

Changes in Pastoral Society in Syria and Resource Management

Part 4: Formation of regular migration patterns and human pressure on mountain grassland vegetation

In this series, we have repeatedly used the term “resource” without clear explanation. We now wish to clarify what we really mean by resource here. A resource is nature around settlements and areas of peoples’ activities, based on the premise that a resident community has a direct and solid relationship with nature. Nature here is soil, water, grassland and forests which form the essential foundation for farming and livestock rearing. Nature also is sometimes a target of gathering and hunting (including fishing) activities as main or auxiliary livelihood activities. Nature surrounding mountain villages which plays an important role as a resource for living, or which provides a means of livelihood in Japan’s farming and fishing villages, is also very close to the term “resource”. For local residents, it seems that nature did not only provide directly materials for living, but also was a safety net for those living with a limited amount of income. In this series, we would like to deal with conventional “resources” totally separately. These resources include petroleum, minerals, energy, grain for livestock and food, which are distributed as mass world wide backed up by industrialization and strong capital and purchasing power.

As we saw in the previous issue, the importance of the Abd Al Aziz (AA) Mountains has been rapidly recognized as the only spring grassland resource of a viable size in the area. As the agricultural development of Hasakah proceeded, the interest of livestock farmers moved to the AA mountains in order to secure scarce spring resources. This led to a new type of seasonal movement among some farmers who graze in grassland plains from Summer to Winter and move to the AA mountains in Spring. (In Winter, grazing is basically done around each village.) The livestock farmers flexibly and enterprisingly adapted their lifestyle to the changing environment, when faced by seasonally and spatially uneven distribution of fodder resources in the area. We believe that the disposition of the people was sustained by their nomadic and non-sedentary character. We already mentioned, in AAI News Vol. 45, that nomadic culture is an adaptation strategy of livestock farmers that has evolved to react to scarce and uneven distribution of resources in arid land.

Although livestock concentrated in the AA mountains in Spring, it did not lead to unlimited and unprincipled utilization. This is because the Baqqara Al Jabal had age-old rules for grazing land use originating from social norms such as a set distribution pattern on semi-nomadic villages based on 5-6 sub-tribal units and the demarcation of grazing areas between sub-tribes. These norms created a set pattern of movement by livestock farmers from outside the area. Looking from the resource utilization point of view, apart from grazing, there is another form of use pressure on the grassland, namely the collection of firewood by livestock farmers for bread baking. People rely on shrub species for firewood which is the dominant species of grassland vegetation, which results in constant resource pressure on grassland. Examining the issue in more detail, one finds selective harvesting of shrubs, just like the conscious selection of grazing areas, a phenomenon that is highly interesting from an ethno-botanical perspective. Although the AA mountains have constantly been under pressure from two human activities, namely grazing and firewood collection, the utilization came to form highly self-regulated patterns. This is because of the socio-economic demarcation of the mountain area for living and grazing between sub-tribes and a liking and selection for resource use. Regular use patterns have been formed through the process of moving from a nomadic to a more sedentary lifestyle. In the next issue, I will introduce orderly grassland vegetation of the AA mountains, which was created through changes caused by the regulated human pressure.



Shrub harvesting in the mountain plains



Transporting firewood home with a donkey



Bread baking using tannor oven