

COMMENT

TRANSHUMANCE RE-EXAMINED

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Transhumance appears to be a much misunderstood economic system if one goes by the definitions provided in many standard reference works as well as the writings of a number of anthropologists. I suspect that this is because, while many field studies have been carried out among pastoral nomads, relatively few anthropologists have concerned themselves with transhumance. Since the two economic systems rely heavily on livestock herding and the seasonal movements of livestock to ensure adequate grazing and water, it has been thought both harmless and convenient to regard transhumance as a 'form of pastoralism or nomadism'. It is, in fact, described in just those terms in *The New Britannica*: 'transhumance, [a] form of pastoralism or nomadism organized around the migration of livestock between mountain pastures ...' (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1988: 897). Similarly, in the *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology* we find the following entry: '**transhumance.** See NOMADS, PASTORAL NOMADS' (1986: 280) – a reflection of the assumption that these different systems belong together.

That even anthropologists have not always understood the highly specialized nature of transhumance is illustrated by W.A. Haviland's account of the Bakhtiari, a group of pastoral nomads who live in Iran. Basing his account on fieldwork by Fredrik Barth, Haviland correctly describes the Bakhtiari as a tent-dwelling people practising a livestock-based economy in arid regions of Iran where it is essential that extensive seasonal movements are made in search of pasture and water for their animals. He then goes on to tell readers: 'This pattern of strict seasonal movement is known as *transhumance*' (Haviland 1975: 182), clearly implying that pastoral nomadism

and transhumance are simply two different words for the same thing. My argument here is that it is both incorrect and misleading to regard transhumance as a form of either nomadism in general or pastoral nomadism in particular.

Let us begin by examining what I take to be the generally agreed upon characteristics of pastoral nomadism. It is an economic system based primarily on animal husbandry, supplemented by trade. As the community's primary resource, aside from people, is livestock, and as their territorial rights are confined to marginal environments, it is necessary for the entire community to move seasonally in order to ensure adequate grazing and water for the livestock. They occupy marginal lands because the better-favoured environments are already occupied by agriculturalists who are settled in permanent villages. In other words, pastoral nomads make use of environments that other economic systems cannot use and therefore do not want.

Under these circumstances, since mobility of the human and livestock population is essential for the well-being of both, pastoral nomads characteristically live in tents, yurts, ger, or some other form of portable dwelling. This need for flexible mobility, combined with the relatively arid nature of the lands available to them, generally rules out any form of agriculture. It is by trading surplus livestock, hides, goat hair, butter, cheese, meat, wool, and other products that pastoral nomads obtain the goods which they themselves do not make. Far from being independent 'wanderers', pastoral nomads rely heavily on trading relationships with settled communities.

Anthropologists have traditionally classified different cultures by applying defined eco-

conomic labels. We need definitions in our teaching and research so that we can be reasonably certain that we are all talking about the same thing. Transhumance appears to be a term which, for the most part, has escaped the scrutiny given to the other labels we use and, as a consequence, it is often simply regarded as a variation of pastoral nomadism.

In 1934 C. Daryll Forde wrote a book entitled *Habitat, economy, and society*. Now, over seventy years later, we of course have a much greater body of anthropological research to draw upon, but I mention Forde's book because in it he makes a clear distinction between transhumance and pastoral nomadism, something that many of his successors have failed to do. Of transhumance he writes:

In Central Persia occupants of the more difficult country frequently winter in permanent villages around lowland pastures. Here they maintain groves of fruit trees, and in the spring they also sow crops of millets and barley. Before the heat of summer ... the greater part of the community migrates to the mountains with its sheep, goats, and cattle ... to live in upland camps where grass for the livestock is still abundant and green ... This seasonal migration from winter to summer quarters for the benefit of livestock among the more advanced peoples in semi-arid or mountainous areas, was formerly widespread in southern Europe, and is generally referred to as *transhumance* from the term used in Spain[,] where it was until quite recent years exceptionally well developed (Forde 1961 [1934]: 396).

One might observe that transhumance is still practised in the Pyrenees (see Ott 1981) and parts of the Alps, as well as Norway, and that the term also comes to us from the French, but the important thing is that Forde's description of this economic system makes a clear connection between (1) permanent villages, (2) arable agriculture, and (3) the seasonal movements of livestock. To cite another authority, I turn to Douglas L. Johnson and his study *The nature of nomadism: A comparative study of pastoral migrations in Southwestern Asia and Northern Africa* (1969). Johnson writes:

Transhumance is a term used to describe a spatially limited pattern of movement in mountainous areas which was first recognized in the Alpine regions of Europe. The literature indicates that a village of permanent buildings occupied by all or part of the population all of the year, rather than a mobile tent camp,

forms the nucleus of a transhumant society. Although pastoral activities are one of the concerns of a transhumant community, agriculture nearly always remains the dominant interest. In other words, pastoral movements are limited in scale, usually take place in one valley system, and are undertaken by only a small proportion of the total population. *None of these features are shared by pastoral nomads* [emphasis added].

Unfortunately, at some point in time the term transhumance began to be applied to regions outside of Europe and to groups that were not properly transhumants. In time nearly every nomadic group that utilizes altitudinal variations in pasture availability has been called a practitioner of transhumance, when, in fact, the use of the tent and the major dependence on animals such as is found among the Qashqai, Yürük, and Arbaa contradict the common connotations of the term. In every sense these tribes and others like them are nomads who simply happen to operate in mountainous areas and herd sheep and goats rather than camels ... Obviously, once the term transhumance was applied to regions and to situations different from those in which it was originally employed, semantic confusion was bound to result (Johnson 1969: 18-19).

In 1940 Edward (later Sir Edward) Evans-Pritchard published his famous study of the Nuer, a people living in what was then the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. E.P. describes Nuerland as 'dead flat' and details the seasonal flooding that make it necessary for the Nuer to move their cattle seasonally from the grassy plains to slightly elevated areas adjacent to the villages and cultivated fields, and later away from the villages in search of grazing as the flood waters recede. E.P. describes the Nuer economic system as transhumance as it combines livestock herding with permanent villages and associated agriculture (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 55-57).

At intervals from 1960 to 1970 I carried out fieldwork in the Hindu Kush of north-eastern Afghanistan among peoples who practise transhumance. Here in the region known as Nuristan the population resides in permanent villages around which are irrigated hill terraces for the production of wheat, maize, millet, and barley. Each village is both economically and politically independent, having its own arable land and pasture rights in the surrounding mountains. The year begins in spring with the livestock (mostly goats, but also some sheep and cattle) being taken out of winter stables and herded up to the first pastures. The majority of the population reside

in the village throughout the year. In autumn, when the harvest is complete, the livestock are brought back to the village area and go into winter quarters, where they are stall fed until spring (Jones 1974: 22-38).

It will be noted that the economic activities described above bear but little resemblance to pastoral nomadism, having two characteristics which, by definition, clearly separate it from that system: an emphasis on arable agriculture, and a permanent village base. We gain nothing by regarding transhumance as 'a form of pastoralism or nomadism'; on the contrary, such a view obscures rather than illuminates the nature of the economic system under investigation. I conclude by suggesting that transhumance is a highly specialized form of mixed farming, practised by the inhabitants of settled communities, technologically adjusted to a certain set of environmental conditions, which combines livestock herding with arable agriculture.

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