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Rank and Prestige among Herdsmen of the Hungarian Central Plain

ETHNOLOGICAL LITERATURE ON HUNGARIAN HERDSMEN is abundant, however, little effort is spent on a systematic study of the structure of the pastoral society and its relationship to other segments of the peasantry. The intention here is to organize existing data on Hungarian sources and the author's field notes in an attempt to shed some light on the structure of the pastoral society of the Hungarian Central Plain, and its place among the peasant population in terms of rank and prestige. The writers' sources deal basically with the situation of herdsmen roughly from the last decades of the past century to the World War II[1].

Herding always constituted a complementary economical form to agriculture in Hungarian rural communities. Its importance varied greatly according to local ecological factors. It achieved considerable importance in some areas of the Hungarian Plain where swampy grassland was not suitable for intensive agriculture but was very edequate for herding.

Herdsmen form a numerically small specialized group within the Hungarian peasantry, and live in a symbiotic relationship with the agriculturalists. In some cases they herd their own flocks, but usually they hire out their skill to landlords, well-to-do peasants, or cooperative peasant groups. Not all of them, however, are equally specialized. Herding of joint families and small peasant groups usually does not require specialized herdsmen.

Professional herdsmen, hired mostly by landlords or opulent farmers, differentiate themselves consciously from other segments of the peasantry. They are true professionals who in most cases inherited their profession from their ancestors. In many ways they are bearer of a well defined strictly peasant subculture, yet distinct in its style of life, ethos, and personality type.

As may be expected stock care is masculine work. Only lately, however, after realizing the economic importance of the dairy products, the processing of milk became a habitual task for women. This work is done at home, and women are tolerated around the flock only in exceptional cases. The herder's family, which he visits periodically, lives at the employer's ranch, on the manorial estate, or in the village. Herdsmen spend most of their time in small masculine groups, in the open, struggling with the restless herd and inclemencies of weather. Centers for their social life are the temporary cottages built on grazing ground, lonely road-side taverns *(csárda)*, and occasional markets in different towns of the region. Their contacts with the general agrarian population are rather limited, and as a group their political influence in community affairs is reduced to a minimum due to their relatively isolated way of life and small number.

Studies concerning the social stratification of Hungarian peasantry are scant. Traditionally, Hungarian ethnologists did not regard the study of social stratification as their legitimate field of investigation. Studies of a few sociographers, however, show that the Hungarian peasantry does not represent the sharp division of a rank system but rather a continuum of discrete strata (Erdei, n.d.). Trying to define the place of the herdsmen in this continuum, taking as a basis the people's own categori-

1. I carried out field work in 1945-46 among herdsmen of Nagyszalonta and Erdőgyarak (Bihar district), two localities on the Hungarian-Rumanian border. I am indebted to professor Béla Gunda of the University of Hungary at Debrecen for making available most of my sources.

zation, difficulties are encountered because of the conflicting views advocated by both herdsmen and agriculturalists.

There is only one segment of the Hungarian peasantry, the manorial servants, which is ready to accept the greater prestige of herdsmen (Illyés 1936: 90; Paládi-Kovács 1965:156). On their part herdsmen usually admit — although not without reservation — the superiority of some rich owners of large herds. With respect to prestige evaluation, however, diametrically opposed opinions prevail between herdsmen and agriculturalists at large. Both sectors claim indisputable priority on the social plane. The discrepancy is largely conscious and diffusely verbalized in conversations and folklore[2].

At the root of the disagreement there are basic differences in values adopted by the two disputing sociocultural sectors. Small peasants, who accept modernization slowly and reluctantly, under the pressure of capitalistic market conditions can survive only by an increase of labor, thrift, and emphasis on land ownership. Thus, Hungarian agriculturalists — as many other peasant societies — attribute great value to hard work, thrift, private property, security, and a sedentary way of life. Although bound to the peasant economy, herdsmen's life experience led them to subscribe to quite different values: independence of action, dangerous life, abundance of leisure time, and a less rigorous respect to private property. The evaluation of each sector regarding to the other is mainly based on this divergent value orientation. Thus, the most frequent generalizations of the agriculturalists are that herdsmen are lazy, vagabonds, excessively arrogant, friends and protectors of outlaws, and usually suspicious of thievery. The counter-arguments of herdsmen are that they are descendants of "free men", while peasants' ancestors were serfs bound to the land; peasants are obliged to work night and day, they are slaves of the land (Nagy-Czirok 1959:255). In the herdsmen's mind more freedom of movement, more possibility for leisure time, their manliness and bravery set them in a position of superior prestige. Among themselves the herdsmen call "paraszt" (an ambigous term that means both agriculturalist and boorish fellow) the agriculturalists, including even their well-to-do employers (Madarassy 1912:13).

Arrogance, bravery, fortitude, "ready acting-out of hostility" are world-wide attributes of pastoralists (Goldschmidt 1965:404-405). Hungarian herdsmen are not different and they use intensively these qualities as arguments in proving their superiority. A herdsman feels the moral obligation of coming out on top in every fight, display of strength, or verbal dispute with the agriculturalists if he wants to avoid contempt or even ostracism of his fellows (Nagy-Czirok 1959:250).

The separateness of both sectors is shown by the reluctance to intermarry. Especially herdsmen marriages tend to be endogamous. They prefer to marry girls from herdsmen's family, adducing that peasant girls would not be able to endure the hardship and instability of the herdsman's life. Likewise, peasants are reluctant to marry their daughters to herdsmen (Paládi-Kovács 1965:155). The unfortunate love of the young herd-boy and the peasant girl is a recurring theme in Hungarian folklore.

2. Lately Zoltán Ujváry published three peasant dramatic plays, two of which expounds conflicting situations between herdsmen and agriculturalists (1968: 121-150).

Differences in value orientation and disputes about prestige, however, rarely take the form of an open conflict. The two sectors fit together economically, so the dispute remains chiefly on a verbal level. Occasional fighting in the tavern or at the market place may occur, but agriculturalists usually try to avoid brawling with herdsmen. None of these differences makes the two segments completely closed. Many young peasant lads become tempted by the freedom of life at the flocks, and try to enroll in one of the herding teams. Likewise, many herders are eager to secure a portion of land and house in the village for retirement.

THE HUNGARIAN PASTORAL SOCIETY is far from being homogeneous with respect to rank and prestige. Besides the economic importance of the herd, prestige is ascribed in accordance with the already mentioned values, like freedom of movement, physical strength, courage, and available leisure time. First of all they rank the different herding subspecialities. Usually the following two factors serve as criteria for ranking: 1. the kind of animal to be herded, and 2. the way of life required by different grazing practices.

Different species of animals are cared for separately by different teams. Horses by the *csikós*, cattle by the *gulyás*, sheep by the *juhász*, and pigs by the *kanász*. The ranking of these teams in term of prestige somewhat varies from region to region, usually horseherds and cattleherds have an advantage upon shepherds and swineherds. The reason is partly economical — horses and cattle represent greater economic value than sheep and pigs, therefore, more responsibility in caring is required — partly because herding of these strong and fast moving animals requires a high degree of physical dexterity, resistance, and alertness. Horseherds especially have great prestige, perhaps because these animals are cherished by all sectors of the peasantry. Moreover, horseherds are mounted, and their art of horse riding is largely admired. Cattleherds work on foot, and go everywhere on foot, a fact that diminishes their prestige before the people (Nagy-Czirok 1959:251)[3]. General consensus places the swineherd on the bottom of the prestige scale. They do their best to imitate the way of life of other herdsmen, but they are looked down upon because of the dirtiness of their occupation. Pigs like muddy places, therefore swineherds are always caked with mud (Nagy-Czirok 1959:252).

The position of shepherds is somewhat ambigous. In their judgement they are superior to the horseherds and cattleherds. Their argument is based on the abundance of leisure time which is a clear indicator of a superior way of life. While cattleherds have no time to sit down, and horseherds are busy all day giving water to horses, the shepherd can lie down without neglecting his duties (Illyés 1936:91). However, horseherds and cattleherds vehemently refute this claim to superiority, and so do most of the peasantry (Nagy-Czirok 1959:252)[4].

3. In the opinion of István Györffy cattleherds are before horseherds in the prestige rank because of greater economic importance of the cattle (1941: 87).

4. In some areas shepherds are highly regarded because sheep herding seemed to be the fastest way to make a fortune. In some regions they are considered first among herdsmen (Paládi-Kovács 1965: 156).

Grazing practices, each requiring a different way of life, represent another prestige factor. Although there are local variations, in the main there are three kinds of herds: 1) flocks herded year-around far away from the village *(szilaj)*; 2) flocks herded outside most of the year, returning to the village only for the winter season *(félszilaj)*; and 3) herds that are taken out every morning and brought back to the stable in the evening *(kezes)*.

The prestige scale here again is consistent with the typical pastoral values. The *szilaj* herdsman is on the top. Working far away from the eyes of employers, overseers, and communal authorities he is freer and more independent in his actions than other herdsmen. His life (described in details by Györffy 1928) is tough and dangerous. Before the drainage of swampy lands of the Hungarian Plain the wild environment where they herded their flocks was practically impenetrable for people who were not fully acquainted with the terrain. The animals they herded became semiwild and hard to care for. Inclemencies of the weather, the danger of roving bandits and predatory beasts rendered their lives hard and risky. In their minds herders working around the villages were little more than servants, and their great prestige was usually recognized among other herders. In the prestige scale they are followed closely by herdsmen who return home with the herd only for the winter season. Finally, herdsmen returning to the village every evening have the least consideration. In most cases the latter are not truly professional.

A widespread characteristic of pastoral societies is that in spite of their individualistic tendencies they are oriented to accept cooperation and authority derived from prestige (Goldschmidt 1965:404). They seem to be less hostile and suspicious of their fellows than agriculturalists (Edgerton 1965:446). This description fits the Hungarian pastoralists also, thus they have a more conscious and diversified structure orientation than the agriculturalists. This tendency becomes particularly evident when considering the well defined structure of the herding team and their relationship to each other.

Herding needs team work. The team size varies according to the size of the herd. Usually it does not comprise more than 8 persons, and the average size is 4-6 herdsmen. The team represents an autonomous unit with its well defined hierarchical rank system. The main function of this rank system is to increase the cooperative effectiveness of the team by maintaining a soldierlike discipline and strictly regulated division of labor.

Supreme authority is invested in the *számadó* (head-herd), followed in rank by the *öregbojtár* (old herd-boy). Under these come the *második bojtár* (second herd-boy), *harmadik bojtár* (third herd-boy), etc. The *kisbojtár* (little herd-boy), a young lad scarcely initiated in the art of herding, is at the bottom of the rank list. Ranks are established by the head-herd, and usually correspond to the age of the herd-boys. Every team-member must show deference to his superior(s), and obey orders. Duties and obediences to superiors are strictly regulated and reinforced.

The head-herd's authority is especially great. He must be married, economically solvent, and a morally irreproachable man. He has a certain number of animals in the flock which constitute a guarantee in case of loss or injury. The head-herd deals with the employer regarding all aspects of the flock, herding, and food supply. Usually

— except when the employer is a landlord — he is on equal standing with the employer, and their relationship can be defined as a dyadic, singlestranded contract on a horizontal basis.

The head-herd is the employer of the herd-boys; selects, hires, pays them, and is responsible for the welfare of the group. He teaches the younger members the art of herding, correct behavior, and rules of the herder's unwritten code. His authority is harsh and paternalistic. Because of his obligations he is frequently absent, and in these opportunities the old herd-boy commands with the same authority.

At the beginning of the grazing season the *számadó* assigns tasks and duties to every team-member in accordance with his rank. Duties of the little herd-boy are cooking, keeping the cottage clean, keeping the campfire alive at night, going to the village for foodstuff[5]. Every day a different herd-boy is on duty for grazing the animals while other herd-boys are "in the well" scooping out water for the animals (Törő 1968a:270).

The rigid team structure tends to produce strong feeling of solidarity and cooperation. Acts of disloyalty are not tolerated, and when an act occurs, the guilty one is punished. Differences and antagonisms are settled by the head-herd who in many instances does not hesitate to use physical punishment (Nagy-Czirok 1959:40). Many times in the solitude of the "puszta" head-herds represented the only forum of justice. In case of major demeanor they sentenced the criminal to death which was executed by the herd-boys hanging the guilty on the sweep of the well (Gombás 1960:244). At the same time head-herds were greatly respected and even loved by their subordinates. Törő mentions that during his fieldwork he never met a herdsman who talked ill of his one-time head-herd (1968b:402). No doubt, in most cases the *számadó* projected a perfect paternalistic figure to the members of the team. To some head-herds unusual magic power was attributed (Gombás 1960:244)[6].

Rank order is expressed explicitly at all occasions related or unrelated to work. At mealtime they sit in rank order around the common stew-pot and take food in the same order. The little herd-boy is not even allowed to eat with them. If arrived at the same time they enter the cottage door in rank order, and in the cottage all personal belongings are arranged to reflect the rank of their owners (Törő 1968b:402-405).

Teams tend to be stable, but occasional changes may occur. For new candidates admission is not easy. Head-herds make a rigorous selection. The aspirant is not admitted if there is any suspicion that he would become the "shame of the team" or could violate the "herder honor". There are descriptions of admission trials where physical endurance is tested as well as moral qualities (Nagy-Czirok 1959:46). In particular the little herd-boy has to endure a very harsh treatment from his superiors even after his admission to the team. His training is rigorous and it is aimed to make him an authentic herdsman. He is expected to carry out some remarkable deeds that

5. Some large teams employ a married man *(lakos)* for these tasks. At sheep flocks his duties include milking, and his wife processes the dairy products at home. His rank is usually between the old herd-boy and the second herd-boy (Nagy-Czirok 1959: 39).

6. A retired head-herd informed me that one of the *számadó's* tasks is to perform magical acts regularly on behalf of the herd. This is a routine work, however, and not a sign of unusual magical power.

require a display of unusual courage and dexterity. After this by a simple ceremony he becomes a full-fledged member of the pastoral community (Nagy-Czirok 1959:48-49).

Relations are friendly among different herding teams. A certain kind of herder solidarity prevails generally. They call each other *testvér* (brother), *sógor* (brother-in-law), or *koma* (a kind of ritual relationship) even if they are not real relatives (Nagy-Czirok 1959:252). Occasional conflicts between teams and individuals are not resolved at work where major disorders are to be avoided, but at taverns, markets, or during special feasts. Although in a middle class, and even in a peasant sense, their concept of private property is somewhat loose — occasional steeling of animals from each other is not infrequent — the "herder honor" requires to be fair and loyal to the fellow herdsmen. The herdsman who denounces another herdsman to the authorities, reports his fellow's misdeed during an interrogation (usually combined with physical torture) violates the herder code and exposes himself to deep contempt and exclusion (Nagy-Czirok 1959:256).

Specific pastoral values and way of life were in many cases disturbing to the communal authorities and law-enforcement agents. They found great difficulty in handling the pastoral population. Herdsmen lived away from the eyes of the authority, and their fame of being unmanageable people associated with roving outlaws *(betyár)* was not always undeserved. Old communal documents preserved countless ordinances aimed to keep a tight hold on herdsmen. These ordinances, however, never were intended to change or destroy the solid structure of the pastoral teams, probably because its economic effectiveness was obvious for all.

THE FACT THAT A SIGNIFICANT PORTION of the Hungarian Central Plain was not suitable for agriculture, but was good for pastures, made possible the development of a complementary exploitation of the area by herding. This subsidiary ecological niche was filled by herders whose society established itself in co-residence with agriculturalists, shared the general features of peasantry but was different and separate from it in many ways. Both sectors cover different ecological areas, thus the economic relationship tends to be rather symbiotic than competitive. Although herdsmen depend on agriculturalists for jobs, they managed to avoid direct economic domination and preserved a certain degree of autonomy. Instrumental factors in this achievement are psychological as well as environmental. Herdsmen compensate their dependency on the agricultural segment by developing a separate social identity which is ready to present an obstinate competence to the latter in terms of prestige. Environmental factors are even more important. Life in the open during most of the year without the warmth of the family or female company; the irregular rhythm of work which sometimes implies great physical resistence, alertness, danger, but other times grants plenty of leisure time; the volatil nature of the herd taught them to cherish quite different values than agriculturalists. Pastoralists adapted themselves to the environment by a degree of specialization and highly structured small working groups. These groups are suitable for easy movement and make possible a very

effective division of labor. Effectiveness of the group is further enhanced by adopting a strict rank order which is aimed to inculcate discipline, cooperation, and a sense of responsibility toward members of the group and the pastoral society at large. From these positions herdsmen can successfully fend off the pressure of the agricultural society which is much larger, economically stronger, and usually enjoys the assistance of the political authority.

AFTER THE MIDDLE OF THE PAST CENTURY with the desintegration of the feudalistic land ownership and subsequent rearrangements of farm plots, paralleled by the technological advance, the ecological bases for herding became increasingly reduced in Hungary. Swampy terrains were drained and large pastures were broken up by the plow. Between the two World Wars the pastoral subculture was in the process of rapid dissolution, and professional herdsmen survived only in some exceptional regions of the country. In most communities herding has become an occasional job for poor and inexpert people (Fél-Hofer 1969:241). Recent studies still deal with older forms of herding, therefore one cannot form a clear idea of what happened to the pastoral segment after the land reform of 1946 and subsequent collectivization of land carried out in these last decades.

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