

## **Ethnicity and Scale in Pastoral-Sedentary Relations: Early Barth and his relevance to Sudan.<sup>1</sup>**

Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed,

University of Khartoum, Sudan.

### **Abstract**

This paper addresses issues of ethnicity and scale, two major areas in Fredrik Barth's analysis of society. It specifically relates to Barth's "general perspective on nomad-sedentary relations in the Middle East" where two approaches are possible. Pastoral groups can be either depicted through their relation to their total environment or they can be explicitly viewed from a symbiotic relation to the rest of their society. The latter view implies starting with households in rural areas, especially of pastoral groups, showing their symbiotic relations to villages and larger urban settings that represent the environment in which they practice their activities. It identifies the distinct roles of everyone involved and the mediating role of traditional elites and state agents in this process. The space on which they compete is land where laws have changed in the last few decades. Actors and/or groups of actors use different means to substantiate their claims over the space at hand. History, traditions and laws are invoked to justify the rights to ownership and control of land and other resources. Ethnicity and scale became crucial factors in defining the roles of different agents. Changes have taken place and newly adopted technology had its influence on relations of different pastoral and sedentary groups even when they are in remote areas far away from the center for decision making in the state. These new elements have their impact on ethnicity and scale and examples from pastoralists and settled people in Sudan shall illustrate this point.

**Keywords: Ethnicity, scale, pastoralists and sedentary groups, land, Sudan.**

"Africa is being transformed into new kinds of large and heterogeneous communities, forerunners of national states yet to emerge.....the people who have long-standing relationship to town people, as in parts of the Middle East and in Afghanistan, are in some respects like agricultural peasantry. To include them in a series of comparison would help us to understand what tends to follow from a rural-town relationship rather than from agricultural peasant attachment to his land." (Redfield, 1960:14-18).

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## Introduction

Fredrik Barth's early fieldwork among nomads of the Middle East provided a good guide for those interested in the development processes in the region and beyond. His approach was also important for African researchers concerned with pastoral-sedentary relations and related topics. The ruling elites in most African countries face problems when dealing with pastoralists, primarily because they do not seem to grasp the role pastoralists play in the wider society. Their concern seems to focus on how these groups can be efficiently ruled, how social services can be extended to them, and in what way they can be made to contribute effectively to the national economy. Such perspectives do not allow them to discover how pastoral groups use their environment, their relations to surrounding groups of sedentary villagers as well as their relations to urban populations.

Elites in African countries with pastoralists rarely attempt to seek models that can illustrate the role of pastoralists and sedentary villagers in everyday life. Barth draws our attention to this role. He made ethnicity and scale as major variables of social organization in his analysis of the relations between nomads and sedentary people. He (Barth, 1973) outlined at least two models of depicting this position; namely by seeing the nomad relations to their environment or by considering their symbiotic relations to those who occupy the space in which they practice their activities. This allows us to investigate the statuses and roles that dominate such relations of diverse groups and recognize their increasing complexity as issues of scale involve a sizable number of individual actors.

Regarding ethnicity, Barth wrote: "A categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background. To the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction, they form ethnic groups in this organizational sense" (Barth, 1969:13-14). While scale as a term has been current for centuries, its use as a summary index of social difference over the whole observable range is more recent.

Pastoralists are part of wider social systems that include other groups in a geographical space. In rural areas of Sudan, these include sedentary villagers, populations in large villages and scheme owners. Urban dwellers include settled people (voluntary or forced)<sup>2</sup>, merchants, government employees and other personnel whose services are in demand by those residing in and away from the urban setting. They differ in their ethnicity when compared with pastoralists and sedentary villagers and other people in rural areas in terms of both the scale as well as the complexity of the social networks in which they are involved.

While ethnicity is used with reference to the identity of individuals and their relation to the group in which they claim to be members, scale includes two dissimilar dimensions related to the number of people involved and extension in space (Gronhaug, 1978:79). Density is an issue related to space which, in the case of Sudan, mainly refers to land. This requires the investigation of three categories

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<sup>2</sup> The process of sedentarization of pastoralists takes two forms. Due to disease or climatic changes, some pastoralists join villages or urban areas and mostly join the informal sector. They hope to accumulate the necessary funds that may allow them to rebuild their herds and go back to their traditional lives. Other categories that join the urban sector are rich pastoralists who sell part of their herds and join the merchant group. The rest of their herd mostly move with their relatives or hired herders.

in rural areas. These are pastoral groups, sedentary villagers and scheme owners. They are the three major groups that compete for use and ownership of land.

### **Pastoral and Sedentary Groups: People and land**

In analyzing the relations between pastoralists and sedentary villagers that share the same geographical space, commonality becomes a dominant issue. Although there are differences in daily practices, social stratification, joint property holding and the way in which resources are utilized and shared among members of each ethnic group exhibit a striking similarity. Households move together and many households make one camp with its own leader. Herds are owned by the family as a unit but most of the important decisions related to resource management are in the hands of the senior family member.

Villages may consist of different ethnic groups who live in permanent dwellings as family units. Cultivable land, in most cases, is owned by family units. Land is the space in which both pastoral and sedentary groups can compete to expand their activities. Some families may own some animals for their use. Wealthy and poor individuals exist among both groups. However, leaders of native administration and some rich pastoralists settle in large villages while some sedentary rich merchants join large urban centers.

The symbiotic relation between pastoralists and sedentary villagers cannot be missed. They complement each other through processes of exchange. Animal products such as milk, meat, wool and other crafts that the female members among the pastoralists make, are highly demanded by settled villagers even when some of them practice mixed activities of cultivation and animal rearing. At the same time, pastoral groups need agricultural products such as sorghum or millet as well as some vegetables that some villagers may have in excess. They also buy tea, sugar, salt and other market goods from village-merchants. Weekly markets in different villages are usual places for such exchanges. Such village markets, in the past, were places that operated on principle of exchange that do not necessarily follow the typical market principle. This type of exchange has changed with the emergence of merchants in large villages and middlemen representing urban areas' interests<sup>3</sup>.

While pastoral groups would like to make the maximum use of land for grazing their herds, settled villagers strive to use their surroundings for cultivating different crops. However, land is not under the control of either group. In Sudan, the state has passed laws that regulates the use of this resource. The state's control over land can be traced to the kingdoms and sultanates that ruled before the Turkish and Anglo-Egyptian colonization of the country (O'Fahey and Spaulding, 1974). The same system of control was later adopted, with minor modifications, by the Anglo-Egyptian colonizers and the national governments that followed in their footsteps (cf. Shazali and Ahmed, 1999).

The pastoralists in the central rain lands in Sudan, during the initial period of the colonial rule, legitimized access to rangeland by membership of the then fluid structure of ethnic groups referred to, in the literature of the day, as "tribal agglomeration". An ethnic group/tribe was flexible and changing, organized around a "power-center" (elite) controlling strategic resources in the region. By

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<sup>3</sup> Pastoralists also use these market places to sell some of their access animals to middlemen who came from urban areas for this same purpose.

establishing control over the resources in the region, the “power-center” instituted itself as the core drivers of small groups which, in identifying with it, came to be part of the larger ethnic group/tribe (Ahmed, 1979). As and when the power center loses its hegemony, a new core emerged thereby giving rise to a new ethnic structure and leadership within the group. This applied mainly to those who lived on the plains while the claims of the sedentary villagers on the banks of the Nile and its tributaries were given special status in ownership of cultivable land according to their historical claims.

The Condominium government paid attention to the system of land tenure, and issued its first “Title to Land Ordinance” in 1899. By this law, the colonial administration announced that all land in northern and central riverain Sudan which had been continuously cultivated during the preceding five years, would be considered a private property of the cultivators. The Ordinance, however, excluded from the land settlement and registration the rain-lands of central, eastern and western Sudan as well as Southern Sudan. As with the uncultivated land of riverain northern and central Sudan, these “unsettled” areas were categorically classified as government owned and divided into two classes: (i) Government land subject to no right, and (ii) Government land subject to rights vested in a community such as tribe, section or village (Bolton, 1948).

On demarcating Government land, as “subject to no right”, attention was not paid to the fact that pastoralists utilize such space for grazing and settled villagers occasionally move out of the premises of their villages to cultivate such land since they practice shifting cultivation. On reviewing the land use system through the Soil Conservation Committee of 1944 (Sudan Government, 1944), the colonial administration favored the sedentary villagers over pastoralists in land ownership and utilization and assigned land on the bases of ethnicity.

The 1899 Ordinance, the review of 1944 of land use and the following land laws up to the present day have had a significant impact on the scale of expansion and use by both pastoralists and villagers. In fact, it allowed the Government to dominate the space and limit the possibility of expanding the scale of utilization in rural settings although it was silent on the use of land in urban areas (Shazali and Ahmed, 1999). It also gave the government the right to use this land by granting rights of use to absentee land-lords, a practice that national governments continued after independence until the present day. Private rain fed schemes, assigned to landlords by the state with nominal rent, took over most of the lands used by the pastoralists and sedentary villagers. The private owners of the schemes came in conflict with pastoral groups since they obstructed their routes of annual migration when they started cultivating parts of these routes. These schemes also took part of the land where villagers used to expand their shifting cultivation.

These policies did not consider how pastoralists and sedentary people maintained and used symbiotic relations within the spaces they occupied. In the past, during market days, pastoralists needed the support of an ethnically related granter (dhamin) who could be a person with good knowledge of the whereabouts of the parties to any transaction since pastoralists are constantly on the move. It was also possible to use the elites who were settled in/or were close to villages where the transaction takes place. This role was also the responsibility of the elite heading the Native Administration before its abolishment in 1970. However, the symbiotic relations between the two groups continue replacing the role of the granter and the elite of the Native Administration with the use of modern technological means to contact and locate partners to the transaction wherever they

are. This can mainly be seen in the use of vehicles and telephones that recently became available to pastoralists.

### **Urban Dwellers as part of the environment**

The similarity between the pastoral- sedentary relations with their immediate neighboring villages and their relations with both surrounding urban large villages or towns is conspicuous. Urban areas depend on rural areas for their supply of animals and agricultural product. The old methods, especially the role played by ethnic elites in enhancing such a relation, was important in linking the two entities. Ethnicity had a crucial role in establishing this link through use of ethnic relatives on both sides. However, this type of link has recently been replaced by contact through modern technical means such as mobile telephones and Toyota pick-up cars. Traditionally, middlemen representing the interests of some merchants in urban areas, visited the village markets where pastoralist and sedentary villager meet and tried to obtain deals in favor of the urban markets. The profit that these middlemen used to make on their visit is no longer as lucrative as it used to be since both pastoralists and sedentary villagers use their mobile phones to check the prices in urban areas, allow for the cost of transport and adjust their transactions accordingly.

Other important changes took place in the last few years. Due to drought and desertification, many pastoralists lost most of their animal herds. Some of them opted to move to urban areas with what they had left, creating what had been referred to as "nomads in towns" and started to sell milk and other animal products to urban dwellers (Salih, 1985, Elnager 2001). This also led some village inhabitants to move to surrounding urban areas seeking services such as health and education as well as jobs in the informal sector and living in displaced camps. It is here that the scale of relations differ and ethnicity alone could not help in adjusting to the new life and its complexity. It is a level different from what the pastoralists and sedentary villagers are used to since in these camps they would meet with people from different localities and with different customs and values<sup>4</sup>. Pastoralists and sedentary villagers from the same areas attempt to use their ethnic acquaintances, who came to urban areas under different circumstances, to nurse and maintain their new relations and create new ones that fit their new roles and statuses. At this level of contact, they find it necessary to expand their social networks to cope with the change in the scale and the complexity of their new relations.

Technical means, specially the use of mobile phones, enhanced the new relations between pastoralists and villagers and their contact in large villages and towns. The scale becomes much larger than it used to be in rural areas and the role of ethnicity has moved to a higher level. Both pastoralists and villagers, in their move to large villages and towns, will be expected to give political support to elites that belong to their ethnicity. Ethnicity at this level of scale becomes a political tool used by ethnic elites to gain power and authority.

### **Dealing with complexity**

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<sup>4</sup> The internally displaced people (IDPs) differ in systems of organization. In most cases individuals keep close to their ethnic relatives. Yet they recognize the large society they joined and the fact that they must integrate in the urban setting they are making its outskirts. For more on this variation see (Ali and Mahmoud, 2016).

In his analysis of “Nomads of South Persia” Barth advocated a general perspective addressing the way in which nomads interact and adapt to their environment. Within the context of the Middle East and similar situations, he stated that “nomad-sedentary relations need a model that exhibits the crucial features of these relations, so that we can compare that variation under a unified perspective. Various alternatives present themselves: (i) We can depict nomadic society in relation to its total environment. Sedentary peoples and societies are part of this total environment, and nomads’ relations to them are revealed as part of an ecologic, economic, or political analysis.... (ii) We can adopt a more explicitly symbiotic view, and seek to analyse the inter-connection of nomads and sedentary as prerequisites for the persistence of each in their present form” (Barth, 1973:11).

Barth chose to adopt the first approach when attempting to depict nomad-sedentary relations and emphasized the role of environment and ecology in depicting these relations in the Middle East context. However, since then these relations have changed in response to the changing situation because of the impact of climate change and advancing technology in these societies. Drought and desertification and the introduction of new communication and services facilities and the concentration of these services in urban areas had their impact on pastoralists and sedentary relations. This also influenced the pastoralists and sedentary relations to surrounding agriculture schemes as well as to the state that controlled the space in which each of these groups practice their everyday activities.

Ethnicity played a significant role in the social organization of society among pastoralists and sedentary villagers in rural areas. It shaped the relation between the individual and his/her group as well as organized his/her role in economic and political daily activities. Elsewhere, I have dealt with these organizational issues (Ahmed, 1973, 1974, 1979, 2017), but the situation was not as complex as it is now. It was possible to draw a dividing line between pastoralists and sedentary communities and the kind of symbiotic relations that they exhibited. Agricultural schemes were new-comers on the scene and their competition over land, although it could be noticed, did not yet impact negatively on the relations of individuals among these groups.

Politically, the native administration was mainly favoring the pastoral groups in the plains and extending its influence on sedentary villagers. Ethnicity was the main political tool governing interaction in rural areas. Village markets, in addition to the symbiotic relations that individual families among pastoralist and sedentary groups had, facilitated contact with wider audiences among groups. They also established the relation between rural and urban areas through the activities of middlemen representing the interests of the urban settings. However, with the abolishment of native administration in the early 1970 and drought and desertification as well as civil conflicts<sup>5</sup>, many people in rural areas started to move towards urban areas where ruralization of urban settings became a reality.

The technological advances that impacted the world at large have also had their impact on pastoral and sedentary groups in Sudan. The introduction of water tanks has given an opportunity for pastoralists to graze their animals on the byproducts of the cultivated areas, hence reducing the

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<sup>5</sup> In areas of the Blue Nile, South Kordofan and South Darfur civil conflicts between differ groups and between these groups and the regional and central state have had a negative impact of the pastoral-sedentary relations but did not stop the contact and the dependency related,

distance to be covered in watering animals since water tanks, mounted on cars, can be used. This also recently allowed scheme-owners to sell the byproducts that they used to allow pastoralists to graze freely. However, more recently, the scheme-owners and some of the wealthy villagers started to have their own animals grazing these byproducts thus competing with pastoralists. Use of Toyota pick-up cars started to replace the traditional movement of households (using Hawdaj i.e house-like mounted on camels). The cars are used during the annual migration to transport families with old and young members of the group together with young and sick animals ahead of the rest of the main herds. It allowed for the separation of households and herds for some time during this movement. This changed the nature of the annual migration of pastoral groups and the distance they cover and the length of their stay near the sedentary villages that they used to annually pass and exchange items with (Ahmed and Suliman, 2017).

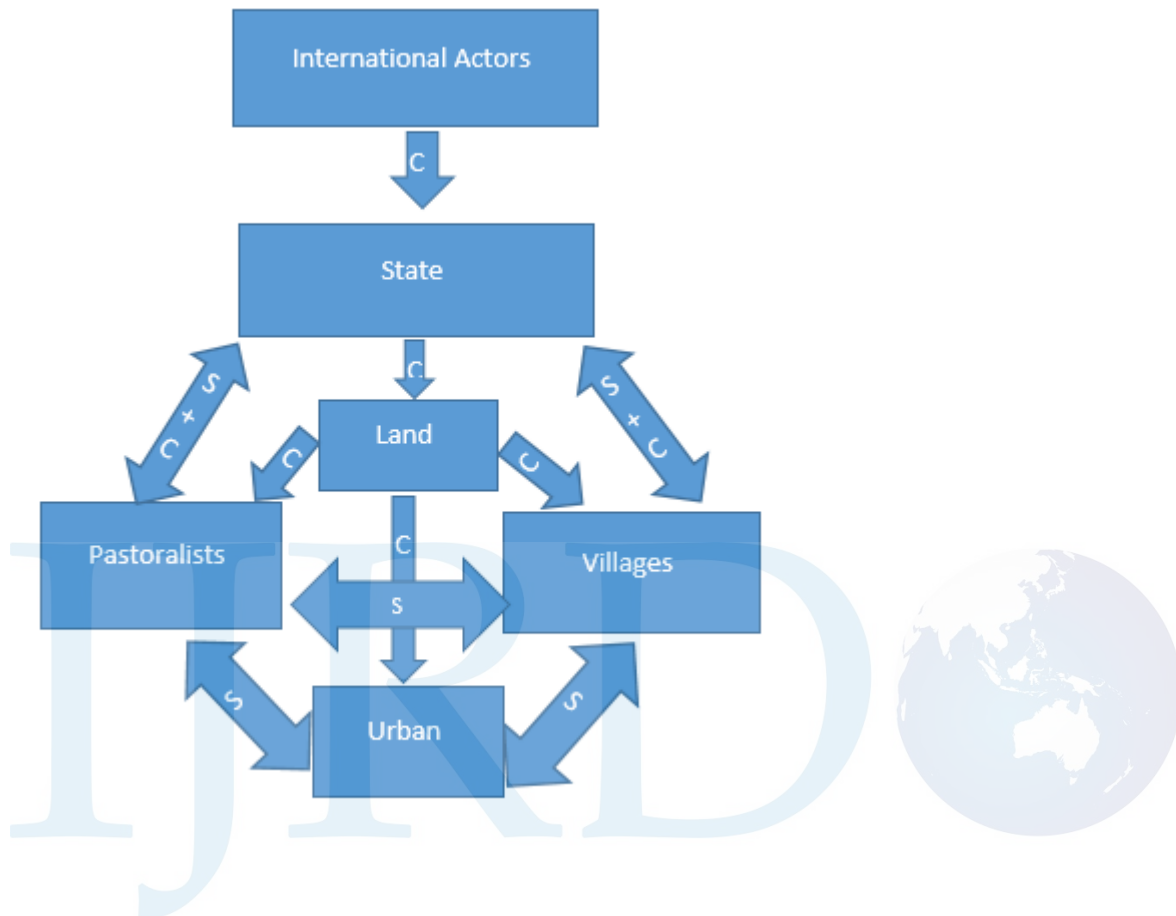
Mobile phones are a recent technological item that impacted the daily lives of the pastoralists. Although its use among sedentary villagers was earlier than that of the pastoral groups. It has a significant impact on the pastoral communities. Young and old men and women in pastoral camps carry and use mobile phone to contact each other in the camp; to know the movement of the herd when grazing with young individuals away from the camp, as well as its use by those sent by members of the camp trying to find the most suitable places for the next move during the annual migration. The village markets are places where these phones are charged (Ahmed and Suliman, 2017). Mobile phones have also had their impact on the rural urban and market relations since they have restricted the role of middlemen. Both pastoralists villagers started to contact their ethnic relatives and/or friends in urban areas to know the price of animals they may sell and be able to reduce the margin of profit that the middlemen used to make.

### **Modeling pastoralist-sedentary relations**

While ethnicity emphasizes the relations that unite individuals in rural and urban areas, the concept of scale tries to capture the density and extension of networks and relations. As Gronhaug (1978:79) points out, "scale, in this sense of size, includes two dissimilar dimensions: the number of personnel and the extension of social space". The complexity of the situation becomes clear once this is applied to the pastoral-sedentary relations in rural areas of Sudan and their relations to the urban population in the country. Actors that establish the relations between the two sectors are operating at various levels of scale with the complex size of individuals involved and with variations of interests.

The diagram shows various parts of society; their relations to each other; the resources involved and the complexity that actors face in their attempt to allow the individuals to function within a given space. "S" stands for symbiotic relations between pastoralists and sedentary villagers and the kind of dependency of their societies on each other. The exchange of relevant goods takes place when the pastoralists, during their annual migration, are in the proximity of the villages. They exchange the excess of their pastoral products with the sedentary villagers and/or the small shops in such villages. It also applies to the case of relations with urban areas and the state. "C" stands for the control of the state over land and the way it can be utilized as already mentioned. The expansion of the

schemes, whether private, public or owned by international companies<sup>6</sup>, is mainly decided by the state. The state also controls the process of distribution of land in urban areas. The interaction and the social, economic and political relations at this level is of a different scale in comparison with the one between pastoralists and sedentary villagers.



The relation between the state and the rural inhabitants is also symbiotic in nature since urban areas depend on rural ones for their supply of various goods. However, the recent changes, resulting from the climatic changes leading to drought and desertification as well as civil conflicts, have forced some pastoralists and sedentary villagers to move to urban areas. They made up camps as displaced people which, in some cases, led to the ruralization of urban areas.

Complexity of relations within such a diagram cannot ignore the impact of the international actors. International companies have been offered certain areas to cultivate without any consideration to the interest of the pastoralists who use such space for grazing, or the interests of sedentary villagers who use it for shifting cultivation. The state occasionally grabs the land and offers it to international actors for political and/or other reasons. This relation between the state and the international actors is of a different scale and clearly has its impact on many other political and economic dimensions. The conceptual frame presented in the diagram above attempts to draw attention to the complexity

<sup>6</sup> Although the central government since the 1960 used to grant land it controlled to international organizations it has recently granted large areas in rural Sudan to The Gulf states and Saudi Arabian companies. These companies used most this land to produce fodder for export.



of relations involved; the use of ethnicity and scale at various levels of interaction in society and how they impact each other.

### Concluding remarks

Ethnicity, scale and complexity of relations among pastoralists and sedentary villagers in the plains of Sudan have passed through various stages. The models suggested by Barth alluded to above in his study of nomads in the Middle East remains valid. These models, however, need to be extended to take into considerations the recent changes because of the impact of modern technology on the social organization of diverse groups in rural and urban areas. The introduction of Toyota pick-up cars and mobile phones, as examples, have had their impact on the pastoralists' annual migration. They also facilitated their contacts within and outside the camp and their social and economic relations with the sedentary villagers during their annual migration.

The relations that pastoralists and sedentary villagers have are also influenced by the role of traditional leaders, the market principle and the role of middlemen representing the interests of urban areas. The complexity of the situation becomes clear once the relation with urban areas is introduced and the state becomes a significant actor with special rules and regulations on the resources it controls, i.e land. This level of scale gets even more complex when the population in rural areas is forced through climatic changes, civil conflicts and the lack of health and social services, to move to urban areas as displaced people.

One important feature is that of ruralization of some towns due to the movement of rural populations to their outskirts whose culture, tradition and values are different from those in urban settings. The controlling role of the state and its ability to grant land to absentee scheme owners and international actors, must be considered. The diagram above attempts to show the complexity of the relations of the pastoralists and their neighbors and their relation to the wider world.

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