confederated to give battle and resist Ottoman demands, this is an oversimplification. To begin with, submission was never complete. Even after a tribe or coalition of tribes was defeated and hostages were taken, the Ottomans knew that total political submission was highly improbable. Hostages guaranteed that tribute would be paid for a few years and that raiding of Ottoman subjects would be curtailed, but Ottoman interference in tribal internal affairs was out of the question, as were abrogation of tribal territorial rights or institution of military conscription. A tribe faced with such control would either fight desperately or flee to seek refuge with some more isolated tribe. Both Ottomans and Montenegrins understood these limits, and it was very seldom that the Ottomans were successful in attempts to displace Montenegrins from their territory and resettle even the more unruly clans of a tribe.

The classical decision dilemma for a Montenegrin tribe or for several allied tribes came after the tribe had repeatedly refused unusual Ottoman demands for tribute, and the Ottomans had gathered an army to threaten the tribe and force submission. Often, such a move was motivated also by a desire to control tribal raiding. At such a point, the decision was, in fact, simple: the Montenegrins either paid tribute or fought. However, there was a constant process of «politicking» which went on, which enabled the tribesmen to anticipate Ottoman moves and to cope through other means. Both tribesmen and Ottoman lords actively sought to play on rivalries or feuds within the opposite camp, and both sides did so effectively. Furthermore, local Ottomans often had to travel to distant parts to fight for their Sultan, and the Montenegrins followed such events closely, gearing their level of

raiding and payment or nonpayment of tribute to ongoing assessments of Ottoman military strength and political unity.

Aside from rebellion or limited submission, the tribesmen always had the additional alternative of fully submitting or even of Islamicizing to achieve substantial tax advantages, and often the Ottomans courted certain tribes as allies and offered them economic favors without insisting that they Islamicize. Thus a number of political alternatives were available, and the process of political posturing with threats, bluffs, temporary alliance-building, etc., was all but continual. In addition, the tribesmen were willing to take financial help from Christian great power enemies of the Ottomans so long as they had no serious designs on Montenegrin local autonomy. If conditions seemed favorable, the Montenegrins were only too happy to be used as a military diversion, and when they confederated and became aggressive they could tie down a sizeable portion of the Sultan's Balkan army. Most of the time, however, it was each tribe for itself, formulating its own political policy and negotiating its own interests with local Moslem lords.

Living this precarious political life style for several centuries, the Montenegrins suffered only half a dozen major devastations of the entire tribal heartland. While they were sometimes decimated, and while there were several times that with bad luck genocidal extermination could have taken place, the free tribes did, in fact, persevere. In 1851, definitive political centralization took place and the egalitarian segmentary system was replaced by a political system much more similar to that of the Ottomans. The Empire then redoubled its attacks on Montenegro, but the Montenegrins were able to involve European Christian powers to save them, and in 1875 they finally ignited a general rebellion, doubled their territory, and received political recognition from Turkey. By 1911, Montenegro was a tiny kingdom poised to attack the Ottomans in Albania and thus to begin the series of Balkan wars which led to Sarajevo.

Refuge Area Warrior Adaptations

The Montenegrins offer an interesting starting point for setting up a cross-cultural type using Steward's method. However, the method must be amplified. Steward (1955) looked for consistency of relevant environmental features such as quantity and distribution of game for hunting, and focused on subsistence activities and other relevant cultural features in setting up his types, holding social scale constant. Steward was correct in viewing subsistence activities to be critical to reproductive success. But, in looking to biological models he did not deal with equally critical factors such as predation or disease. In the Montenegrin case, genocidal extinction sometimes was a conscious aim of the external political predator, while subsistence activities often became secondary due to the fact that the food supply could be augmented by raiding. I now raise the question, whether such an intercultural adaptive style may have been replicated elsewhere, independently, where environmental exigencies were similar.

Refuge area warrior adaptations come into being where small scale societies resist domination or absorption by predatory societies which are better organized politically. One might surmise that a mountain fortress will be an indispensable feature of the natural environment, but actually deserts, coastlines, swamps, or islands may do as well, and certain Riffians

of Morocco occupied rolling lowlands areas and relied upon well-coordinated cavalry charges for self-defense (Coon 1951). Thus, the natural environment can vary markedly.

One also might surmise that a pastoral or largely pastoral economy is required, since this provides a mobile subsistence base which can be hidden, and which permits instant augmentation by raiding. However, obvious refuge area societies in the Middle East range from wholly agricultural adaptations to nomadic pastoralism (see Coon 1951). Thus, neither geographic structure nor subsistence patterns remain constant when one considers no more cases than those of the Bedouins, Kurds, Pathans, Montenegrins, North Albanians, and Berbers (see Boehm 1982). These facts play havoc with Steward's method as he applied it to adaptations which were not very significantly intercultural. However, a cross-cultural type may be set up in the same spirit by looking more to political variables.

To begin with the natural environment, the refuge area itself must be not very attractive to the predator for long-term economic exploitation or for strategic political use. Rocky mountains and deserts fill the bill nicely, in that they do not merit investment in conquest and occupation. Also, from the standpoint of a predatory empire it is sometimes desirable to «use» warlike tribesmen intent on local autonomy to inhabit a buffer zone between itself and another empire or nation.

Another invariant feature is the segmentary social organization, which facilitates political decisions and political negotiation or military action at a number of levels. This presents an empire with the threat of large-scale, well-coordinated military resistance but also with the further problem of many small guerrilla units to contend with, once a large-scale military victory is achieved against the tribesmen. It goes without saying that the tribesmen must devise a highly effective military technology to go with their segmentary political organization, if they are to survive politically and biologically. Such technology must be well-adapted to their terrain.

Following Steward's (1955) method, I have set up a cross-cultural type which includes not only mountain warriors like the predominantly pastoral and transhumant Montenegrins or like some of the Kurds and Berbers who are agriculturalists, but it also includes pastoral nomads who inhabit deserts or mountains and sometimes fight for their autonomy. In the fact of this diversity in natural environment and subsistence pattern, the constants are that the external political environment remains predatory, the habitat remains marginal, political organization remains segmentary, and military technology is very well developed. This provides the basis for a synchronic typology which sheds light on causal relations between the most relevant environmental features and the cultural features critical to reproductive success and to social and cultural continuity.

Making Ecological Typology More Processual

Steward was a grand architect like Darwin, who proceeded to characterize adaptive process in a rather general manner without being able to identify the underlying mechanisms in any very specific way. However, in the case of refuge area warrior societies some significant specification of mechanisms should be possible. Such precarious political adaptations do not just «happen;» rather, they result from decisions based on conscious intentions. Because

such political decisions are debated publicly by large collectivities, they are more accessible to ethnographic study than are the myriads of intuitive individual decisions which so often shape adaptations to the natural environment very gradually. But if such mechanisms are to be accounted for in the cultural core, then some further variables must be considered, in setting up the cross-cultural type.

Tribal decisions, like all decisions, are made through consideration of alternative goals and methods. Such consideration takes place in the context of cognitive assessments, while cultural values set up the range of goals which compete as decision alternatives. In this respect, it must be emphasized that cultural values are never «unanimous,» as it were, even though monolithic ethnographic portrayals (usually these resemble a «catalog» of values) often suggest that this is so. Rather, values may conflict directly, for example, values placed on individual biological survival compete with values placed on heroic risk-taking. And a single set of cultural values may generate contrasting or even contradictory goals which then compete as alternatives for decision making.

Consideration of cognitive assessments and values as these interact in the decision process provides the key to understanding an important mechanism of cultural selection, one by which indigenous actors deliberately shape their own adaptive course (Boehm 1978). In a few hours, a Montenegrin tribe could convene and decide to stop paying tribute and fight, or vice versa. The result was a radical shift in adaptive strategy, a shift which stabilized until the next decision point. This might come a few hours later, or take place after several decades. If one is to account for such mechanisms in the cultural core for refuge area warriors, the core profile must be extended to include political world view, values, and decision style.

Assuming that the Montenegrins are a classical example of the refuge area warrior type, the cultural core will include a sophisticated capacity for making political assessments in several areas. Obviously, the tribesmen must be able to assess the political intentions and military potential of their predator. But in addition they must be able to keep their own house in order politically, anticipating or repairing breaches in internal political harmony so that their segmentary system can work effectively. Furthermore, they must adjust their subsistence and economic decisions to political exigencies.

Obviously, the cultural core must include the values which motivate warriors to fight for local autonomy. For traditional Montenegrins, it is easy to identify strong values placed on egalitarian personal relations, political unsubmissiveness, local autonomy, and individual warrior performance. All were closely tied to the indigenous notion of honor (obraz). But it must include, as well, the values which ensure that military policy does not become too reckless. Indeed, such values were equally critical to continued political and reproductive success. For example, Montenegrins liked to «live well,» in the sense of meeting minimal needs for shelter, clothing and food. And they most definitely preferred to stay alive. These values seem almost too obvious to mention, but they definitely tempered tribal decisions to go to war for autonomy, when the military odds were unfavorable or the economic costs were too high. It was all these values in combination which provided a basis for generating specific, viable goals in the context of what was perceived politically.

There are two additional elements which must be added to the cultural core, in order to complete the picture. First, a collective decision process is needed, to ensure that experience and knowledge may be pooled so as to make rapid decisions which are adaptively rational,[1] in an egalitarianistic society in which not very much power is permitted to leaders. Second, in addition to a highly developed and appropriate military technology there should be a good ability to conduct political negotiations. Such a capacity enabled Montenegrins to change their minds and negotiate a status of limited submission, rather than to continue fighting against overly steep odds. Decisions to fight and decisions to negotiate are equally mechanisms of cultural selection (see Boehm 1982), and are critical to the continuance of refuge area warrior adaptations.

With the addition of these ideological or «mental» features to the cultural core, it is possible to specify not only some gross environmental and cultural features of this cultural type, but to specify certain more` obvious mechanisms which helped to maintain this distinctive style of political adaptation. Certain ecological anthropologists and other «cultural materialists» may balk at the inclusion of such variables in the analysis of cultural ecology, but I believe they are necessary if anthropologists are to begin to specify mechanisms of cultural continuity and change in a way which sheds direct light on process.

Relevance for the Study of Nomadic Peoples

If world view, values and collective decisions are of obvious utility in explaining political adaptations which involve frequent changes in political strategy, these same conceptual entities are of equally obvious utility in explaining the natural-environmental adaptations of all nomads, be they primarily gatherers, hunters, or pastoralists. Nomads continually make migration decisions, and such decisions must take into account not only projections about distribution of plants and game or the health and productivity of herds, but social desires of people to congregate in larger groups. Barth (1961) has shown for the Basseri how the pull between these competing goals creates stress and results in collective decisions made at the household level and higher.

When nomads are also refuge area warriors, the calculus out of which they make migration decisions becomes more complicated, since political considerations may require that other interests be sacrificed. There arises here a problem for the typologies I have developed. Earlier, I differentiated two types of refuge area adaptation. In one, a tribal people stand their ground either to fight, or to negotiate a status of limited submission based on the adversary's respect for their willingness to fight if external domination proceeds too far. In the other, a tribal people uses extreme isolation to avoid contact which leads to domination. As transhumant pastoralists, the Montenegrins clearly define the first type, since neither their winter settlements nor their summer pastures were so isolated that contact could be avoided. However, under dire genocidal pressure a particularly intransigent tribal section might temporarily seek refuge with a more remote tribe until local Ottoman military strength waned or Ottoman genocidal intentions relaxed.

It would appear that pastoral nomads, with their much larger territories, or ranges, utilize isolation effects more often than do sedentary people like Montenegrins who have agricultural or mixed economies. What are the implications for typology?

It may make sense to treat refuge area societies as one general type, and to include in this category not only tribesmen who stand and fight or who totally isolate themselves, but also the peasant peoples Aguirre-Beltrán (1979) describes as living in «regions of refuge.» But in considering only the tribesmen, it may make sense to differentiate «isolation refuge areas» from refuge areas maintained by military force or threat of military force, as two distinct subtypes. This dichotomy was set up earlier, but the problem remains as to how one classifies societies sharing in both types.

With many pastoral nomads, the multiplicity of alternative political strategies may well be greater than with the Montenegrins. These strategies often range from use of either deserts or mountains as natural fortresses, to their utilization to maximize isolation. They may also use sedentarization either as a natural subsistence strategy, or as a political strategy, and may later decide to revert to nomadism.

Typologizing is usually arbitrary, and where a continuum is divided arbitrarily, one should not worry unduly about borderline cases. Thus, the general types I have set up may be of some use in thinking about pastoral nomads, and refinements may be possible by thinking about sub-types within this category. More specifically, the emphasis I have given to «ideological» or psychological aspects of political adaptation should prove useful if applied to nomadic adaptations, particularly where migration decisions are complicated by political considerations.

A Cultural Core for Nomadic Warriors

In regard to cases in which pastoral nomads rely to a significant degree upon fighting to maintain their freedom of action and movement, I shall make some predictions as to the relevant cultural features which belong in the cultural core. First, they will have a segmentary political organization and a consensus-oriented political decision process. This permits rapid combination of diverse sources of information and expertise into a single decision process, which results in decisive, concerted action. Second, they will have a military technology well-adapted to the marginal terrain they use and defend. Third, they will have a heroic ethos, a distinctive set of values oriented to individual honor but also to group political goals. These goals will include a very strong concern for local autonomy, as well as a prudent concern for maintaining a reasonable rate of biological survival. An oral tradition concerned with martial accomplishment may also be a predictable concomitant of this complex (see Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969). Fourth, their political world view will be relatively sophisticated because of their dealings with agents of well-centralized polities. Fifth, such societies are likely to feud. In making this statement I assume that feuding is not merely a way of expressing homicidal violence, but a carefully engineered system which minimizes inevitable conflicts between or within segments, where political unity is a conscious goal. Sixth, there will be a chiefly role adequate to provide military and political leadership, but otherwise development of personal power will be curtailed by an egalitarianistic ideological orientation and by other levelling mechanisms inherent in a nomadic life. This egalitarian orientation fits closely with the notion of warriors as unsubmissive people who value their local autonomy enough to fight for it. Seventh, there is likely to be raiding as an activity which allows natural subsistence to be supplemented in times of political (or natural) exigency. Finally, as with the Montenegrins there is a mobile subsistence base in the form of flocks, although this last is not a necessary feature of all refuge area warrior adaptations.

Conclusions

Hjort (1982) has discussed some ways in which the study of ecology may be employed to understand the relation of pastoralists to the land they use. He emphasizes not only constraints of the natural environment, but also the «vast fields of knowledge and cognitions which pastoralists themselves have developed through long experience with their environment» (1982:24). What he refers to here is the natural environment, while a broader anthropologic approach is suggested under the rubric of «political ecology,» to explain what is happening to pastoral nomads in today's world.

What I have argued above is that political ecology for long has been important for many pastoral nomads, and for other people who take refuge in economically marginal zones. In studying that kind of ecology, one must attend to indigenous beliefs, to values, and to decisions concerned with both the natural environment and the political environment. Elsewhere (Boehm 1978, 1982), I have suggested that as a field of study, cultural ecology can be significantly improved in its explanatory power, by giving more attention to those indigenous cognitive assessments and decisions which serve as important mechanisms of cultural selection. Above, I have provided a typological model designed to account for these variables as well as for those ordinarily emphasized by cultural ecologists. The model is based on intensive study of a single, non-nomadic society, although it does seem to apply to several nomadic refuge areas in the Middle East (Boehm 1982). Whether this model also applies to pastoral nomadic warriors such as those traditionally found in Central Asia remains to be seen. But I believe that an approach which attends to indigenous adaptive rationality will be most productive for understanding adaptations such as those of politically pressured nomads, who at times must change their strategies rapidly and radically in order to survive as free men, or to survive at all.

As the options of fighting or escaping into isolation become even less viable today, it may be useful to construct a different culture type, to account for other compromises such people make with the political world around them. But locally autonomous refuge area warriors are not yet extinct, as events in Afganistan and the Kurdish situation attest. There are still a few niches left for those who would isolate themselves, as well. The very longevity of this refuge area culture type under increasingly adverse political conditions is a tribute to the ingenuity and decision capacity of such peoples, while the apparent uniformity of their responses in historically unrelated parts of the world suggests an adaptive regularity which merits further study.

FOOTNOTES

1. Adaptive rationality must be defined. When deliberate indigenous efforts to attain goals favorable to reproductive success are made, and when these efforts are, in fact, causally effective in realizing such goals, then the decision behavior is adaptively rational. If intentions favor reproductive success but methods are not causally efficacious, as with rain dances, then adaptive rationality is not present. Elsewhere, adaptive rationality is discussed at greater length (Boehm 1978, 1982).

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