

New Series: Changes in Pastoral Society in Syria and Resource Management

Part 1: Sedentary of Nomadic pastoralists

Since the late 1950s increasing numbers of nomadic pastoralists have become sedentary in the north-eastern part of Syria. Before then the main part of this area called Jazira was rangeland inhabited by nomads migrating long distances. The only exceptions to this practice being a limited number of settlements in farming areas near the Khabur River and along the Turkish border. European travelers visiting the area from the 19th Century to the early 20th Century, were amazed by the sight of fertile lands being occupied by nomadic pastoralists.

The trend of increased settling of nomadic pastoralists since 50 years ago is not considered to be a result of external pressure exerted by national policy. Rather, it is considered to be a result of rapid agricultural development in the Jazira Plain, combined with the farmers' will to incorporate modern agriculture in their livelihoods. However, even though settlement meant building a permanent house and starting cultivation, it was effectively a primitive farming practice totally dependent on rainwater, and the crop was mainly barley and was no more than a small supplement to their main livelihood, which came from pastoral system. Therefore, given a changed environment of enlarged farming area and decreased grasslands, after trying a little bit of sedentary farming, the people might have assumed a new posture and adapted to a new style of pastoral system involving seasonal movement between farming area and grasslands.

What is pastoral system in the first place? The popular and principle definition is “mobile people who manage animal herds, assist their reproduction, and directly and indirectly utilize their milk and meat for living.” However in the real world, many different types of pastoral system exist. In addition, due to recent rippling effects of modernization, the variation of stock raising styles is even greater. Stock raising of pastoral system has been compounded with agriculture and other livelihood activities throughout history, which has created many different variations depending on the ratio of the mix. Their forms also clearly differ from “livestock farming” as an industry in developed nations in that their way of living is heavily influenced by farming practices in all corners of life. In Syria, urban dwellers often call nomadic pastoralists “Badw”. This name is often tinged with a feeling of petty contempt for those living in the difficult conditions of the desert, mixed with a sense of respect for (and fear of) anybody who can live in a harsh environment which is impossible for city dwellers to cope with.

So far, in AAI News, we dealt with Syria-related topics such as “Nature and Agriculture of Syria”, “Agricultural Extension”, and “Horticultural Therapy.” In this new series we focus on the Arabian tribe of Baqqara, living in the Abd al Aziz Mountains which are located roughly in the center of the Jazira Plain in Hasakah Prefecture. We will introduce their main livelihood activities such as livestock farming and rain-fed agriculture and their transition over time. By doing this, we would like to develop a systematic thinking on the way grazing lands are used and the problems the Baqqara face. In particular we are hoping to examine utilization of arid environment, from the view point of resource management in the grassland ecosystem, based on the environmental history of the Abd al Aziz Mountains.



Distant view of the Abd al Aziz Mountains



Baqqara tribesman and Bait Shaar (tent woven from black goat's fur)