property relations and productive strategies in pastoral societies

JOHN H. DOWLING—Marquette University

In his exciting ecological study of the Basseri nomads of South Persia, Fredrik Barth argues that in pastoral societies generally there exists a unique set of relationships between populations of men, the animals off of which they live, and the habitat which those men and their herds collectively exploit, a relationship which promotes cultural patterns of ascribing animals to individual men as private property. On reading it I found Barth's analysis provocative, stimulating, insightful—and wrong. Although the passage to which I have reference is long (Barth 1961:124), the importance of the entailed argument for economic anthropology makes its full recitation useful, especially since the analysis has received positive endorsement by others (cf. Sahlins 1965:156-157):

The stability of a pastoral population depends on the maintenance of a balance between pastures, animal population, and human population. The pastures available by their techniques of herding set a maximal limit to the total animal population that an area will support; while the patterns of nomadic production and consumption define a minimal limit to the size of herd that will support a human household.

In this double set of balances is summarized the special difficulty in establishing a population balance in a pastoral economy: the human population must be sensitive to imbalances between flocks and pastures. Among agricultural or hunting and collecting people, a crude Malthusian type of population control is sufficient. With a growing population, starvation and death-rate rise, until a balance is reached around which the population stabilizes. Where pastoral nomadism is the predominant or exclusive subsistence pattern, the nomad population, if subjected to such a form of population control, would not establish a population balance, but would find its whole basis for subsistence removed. Quite simply, this is because the productive capital on which their subsistence is based is not simply land, it is animals—in other words food. A pastoral economy can only be maintained so long as there are no pressures on its practitioners to invade this store of food. Once it has been consumed, the population can no longer pursue a pastoral subsistence. A pastoral population can therefore only reach a stable level if other effective population controls intervene before those of starvation and death-rate.

A first requirement in such an adaptation is the presence of the patterns of private ownership of herds, and individual economic responsibility for each household. By these patterns, the population becomes fragmented with respect to economic activities, and economic factors can strike differentially, eliminating some members of the population without affecting other members of the same population. This would be impossible if the corporate organization with respect to political life, and pasture rights, were also made relevant to economic responsibility and survival.

Barth has argued from his analysis of Basseri data that pastoral societies face demographic problems which require making animals private property, a problem non-pastoral societies do not face. In fact, Barth's theory fits some gardening societies better than the Basseri. The reason is that Basseri private property seems to be a response to market opportunities. In non-market pastoral societies, animals are commonly personal property, not private property.
I find two problems with Barth's argument. In the first place, I fail to see any
difference between the productive problem faced by pastoralists and the productive
problem faced by gardeners. Secondly, I believe that it can be demonstrated that the
Basseri pattern of ascribing animals to individuals as private property is a consequence of
their external market orientation; it is not a cultural technique designed to cope with
potential demographic problems, although it may have that fortuitous consequence.

Whether a society practices nomadic herding or sedentary gardening, it is inevitably
faced with the problem of setting aside some of its current production to provide
"capital" for future production. In both cases, one of the technical factors of production
is substantively the same as the end product—"in other words food." And in both cases,
some of this year's output must be earmarked as next year's input factors in productive
activity. If the gardener invades his seed stock he is faced with exactly the same kind of
problem that confronts the herder who consumes too many of his animals. The problem
may or may not be of critical importance in either a specific agricultural or pastoral
society, but it is just as likely to be critical for gardeners as for herders. The argument
here is not simply a matter of logic; it is also ethnographically informed.

Reo Fortune tells us (1963:94) that to the individual Dobuan
his small garden patch is his refuge against hunger in the coming year. He has fasted many times
the previous year to save a good supply of seed against this season. He and his wife have
brooded over the patch for the year like parents over a sickly child.

Surely in its form, if not in its concrete substance, this is the same type of productive
problem faced by the Basseri. Just as surely the kind of care and concern concentrated on
Basseri herds and Dobuan yams is not unique to the Basseri and the Dobuans but is to be
found elsewhere among other pastoralists, gardeners, and, perhaps, even hunters and
gatherers. Many years ago Julian Steward argued that one of the reasons why people
living by hunting and gathering at a low level of productivity organized themselves into
territorial units or bands, is that they "may conserve food resources in their territory"
(1936:332), i.e., they may abstain from killing pregnant animals, too intensively hunting
particular areas, and so on, so that their input factors are maintained and their future
food supply assured.

That input factors must be conserved so that output may be continuous in a society
where the two factors are the same is common grist for the analytical mill of cultural
ecology, and much effort has been fruitfully spent in searching out those culture traits
which have either the manifest or, more interestingly, the latent function of achieving an
input-output balance. Thus the very common ritualization of cattle and pig consumption
has often been interpreted as having at least the covert or latent function of maintaining a
breeding stock so that an adequacy of production is maintained (cf. Schneider
1957:278-300). Factoring out such latent functions is the current delight and lasting
contribution of many students operating within the theoretical framework of cultural
ecology.

The parallels between the pastoral Basseri and the gardening Dobuans extend beyond
their apparently being faced with the same kind of productive problem. Both societies
also have similar patterns of property relations, although I shall subsequently argue that
there are important and critical differences between the property relations of the Basseri
and the Dobuans. As I have noted, Barth holds that the requirement of conserving
productive stock makes it a "first requirement" that animals be assigned to individuals as
private property so that the owning individual is responsible for not consuming his input
factors and so that, should he consume those animals, he can hold no one accountable for
his hungry plight but himself. Among his subject population Barth found a number of
people who had not maintained their productive stock and had been excluded from the nomadic Basseri camps as a consequence. These latter people had taken up settled residence as common laborers in communities adjacent to the Basseri pasture routes.

The agricultural Dobuans fit Barth’s paradigm well. In fact, I shall attempt to show that Barth’s analysis provides more insight into the Dobuan situation than it does the Basseri situation. Barth was right for the wrong society. In Dobu, seed yams are inherited in the matriline, as is the garden ritual by means of which those seed yams are induced to grow. The individual who consumes his personally owned seed yams—as some are enticed to do when the larder becomes less than well supplied—subsequently finds himself without the seed stock necessary to plant a garden the following season. Among the Dobuans, the patterns of personal ownership of seed yams and the individual responsibility for maintaining an adequate stock of seed yams is supported and buttressed by the local beliefs in garden ritual. Should the individual Dobuan consume his own planting stock and borrow seed yams from others, those borrowed yams will not grow because the ritual inherited from matrilineal ancestors will work only on seed yams inherited from those same ancestors—and no crops can possibly grow without supportive ritual. Fortune writes that:

The pressure of population upon the food supply is such that a person who has not kept his or her seed yams expects no relief, no seed yams from elsewhere, and does not get any. I knew of several women in this position. They were thieves, or fishers, sago workers and beggars. Fish and sago are not plentiful enough to support anyone. They are poor resources that must be eked out by thieving or begging (1963:69-70).

Thus there is among the Dobuans a “class of native beachcombers without seed, and without help in seed gifts from others” (1963:70). As among the Basseri there are those Dobuans who have failed in their productive responsibilities and who consequently find themselves excluded from the traditional subsistence base; on their own heads misfortune has fallen, and they can look to no one else for succor.

On first appraisal the pastoral Basseri and the gardening Dobuans would appear to be faced with the same kind of problem and to have developed the same cultural solution, yet I do not believe that the Basseri and the Dobuans are actually analogous to one another. Barth’s analysis is correct for the Dobuans and wrong for the Basseri. If I read the ethnographic material correctly, the Dobuans are in the climax seral stage of their ecological succession, i.e., they are maintaining as large a population as is possible with their current technology. Societies that have reached the climax seral stage are marginal societies in the sense that they stand face-to-face with the Malthusian dilemma. Coping with the problems entailed in their marginality will require changes in many aspects of life. In this context, shifting individual subsistence maintenance from a community responsibility to an individual responsibility makes functional sense. Guided by Barth’s model, I should interpret individual ownership of seed yams and restricted consumption of their product among the Dobuans in just such a light. The Dobuans are faced with a population problem and a drain on subsistence resources available with the food producing technologies utilized by them. The pre-climax pattern of joint responsibility implemented by generalized reciprocity or redistribution of food so common in many primitive societies has become abrogated in the interest of countering community wide marginality. The ascription of input resources to individuals as their personal property makes the individual responsible for his own maintenance. With respect to subsistence, the population has become fragmented in the climax community, and subsistence problems that are a constant companion of all are allowed to strike the profligate without punishing the careful husband.
The Basseri, on the other hand, are not faced with the same demographic pressure (Barth 1961:113-121); individual Basseri quit their nomadic life and become sedentary well before the man-animal-land ratio reaches a critical threshold for the society at large. In fact, and as Barth notes, it is the pattern of sedentarization which prevents Basseri society from rising to the climax seral stage. Barth has demonstrated that patterns of individual ownership of animals have played an important role in the Basseri sedentarization process and have had the effect of maintaining a compatible ratio of men and animals to pasture. He has not demonstrated that this pattern of property allocation is necessary for pastoralists in general or, in the Basseri case, was originally institutionalized in order to force sedentarization and maintain a low man-animal-land ratio.

Barth speaks of personal ownership of animals as though this institution were characteristic of all pastoralists. I suspect that his view is biased by Asiatic ethnographies in which individual ownership and sedentarization of paupers is commonly reported. Such patterns are not universal among pastoralists, however. Among the Tungus, for instance, reindeer are clan property; families having usufruct rights to a portion of the clan herd during the winter when they are scattered across the grazing area. Each summer when the clan gathers, however, the family herds are pooled and reallocated to insure that differential use, predation, disease, accident, and so on, do not strike individual families disproportionately. Among the Tungus there is joint responsibility within the clan on the technological, economic, and political levels (Service 1971:99).

It is true, however, that individual ownership of animals is quite common among pastoralists throughout the ethnographic world. Yet there is a vital difference between the patterns of individual ownership among the Basseri and the patterns of ownership found among other pastoralists. Animals among the Basseri are private property; animals among many other pastoralists are personal property (personalties). This difference between private property and personal property is a function of the technological and economic differences in the societies involved.

Property concepts, as Hobhouse (1915:6) and others have emphasized, are social products, highly variable, and structure interpersonal relations in a diversity of ways. Hoebel (1954:58) has written about the nature of property as follows:

Even though the individual may create or acquire the object of property through his own effort, it is society and not the individual which creates the circumstances that make property out of it. For although an individual may be the possessor of some valued object, some res nullius that he has picked up, occupied, or created, that object does not become property until the members of the society at large agree, tacitly or explicitly, to bestow the property attribute upon the object by regulating their behavior with respect to it in a self-limiting manner. They recognize a special status in the owner with respect to the object in question.

It follows that property concepts may be expected to vary in a determinate way with variations in culture, especially with differences in techno-economic systems. Although animals may be assigned as property to individuals in various societies, those societies may differ considerably among themselves in the various demand-rights, duties, privileges, and immunities conferred on the owner of the animal (cf. Dowling 1968:502-507).

To say that a plot of land, a person’s labor, a machine, or a commodity is private property is to imply and stipulate a particular kind of economy. Private property is a meaningful concept only in a commercial economy. In a society with such an economy everyone habitually sells factors to an impersonal market and buys virtually the entire range of consumption goods from the market. Buyers are in competition with one another, and their behavior generates the demand side of the price determining process. Sellers are similarly in competition with one another, and their actions create the forces of supply in the price determining process. The society, in other words, is economically...
fragmented into competitive buyers and competitive sellers where each is trying to dominate transactions to the best of his ability. In a society with a commercial economy everyone is of necessity market oriented and market involved because life outside the market is impossible. By virtue of the institutional constraints inherent in an all-pervasive, competitive market each individual has no option but to buy as cheaply and sell as dearly as possible. Technically, the term “private property” refers only to commodities and production factors habitually bought and sold on the market. As the courts have consistently held, to say that something is private property means that the owner has “the right to fix prices by withholding from others what they need but do not own” (Commons 1959:3). Such a transactional strategy is unique to an economy dominated by the market; it is alien to an economy where goods are commonly transacted through sharing or through gift and countergift.

Property relations of all kinds are relations between persons relative to a thing; they entail a constellation of rights which relate people to one another in terms of the use, abuse, and alienation of things. Private property relations are property relations that allow and promote an owner’s taking advantage of all available opportunities in impersonal market transactions, the exploitation of each opportunity to aggrandize the owner’s position over that of his competitors. This is exactly the strategy which underlies Basseri economic behavior.

The Basseri pastoralist would appear to be positioned somewhere along that continuum which extends from the peasant to the business man. He is not yet a business man in the full sense of that term since he is not totally dependent on a commodity market for all he consumes and he is not generally involved in a factors market at all. Yet he is much more than a peasant. Wolf has discussed the strategy and operation of peasant economies in the following way:

the peasant aims at subsistence, not at reinvestment. The starting point of the peasant is the needs which are defined by his culture. His answer, the production of cash crops for a market, is prompted largely by his inability to meet these needs within the sociocultural segment of which he is a part. He sells cash crops to get money, but this money is used in turn to buy goods and services which he requires to subsist and to maintain his social status, rather than to enlarge his scale of operations (1955:454).

The peasant, in other words, is subsistence oriented but incapable of producing all of the goods required to maintain the traditional subsistence level of his community. He consequently produces just enough commodities, i.e., goods produced for exchange rather than for consumption, to acquire through trade that limited amount of foreign goods which he needs to fill out his limited desires. His productive strategy, then, is to produce a restricted amount of commodities; it is not the ever and infinitely expanding productive strategy of the business man.

Unlike the peasant, the Basseri pastoralist is definitely oriented toward reinvestment. His goal is not simply to maintain a traditional level of subsistence by exchanging commodities for a few target goods he cannot produce for himself. His goal rather is to increase his herds through carefully husbanding his resources and to invest his profit in land in the agricultural village areas along his pasture route. Just as there are Basseri who become pauperized and give up pastoral life to live as common laborers in sedentary communities, so there are successful Basseri in every generation who give up pastoral life to live as wealthy landlords in those same communities. This market and profit orientation is facilitated by the constellation of property rights found in Basseri society.

The Basseri pastoralist is in economic competition with his congeners, and his property rights protect his position in that competitive field. No kinsmen except his sons have a
demand right against his flocks; he is immune to requests for gifts from those less fortunate than himself; he has no duty to provide aid when the flocks of others are ravaged by disease, starvation, and accident; and he has the privilege of manipulating his flocks to his own best advantage. His is the orientation of the business world; his animals and their products are truly private property. It is to the nature and functional demands of the Basseri niche in the larger economy that we must look for an explanation of their property concepts, not to some peculiar man-animal-land relationship unique to pastoralists.

To support and amplify what has been said here, it is informative to contrast the Basseri with another pastoral people, the Turkana of Tanganyika (Gulliver 1955). Both the Basseri and the Turkana are nomadic, both have productive organizations that are family based, both pasture their animals on tribally owned lands to which all individuals have usufruct rights, and in both societies animals are culturally ascribed to individuals as property. But the orientation of the Turkana pastoralist is vastly different than that of the Basseri. The Turkana pastoralist produces primarily for consumption, the Basseri for sale.

To be sure, the Turkana do exchange with the Labwor for some ironware, grain, tobacco, gourds, and pots. But such transactions are rare; they are beneficial but not mandatory. The Turkana depend almost entirely on their animals for clothing, food, and utensils. The Basseri, on the other hand, go frequently to market, buying material for women’s clothing, men’s ready-made clothing, goods of tanned leather (shoes, saddles, etc.), wheat flour (a staple), sugar, tea, dates, fruits, vegetables, glass ware, china, metal articles (cooking utensils, etc.), narcotics, luxury goods such as women’s jewelry and carpets, and, for those who are able, land. The Turkana could live without external trade; they are self-sufficient subsistence producers. The Basseri are market dependent.

The consequences of these economic differences are manifold and pervasive, differentially structuring the lives and the relationships of the people involved. If a man’s flocks are decimated among the Basseri, he has no option but to turn to sedentary work and life. His Turkana counterpart rebuilds his herds and flocks from gifts by his kinsmen and his stock associates, i.e., non-kinsmen with whom he has established reciprocal bonds through hospitality and gift exchange. Where the Basseri converts his expanding flocks and their products into land, the Turkana pastoralist whose herds and flocks are increasing acquires another wife for himself or his son.

The Basseri and the Turkana live in different economic worlds, the former are market oriented, the latter subsistence oriented. The Turkana are virtually a closed society economically, and while there are wealth differentials within the society at any one time, those wealth differentials vary through time. The family that is wealthy acquires many wives who produce many sons so that the family herds are divided among many heirs. For the Turkana there is no possibility of investing in anything that will accumulate over time and create class differences between those who control the means of production and those who do not. The Basseri, on the other hand, are articulated with a national and international economy where investment is not only possible but ever available. Both success and failure as a nomadic pastoralist results in Basseri sedentarization, but the successful Basseri becomes one of the land owning elite, the failure a common laborer.

The property relations of the two societies take their form from the nature of the respective societies. Unlike the Basseri nomad, the Turkana pastoralist is not an independent operator, aloof from the demands and requests of others. He not only is dependent on the economic aid and support of his kinsmen, he has actively sought and created economic interdependence with a number of non-kinsmen. The consequence is
that far from being immune to the demands and requests of others for his personalities, he is obliged to behave in a manner directly opposite that characteristic of a capitalist; it is when others are most in need and he least in need that the Turkana must give of what he owns rather than exact the most he can from the economic plight of others. To exploit the prime opportunity is antithetical to his life. The network of interpersonal dependencies comprised of kinsmen and associates engages in a "more or less continuous giving, receiving, and exchanging of animals" (Gulliver 1955:198), a pattern which establishes the expectation and obligation to come to the economic aid of those in want. Unlike the Basseri, the Turkana is not in a position to "fix prices [or exchange rates] by withholding from others what they need but do not own."

This paper has focused on a distinction between private property and personal property in the hope that such a distinction will illuminate some of the problems we face in economic anthropology. I believe that those who subscribe to the idea that "capital," "markets," "money," "private property," and other economic phenomena are found throughout primitive and peasant societies as well as in industrial societies are misguided. Generalizing such terms to subsume the diversity of ethnographically reported economic phenomena tends to obscure differences and inhibit understanding. In economic anthropology I should align myself with the "splitters" rather than the "lumpers." What we need is a conceptual framework that fosters recognition of the differences that exist among the societies we study and appreciation of the systemic nature of distinct economies. I suspect that it is only from such a perspective that we shall ultimately understand how one system evolves into another and, more critically, the implications for change and consequent social dislocations involved in the inevitable expansion of the international economy.

Finally, while I believe that the distinction between private property and personal property has been demonstrated to be useful, I also believe that we shall need to distinguish among different kinds of personal property. So far, personal property has been defined by exclusion, i.e., it is property ascribed to an individual which is not private property. At the present time I doubt that an inclusive definition of personal property is possible. The reason for this is simply that the diversity of such property is so great and has received so little analytical attention that positive statements about its nature cannot yet be formulated. For example, in neither Turkana nor Dobuan society are the people market oriented, hence in neither case can property legitimately be termed private property. Yet the rights, duties, privileges, powers, and immunities which title confers are quite different in Dobu than they are among the Turkana.

We desperately need comparative studies of property relations in societies across the ethnographic world with the goal of developing theories to explain the relationships between property and other sociocultural phenomena. It is as a tentative step in that direction that this paper was written.

references cited

Barth, Fredrik

Commons, John R.

Dowling, John H.

Fortune, R. F.
Gulliver, P. H.  

Hobhouse, L. T.  

Hoebel, E. Adamson  

Sahlins, Marshall D.  

Schneider, Harold K.  

Service, Elman  

Steward, Julian H.  

Wolf, Eric R.  

Date of Submission: June 19, 1974
Date of Acceptance: November 4, 1974