

Arab Camel Nomads in the North West Sudan

The Northern Mahria from a Census Point of View

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Abstract. – The Mahria are described according to the following census categories: Spacial and social camp composition, population size and fertility, marriage relations, the family as a kinship unit, household composition, and school education. [North Africa; camel nomadism, ethnographic census]

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Prologue: On Ethnographic Census

Census taking has a curious status in anthropological research. It seems to be a standard method in field research. It is done by a majority of field researchers. It is regularly mentioned in textbooks on methods in anthropology (cf. e.g., Bernard 1994: 81; Ellen 1984: 242, 289; Johnson 1978: 83; Pelto and Pelto 1978: 78; Epstein 1967); but how the census taking is done, is rarely described. Moreover, census raw data are published only exceptionally (one of these exceptions is Fischer 1975), and attempts at an exhaustive analysis of these data are equally rare in ethnographic publications. Yet without publication this class of basic

field research data is doomed to disappear in the course of time: primary data "thrown away" (but see Silverman 1993).

The reason for this neglect is not that the census data are useless for anthropological research. Ethnographic texts, rather, refer regularly to census data, though always in an eclectic way. The neglect seems to arise from the nature of these data. Census data are so multidimensional that their evaluation leads to an unfocused array of results that cannot be subsumed under a single category or question. Yet the expected format in ethnographic writing is a focused one.

We feel that anthropology should not tolerate the neglect of a class of its primary data. The following paper is an attempt to give census data their due share in spite of the dominant format of writing today.

Introduction

The northern Mahria (henceforth Mahria for short) are a tribe of Arab camel nomads in North Darfur, Sudan. They belong to a confederation of tribes collectively known as the northern Rizeigat. Unlike its constituent tribes the confederation itself is not headed by a single leader, but it is the biggest bargaining unit for the regional administration. Due to their martial activities and achievements the name northern Rizeigat has gained some national notoriety.

As usual in Arabic societies the Mahria conceive their tribe (native term: *kabiila*; transcription according to Persson and Persson 1979) as a patrilinear descent group which is segmented. The segments (native term: *khashm al beet*) are named.

The main economic basis of the Mahria are camel herds. There are families that derive their living exclusively from camels; others have in addition some goats or sheep, or both. Only in rare exceptions do goats or sheep form the economic mainstay. Some families own fields where they