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ASPECTS OF LABOUR IN AN AGRO-PASTORAL ECONOMY: THE NORTHERN BEJA OF SUDAN

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This paper discusses for the case of the Beja agro-pastoral society, the interconnections between different aspects of labour, which include techniques of production, division of labour by gender and age, paid labour and labour migration, and the cultural and political ramifications of different sorts of labour. All these aspects are considered in an attempt to explain why Northern Beja farmers feel they have insufficient labour to cultivate properly. The present paper cannot hope, and does not set out, to provide a general theory of labour for the Beja, still less for pastoral or agro-pastoral societies in general, but is intended to show that agro-pastoral labour cannot be understood from a purely technical, nor from a purely economic, viewpoint.

The Beja

The Beja are the indigenous inhabitants of the Red Sea coast and Red Sea Hills area of the Sudan, numbering in total around half a million. The present paper concerns the Bisharin and Atman tribes to the north of Port Sudan, who are in the great majority herders of smallstock and camels, or combine herding with sorghum cultivation[1]. It should be stressed that the sale of livestock for cash, principally to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, is an integral part of the pastoral economy. Sorghum is brought by lorry from Port Sudan and sold at small rural shops, almost all owned by Beja. Beja society is organised into patrilineages, and land is aggregated into lineage territories. Beja pastoralists prefer to stay on their own lineage land, but where necessary can settle for long periods elsewhere.

The fieldwork in 1982 to 1983 and 1987 on which this paper is based was carried out in and around Sufayya, a small trading settlement, around 200 km NNW of Port Sudan, at an altitude of 400 m. The surrounding area is made up of steep, bare mountains rising from broad flat valleys. Mean annual rainfall is well under 100 mm, and extremely irregular in spatial and temporal distribution. The valleys bear a variety of semi-desert vegetation, notably *acacia tortilis* and other trees, *suaeda fruticosa*, a saline shrub, and various herbs and grasses in the rainy season.

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[1] See Morton (1988, 1989) and for a discussion of the recent drought and famine, Morton *forthcoming*. Also see Salih (1979, 1980) for the Hadendowa or Southern Beja.

That Sufayya was a trading settlement, rather than a pastoral encampment, introduced a bias into fieldwork. Those involved in the trading economy were more restricted in their pastoral migration, and probably used more intensive techniques of production, eg relied more on tree foliage. Nevertheless, cultural norms of the sexual division of labour are the same in Sufayya and outside, and the pastoral techniques observed in Sufayya are available to those outside. It was also an excellent place to observe the connections between pastoralism, trading and politics. One further point is that Sufayya people were very unforthcoming with anything remotely resembling quantitative information. The description of Beja labour that follows will therefore not be backed up by statistical information.

The Division of Labour

Married women are seen as *obliged* to perform basic household tasks assisted by young girls. Women and girls as young as four may do some of the work of herding the small livestock, not too far from the house. Girls and older women are occasionally seen at the wells, where any male will draw water for them, and also collect firewood from nearby perhaps every other day (McEwan 1988:9). Women are responsible for the physical upkeep and periodic rebuilding of the house and shelters and for home crafts, although increasingly household objects are brought in from Port Sudan (*ibid.*:9). Ideally, women do not go to the shops, but this varies according to the village; females of any age are hardly seen in the larger market at Halaib, while in Sufayya widowed, divorced and older women visit the shops frequently or even daily.

One very marked aspect of the division of labour is the prohibition on women milking. No Beja female may milk an animal, although Beja are aware that Arabic-speaking women will.

For men, a distinction between those who need to labour and those who do not (because they have others to labour for them), largely replaces a rigorous division of labour by age. Obviously there are starting ages for the various male activities. Boys give assistance with smallstock from a very young age, and boys of eight or nine may go out looking for camels. During adolescence they will start to help with cultivation, and may become full-time shepherds. In late adolescence they might begin serious camel-herding. At the other end of the age scale there are fewer such distinctions. Men in late middle age will do weeding or other agricultural work, or manual work such as digging out wells if it is necessary, ie if they do not have sons or hired labour to do it for them.

A man’s tasks are the heavier work connected with herding, and all work

connected with camel herding. Shopping is a man's task, and for those living outside the villages, is a very important and time consuming one, involving long journeys on camel back and often overnight stays. These expeditions, on which women *never* go, are one of the most important opportunities for the transmission of news (Morton 1988).

Drawing water is mainly a male activity, and certainly from the deep wells around Sufayya. Sheep are fed on purchased grain, donkeys have to be watered every day even in winter, and goats are watered every day in summer (they can be watered every fourth day or less). So it is likely, especially in summer, that every household sends a man to the well every day. Although there is relatively free visiting by the men of a village or camp to each other's houses, the well does function as a male meeting place, and though older men will leave the drawing and carrying of water to their sons and/or other dependents if possible, they will still come to the well to talk.

The Yearly Agricultural Cycle

The Beja seasons and the yearly cycle of productive activity is shown in Table 1. The table can only be an approximation for various reasons. Firstly, it is difficult to talk about a seasonal cycle in Sufayya, because of the unpredictability of rainfall. Secondly, the labour available to a household, from within itself or hired, will greatly affect its patterns of pastoral movement. Thirdly, people in Sufayya do not have a particularly accurate or coherent traditional calendar, nor are they conversant with western calendar months, which makes information gathering difficult.

Cultivation takes place in Khor Dib, a major watercourse to the west and north of Sufayya. The agricultural cycle can only begin after coastal rains late in the year. If the clay of Khor Dib is sufficiently moistened by the floods, if farmers are reasonably certain that no further floods will wash planting away, and if they have access to land, either as owners or through traditional usufruct, they will go to plant. In 1987 there was an obvious move to the planting areas from around Sufayya on October 22.

Planting is done with a simple digging stick, the Sudanese *seluka*, by men and youths; I was told that women do not do agricultural work at all, but some women watch crops against animals and also weed.

What weeding is done depends very much on the condition of the land. Some farmers clear land of *suaeda* and *calotropis procera* before cultivation, or of grass immediately afterwards. Areas heavily grassed at planting time may be left

uncultivated, both because of pressure to keep them for grazing, and because the labour of clearing them is too daunting. Weeding can be started almost immediately after planting or up to six weeks afterwards. It is mostly done with a sharp hoe, with heavier growth being cut with an axe, adze or adze-hoe (*toria*).

During cultivation the land is supposedly guarded against animals, but this varies. Some families move close to their cultivated land to watch, some farmers pay watchers, others build fences of *suaeda* or, if wealthier, wire. Others leave the land unguarded, assuming their neighbours will watch for them.

I was told that the local variety of sorghum, a form of the common Sudanese *nugud*, takes five or six months to mature. Harvesting is done with the curved Beja knife, by family or hired labour. The sorghum is then taken to a flat place in the khor or outside, and threshed with sticks, apparently by male family members. It is then winnowed and cleaned by women (McEwan 1988:10).

Table 1: The Yearly Cycle in the Sufayya Area

Month	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul
Beja season	T'hobe			(Imai)		Owi		(Bhasai)		Omhagai		
Climate	Rains to SW still hot and dry around Sufayya		Rains around Sufayya	Temp-erature rises	Cold weather begins	Cold		Temper-ature rises		Hot and dry		
Cultivation			(Clear -ing) Plant -ing		Weeding (guarding)			Harvest-ing				
Herding	Suaeda-eating camels and some sheep to SW Acacia-eating camels and goats in home areas Browse and shaking			To open areas for grazing if rains are good To narrow khors for browse if rains are poor, and shaking and cutting of acacia foliage				Return to home areas Browse and shaking of acacia flowers Exceptional summer rains bring ground vegetation Suaeda-eating camels to die				

	of acacia flowers	Some camels to die
	Grazing of dry grass and use of grain	

Pastoral Movements and Techniques

Pastoral movements in the Sufayya area are generally made over short distances by small groups of households, single households, or men on their own. Because of the unpredictability of rainfall, they do not have any very regular pattern, relying instead on hearing accurate news of rain (Morton 1988). They must also be able to act on it. This was raised in a discussion on why some people are poorer than others; they may be lazy, doubt the accuracy of the news, hope for rain in their own areas, or be tied by family members who cannot move, or by jobs. Perhaps most importantly, they may lack the labour-power to take best advantage of rain by sending different herd species in different directions. Optimally a household will have both its sheep and its camels herded separately, and will itself move with its goats, but many families herd sheep and goats together.

The numbers quoted to me as being what one herder could look after were surprisingly small. It must be taken into account that men prefer, if at all possible, to herd in twos and threes, whereby animal numbers per person can be greater. For camels I was told anything from 10 per herder to 90 per three herders. For sheep figures ranged from 30 per herder to 100 per two herders. Dahl and Hjort (1976:254-255) give figures for maximum herd sizes from around the world that are far higher than these although it must be remembered that herds must spread out very widely in the Red Sea Hills, and that the dependence on tree fodder involves more labour than in more favourable environments. The problems of looking after more than the numbers cited were apparently: watering them, fetching the lambs after birth, and controlling the amount of milk consumed by the young. Sheep are considered more troublesome to herd than goats as they are less likely to return of their own accord. Supervision of animals is not in fact close, especially near the home range, and camels might wander untended for up to 30 km. The birthing of smallstock is not supervised, and a few stillbirths result. Herders also perceive wild animals as a major threat to livestock.

Pastoral migrations in the winter are usually over short distances. Observations in 1982 and 1987 suggest that winter migrations tend more to the narrower watercourses (*khors*) for their browse (they have thicker cover and a higher proportion of the larger *acacia tortilis spirocarpa* and *balanites aegyptiaca* relative to the small *acacia tortilis tortilis*) in the poorer years, and to open areas for grazing after good rains. There were also, in 1982 and 1987, men who returned from camel herding to the southwest and immediately left for Dib or areas very near it.

One problem encountered during the winter is the susceptibility of a few camels

to fatal poisoning by *hankwilai* (*zygophyllum simplex*). This succulent plant is the commonest species to grow after the rains, and is generally very good fodder from camels and also eaten by smallstock. A small number of camels (Sufayya people mention two or three a season) develop diarrhoea and die. Such deaths occur more in the colder weather, and to both camels used to eating *suaeda* and those used to acacia browse. They do not occur near Halaib, where *hankwilai* also grows. As a result, camel-owners and herders tend to keep their herds away from areas of *hankwilai*, despite its usefulness to most stock.

If there is no rain, or if families are unable to move to it, or unwilling to, they may remain in the home areas and feed their animals on the leaves of the acacias. These are shaken down with a hooked stick, which is used by men, women and children. This was used in Sufayya in 1987, for feeding smallstock, even when ground vegetation was plentiful. The use of dry grasses and imported food used in late summer will also continue. A further resource is that of chopping whole boughs from the *acacia tortilis tortilis* with an axe, leaving enough green for it to regenerate after two or three years. These strategies are intensified if bad times continue. I was not told of any qualitatively different 'traditional responses to famine' though the burning and selling of charcoal is certainly one.

Families that move for the winter will tend to return to their home areas in March or April. There is a distinct tendency for people to stay settled around their own wells on their own land for the summer. However, owners of *suaeda*-eating camels, if they have available labour, which may mean a man leaving his wife, children and smallstock with relatives, will take them first of all to Dib for the *suaeda* browse, and possibly to join a caravan to Egypt, and possibly later to the southwest, as far as the flat grassland northwest of Musmar known as the Tamarab, for the summer rains there. Sheep are also sometimes taken southwest. Acacia-eating camels and goats will remain closer to the Sufayya over the summer, though their exact movements will depend on the availability of herding labour. The main fodder during this time will be the flowers and pods of the thorny acacias. Camels may browse directly from the smaller trees, otherwise flowers and pods are shaken down. There may also be exceptional summer rains which bring out some *birikt* (*cassia* spp.). Towards the end of summer, when the pods are exhausted, comes a difficult time. Animals will increasingly be eating the dry grass left from the winter growth; *panicum turgidum* and *shikaia* (an unidentified spiky ground herb) both remain on the ground in dry form. Those who can will feed their animals, or some of them, sorghum grain. One resource available at the very end of summer is the flowers of *calotropis procera*. This plant is usually cited as completely poisonous and useless, but in Dib the flowers are eaten by sheep.

Paid Labour

The division of labour by gender and age within the household, and the yearly cycles of pastoralism and agriculture, are not fully comprehensible without a description of paid labour. Paid labour in herding and cultivation is common in Beja society, and approved by tradition. Payment can be in either kind or cash, determined by the employer to his own advantage.

In pastoral production, goats are generally herded by the family, so the two important forms of paid herding are of camels and sheep. The herders are known as *misharib* and *anotegab* respectively, but these terms are not exclusive to paid labour, being applied to anyone involved in actual herding. Owners prefer herding to be done by immediate family members, or other kin, hiring non-relatives only if necessary. Only sons (who will inherit stock) give labour for free, although joint herding by two related owners is also common. Otherwise labour must be paid, traditionally in kind. Camel herding is traditionally the work of young men, and sometimes involves almost a form of pseudo-kinship, whereby clothing and food are provided, and the herder lives at times as part of the family. The heart of the traditional arrangement is the payment of one camel yearling per year. Such work is not looked down upon, as Hjort and Dahl (1979) report also for the Atman. Several Sufayya men were working or had worked as camel herders, and one had invested his earnings in a shop. Sheep herding can also be done by older men. The traditional payment is either one half or one third of the offspring in a year.

It now seems as if these traditional arrangements are being superseded. The Sufayya sheikh told me that owners who wish to pay cash can always find herders willing to accept it. Others confirmed that a shift was taking place; one mentioned £S 400 as the new yearly rate for camel herding. There were contrary accounts, however. One sheikh only mentioned the traditional arrangements, and said that through them the herd paid for its own herding. A young man told us that camel herding rates had been as high as a yearling *and* £S 1,800 per year, and were now down to a yearling only. There is obviously great variation in agreements reached, but there is a general feeling that the stockowners had a greater influence over the terms. A shift from kind to cash does seem to be a holding-down of real rewards by altering the nature of payment. This is probably because the losses of the last few years have resulted in a small number of herdowners with herds large enough to justify hiring labour, and a large pool of impoverished young men looking for work.

I have very little idea of the quantitative prevalence of paid herding in the area. Sufayya people are certainly able to herd sheep and camels separately, but this may not be typical. Sufayya men said very few people could afford to pay

camel herders, while others gave the impression that paid sheep herding was very common. In addition to transferring livestock to poorer households, these loans also provide herding labour to the lender (Toulmin 1983:17).

Northern Beja have various customs of gifts and loans of stock to poorer households. However, these transfers, known as *hamot*, are much less common than the paid herding arrangements mentioned above, and are not the pervasive feature in Beja society that they are in many East African pastoralist societies (Baxter 1975:213, 216-7). *Hamot* consists of the loan of a riding camel, or more usually the loan of a ewe or nanny-goat. The borrower has the right to its milk and hair for the duration of the loan. Although this is seen by Beja as completely different from the relationship with a paid herder (one is an act of kindness, the other the hiring of a worker), there is in practice some blurring of the distinction. Some informants said that rights to one third or one half of the offspring could be included in *hamot*, which would make it effectively a herding contract. Others denied this was the custom, which of course would make it less advantageous to the receiving household.

Agricultural labour is mainly hired for weeding and harvesting. Weeding is generally done for cash. It was very difficult to get a good idea of wage levels, with most informants saying, perhaps rather evasively, that it is a matter of individual agreement, but £S 5 - 6 per day seems likely. There are also agreements for people to watch the fields for animal trespass, but these are few, and there are no standard rates. Most informants agreed that harvesters are paid in kind, although one man said they received £S 7 - 8 per day in cash. The standard rate seems to be 2 *robo'* (about 6 kg) of grain per day. It will be noted that payment for weeding is made in cash, at a season when grain is expensive, and payment for harvesting in grain, when it is cheap. This can be seen as the cyclical analogue of the linear process taking place in herding - a manipulation of the terms of payment by employers. However, it takes place in a very different context, as will be shown in the final section.

Labour Migration

Out-migration of men to work for wages is an important aspect of life in the Sufayya area, and an account of it casts light on various aspects of the agro-pastoral economy. For nearly all migrants the destination is Port Sudan, a city founded on Beja territory, and in which Beja dominated dock labour from 1931

until very recently.[2] Contemporary migration to Port Sudan from the Sufayya area falls into three types, representing three categories of households:

i - migration of a few entire households to Port Sudan because family members have relatively prosperous careers

ii - migration of young men, or those in early middle-age, some of them married, for a short time, to find money to take back to families in the hills

iii - migration of whole households owing to their complete inability to sustain a pastoral lifestyle in the hills.

Besides these, there is a fourth category, (iv) - those who do not need to migrate at all. These and category (i) are the wealthiest people, (iv) being self-sufficient through livestock and cultivation in the hills, and (i) having income in Port Sudan. Category (ii) are families who have sufficient stock in the hills to provide some milk, but who need extra cash income to remain clothed and fed, and to avoid sales of animals. Category (iii) is self-explanatory.

The young men of category (ii), and one informant said 20 was the usual age to start, usually stay in Port Sudan for one or two months. Labour migration is not seasonal, but rotating; from a family, one young man returns and another leaves. This means the livestock in the hills always have someone to herd and milk them. The care of migrants' livestock is not seen as a problem. The men work mainly in loading and unloading, but finding work is becoming more difficult[3]. Although union piece-work rates mean that daily earnings (for extremely hard work) can be relatively high, men can seek work in vain for several days. Most informants denied that migrants would send or bring back anything more than enough to feed and clothe their families, or perhaps a milch animal. Certainly they did not see labour migration as a way of saving towards investment. Some of the families in category (i) may actually be investing in livestock, though I heard no evidence of this. Otherwise, category (ii) are effectively increasing herds by allowing faster reproduction than if there was offtake for sale. Category (iii) come to Port Sudan as a last resort, when their herds have become nil or negligible. It does not appear that they ever save enough to return to pastoralism.

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[2] The role of Beja in urban Port Sudan has been described by Lewis (1962) and Milne (1974).

[3] Because of containerisation and the erosion of the Beja ethnic monopoly on dock labour.

It seems as if short-term migration is practised by a large proportion, possibly a majority, of young men, and that short-term migrants in Port Sudan outnumber settlers. Migration by whole families is not said to have increased in the mid-1980s, or to be particularly important from the Sufayya area. One informant added that some families were even returning to the hills, as there were good chances for cultivation, and because of relief food.

Another destination for a few migrants is Gebeit, 50 km from Sufayya, where gold mining restarted in 1979. Men from the Sufayya area and Dib rarely work there, but certain lineages immediately to the south are heavily involved. The starting underground rate in late 1987 was £S 11.90 per day plus food, well in excess of what farmers would ever pay, and equally importantly, company policy is now geared to the creation of a permanent workforce. Unlike 1983, when they were content with casual labour for fluctuating labour demands (a policy not unwelcome to the local workforce), they are now issuing contracts to the great majority of workers, and paying much of the wage in bonuses conditional on regular and continuous attendance.

Migration takes place mainly because many young men can earn more in cash in Port Sudan or Gebeit than the marginal benefit of them remaining in agro-pastoral production, given their small herds. A small herd is intrinsically unproductive, and the loss of one man's labour when there are relatives to continue herding is small. If a herd is big enough to provide, with available labour, the subsistence of the household through milk and off-take for sale, beside cultivated grain, the household is unlikely to become involved in labour migration. The men who migrate, though not perceiving themselves as 'saving', do cover their own subsistence while in Port Sudan and contribute, through the small amounts they bring back, to their family's subsistence. But this may represent a long-term loss to the productivity of their household, and the economy at large, as the next two sections will show.

Household Labour Supply, Inequality and Leisure

Wage labour in herding and cultivation is clearly subordinate to, and an extension of, independent household agro-pastoralist production; wage labourers either themselves combine, or are members of households that combine, working for others with their own production. Certain households, for a complex cluster of interrelated reasons, show more success in agro-pastoralism than others despite a cultural emphasis on egalitarianism. The ability to hire labour is one of these reasons, but is itself determined by herd size, if traditional in-kind wages are paid, or by cash income, and its effects are nearly identical to that of a plentiful supply of labour from the household itself[4]. This section will explore the place of labour supply in the pattern of Beja inequality.

The most important point about success in agro-pastoralism is that it is largely self-perpetuating. Households with large herds will be likely to keep them, and to attract labour that will enable good herd management as well as cultivation. There are other elements to success, but they constantly lead back to this question. It would be fanciful to suppose that all household heads were either as skilful or as diligent in their herd management, but those with resources will be able to hire the skill and diligence of others. Likewise, agro-pastoralism is always subject to luck, but a large, well-managed herd is better cushioned against fate than a small one where all species must be herded together. One can also invoke the concept of the developmental cycle; the ratio of producers to consumers in a household arising from the age and sex structure. A household full of adult men and older boys will have the advantage of effective herding. A household full of young children will have the disadvantage of having to commit resources to consumption; selling stock for cash, consuming milk rather than allowing the young animals to suckle freely. But even this variable is an effect, as well as a cause, of agro-pastoral success. By the attachment of peripheral kin, as well as the employment of outsiders, successful households will be able to maintain a high ratio of producers to consumers.

In many ways, family and paid labour, besides merging into one another through the hired employment of relatives, are interchangeable, and one can talk generally of the labour shortage or labour sufficiency of a household. These can then become mediating concepts in an analysis of how agro-pastoral success perpetuates itself, and how it affects political life.

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[4] The distinction between kin and non-kin labour in terms of the lack of control over and risk of misappropriation or poor herding by the latter has been discussed by Dahl (1979: 272-273) among others. Beja prefer using family members, but did not stress the distinction.

As herds attract labour, there is no limit, from this point of view, to the accumulation of large herds. The question of labour supply comes into play, rather, in the disadvantages for owners of small herds.

The disadvantages are not only direct, but indirect through the denial of leisure to those men, which is a highly sought-after commodity for Beja:

i - Actual surveillance of herds, for instance chopping or shaking foliage and keeping them from poisonous plants, is more difficult for those with restricted labour. However, the participation of women and children in smallstock herding alleviates this.

ii - More clearly, patterns of pastoral migration are likely to be sub-optimal. We have seen that the ideal pattern around Sufayya is to have both sheep and camels herded separately, while goats remain with the family. Camels especially may be moved long distances, to the coast in winter or southwest to the summer rains on the Tamarab. But many households lack the labour to herd all species separately and are forced into herding two or three species together.

i i i - A lack of labour also affects the relations between pastoralism and cultivation in a household's economy, and between a herdowner and his neighbours who cultivate. 'Customary law' is not unduly hard on those unable to keep their animals off others' crops, though persistent or serious trespass demands recompense. On the other hand, in a dispute I witnessed, a group of people were unable to control their goats while cultivating their own land. Wealthier people whose households both cultivated and herded were pressured by the leading sheikhs of the area to move their goats away; it seemed as if they would have to abandon their fields.

iv - If household heads cannot control labour, they lack the 'leisure' to participate in various key social activities. One of these is the process of acquiring information about rain and grazing vital to herding, in lengthy greetings ceremonies typically held in marketplaces over coffee (see Morton 1988).

v - Leisure is also a condition for full participation in political life. The traditional activities of a good sheikh, solving people's problems through speaking, sometimes at councils a day's journey from home, giving hospitality to all comers, demand a freedom from day-to-day tasks. It is for this reason that despite the ideology of equality among men in Beja society - by which greetings are exchanged between rich and poor, all may speak in council etc - one can still distinguish two loose categories of men; 'public figures' and those who do not have the time to engage in politics. It is not that sheikhs refuse to get their hands dirty; rather it is because they do not need to get their hands dirty that they are sheikhs.

A Labour Shortage?

Several tendencies work together to produce an apparent labour shortage in Northern Beja agriculture. Land for cultivation does not appear scarce, and there was probably some cultivable land left uncultivated in 1987. Informants said that more cultivation was not done because ‘the people are few’, although they had known years when there was less land than people who wished to cultivate. A shortage of labour was also mentioned in connection with animal damage to crops. Farmers complained of a lack of labour especially to weed and also to watch the fields and build fences, supervision of animals was obviously not close, and it appeared that the worst ‘culprits’ of animal damage were those who lacked the labour, or the ability to hire it, to combine cultivation and herding successfully.

The complaints about animal damage and weeding were in fact linked to requests to ACORD to provide fencing and payment for weeders, and are not in themselves sufficient evidence of a labour shortage. Some fences were built of dead *suaeda*, and weeding was carried out energetically by some groups. But overall, agricultural labour would seem unattractive, and therefore difficult to obtain, for a combination of reasons:

i - A high evaluation of leisure. Leisure is, as shown above, a means to success in herd management and politics, and as a result is given a high overall value in society.

ii - A specific preference for herding over agricultural labour. Herding and associated tasks can be just as hard, though rarely as intensive as, cultivation, but are more sanctioned by Beja, and particularly Bisharin, in accordance with their perceptions of themselves as primarily herders.

i i i - The high risks of agriculture. Flood cultivation on Dib may be subject to late floods after planting, wind and locust damage. An unwillingness to invest family labour or pay high rates to others, in the early stages of cultivation, may from this point of view be very rational.

iv - The counter-attractions of labour migration outside the area. The very specific case of Gebeit drawing away men traditionally hired from agricultural labour, as well as the more general drift to Port Sudan, are both relevant. At a more general level, there seems to be an awareness, linked to the much larger phenomenon of migration to Port Sudan, that labour is becoming a commodity that should be paid for. Evidence from other rural

areas of Red Sea Province suggests that Beja are increasingly ready to calculate wage demands in terms of opportunity costs, ie what their labour might fetch in Port Sudan (S Quinney *personal communication*)[5].

v - Another, minor, counter-attraction is the opportunity for petty trade available to anyone who can ride a lorry to the Egyptian border.

There are therefore direct economic reasons, and more diffuse cultural reasons, why agricultural labour is considered less attractive. The large herdowners, being involved in lucrative camel sales, may be able to compete for labour over the counter-attractions of urban migration. The cultivators, looking for assistance in a risky subsistence activity, appear to be having difficulty. So the similarity mentioned above, that both herdowners and cultivators hold down real rewards to labour by manipulating the means of payment, is a superficial one. For herdowners, hiring labour remains a viable strategy. Cultivators, on the other hand, have either been unable, or unwilling, to adapt to the new economic environment in which agricultural labour is relatively unattractive.

Conclusion

The description of labour among the Beja demonstrates the close connections between its different aspects; ecological/technical, economic, political and cultural. The importance of tree fodder, accessible only by human techniques, and the diversity of species, make herding labour-intensive. Forms of paid labour are sanctioned by tradition, but increasingly alternative employment in the wider economy is proving more attractive to poorer households. While agro-pastoral success perpetuates itself in many ways, the distinction between households with sufficient or insufficient labour (whether domestic or hired) helps to explain why certain households prosper and achieve political prominence. That this success is linked with the ‘leisure’ of the household head itself contributes to a generally negative evaluation of labour, one factor among many producing a labour shortage in agriculture.

Notes

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[5] It seems, though not clearly, that there has been a shift in the maintenance of wells from freely-given communal labour to labour paid by sheikhs, which would bear out this argument.

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