HAMULA ORGANISATION AND MASHA’A TENURE
IN PALESTINE

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The thesis is examined that nontribal masha’a villages in Palestine were inherently socially fragmented and, therefore, susceptible to outside intervention and land expropriation. Some general features of the village patronymic group, or hamula, are explored. It does indeed appear that few, if any, such groups are, or were in the recent past, genealogically integrated patrilineages. There is a short treatment of the agricultural routine in the lowlands where the masha’a system prevailed. The usual claim that the periodic redistribution of communal lands characteristic of masha’a was inimical to economic planning and management proves unwarranted. A comparative analysis is made of the effects of Ottoman Land Registration, British Land Settlement and Zionist colonisation on the social and economic organisation of masha’a villages in and around the Plain of Esdraelon. Physically exposed and socially amorphous plains villages composed of sedentarising semi-nomads and hill migrants did seem prone to outside interference. Those older continuously inhabited hill villages with a stronger social fabric were apparently better able to forestall the alienation of their valley lands. But very different fabrics could show resistance. A village constituted of a few powerful and competitive hama’il, such as Umm el-Fahm, was clearly poised to balance internal socio-economic antagonisms and parry outside threats. Yet, even a socially heterogeneous village containing a number of smaller hama’il, such as Isfiyya, held fast owing to a village-wide network of affinal relationships and persistent inter-hamula ties of matrilaterality.

Masha’a, which prevailed in the plains of the Levant through the early twentieth century, was a system of communal land tenure characterised by a periodic redistribution of agricultural plots among peasant cultivators. In Palestine, its practice differed from village to village and also changed in the course of time. Most accounts, however, have wedded fragmented colonial descriptions of this varied peasant economy to an assumed Bedouin tribal model of social organisation, so providing an all too facile explanation of both the origin and demise of masha’a. The general idea is that masha’a constituted a holdover from a nomadic regime of communal pasturage. Inimical to the colonial political economy set in motion at the end of the Ottoman Empire, and carried through by the British Mandate and Zionism, masha’a was allegedly maladapted to the intensive production and co-operation required of a functionally viable society in the modern world.

While most analysis of masha’a has linked the socio-economic ills of land fragmentation to communal tenure, in fact masha’a often persisted as a protective mechanism against them. Moreover, few, if any, villages in Palestine were patrilineally integrated in the Bedouin mode. As long as masha’a endured,
competition between a few strong patronymic groups, or hama’il, could be productively balanced, as in the village of Umm el-Fahm. In more heterogeneous villages containing a number of smaller hama’il, such as Isfiyya, masha’a could stress the overriding economic importance relations of affinity and matrilaterality might take in a society supposedly organised agnatically. Only in relatively amorphous villages, which tended to mix marginal peasant groups with sedentarising semi-nomads, did masha’a readily fall prey to processes of land alienation and community dissociation. But such processes were externally directed, not internally driven.

**Are non-tribal villages feudal?**

One of the first to question the significance of tribal organisation for Levant villagers was Weulersse (1940: 328–33), who argued that the genealogical mode of reckoning among Alawite groups was incomplete and, where seemingly complete, a highly fictitious post hoc formalisation of non-kin alignments. Barth (1953) further stressed the relative insignificance of genealogy for the ‘feudally’ organised villages of southern Kurdistan. He classed the Kurdish groups in the area according to three types: Jaf nomads, Hamawand tribal villages, and ‘detribalised’ villages. The first and second types owned their means of production (animals and land) and were fairly meticulous about their genealogies. For the nomads, genealogy served as the principal means of political recruitment, while for the tribal villagers it provided a strong collective group structure that operated as a powerful agent between governmental authorities and individual villagers. The non-tribal villagers, though, were mainly tenants of absentee landowners, and there was no wider kinship structure that connected non-tribal villages to one another or that linked the vestigial lineal segments of any one village together.

Although there may have been temporary intermediate forms of organisation, supposedly only the tribal and non-tribal poles were structurally stable. The former would invariably devolve into the latter after periods of long centralised rule. This was presumably because central governments and their clients aimed to divide and conquer by promoting factionalism, fragmenting genealogy and scattering patrimony. With the unity of the group thus dissipated, its land could be picked off rapidly in piecemeal fashion (Barth 1953: 131–4). Furthermore, since the purpose of parallel cousin marriage was supposed to ‘reinforce the political implications of the lineage system’ (1953: 137), one would expect a consequent decline in the frequency of such unions.

The apparent social and economic unity of non-tribal tenant villages was illusory, argues Barth. Politically, the village’s tendency to disintegration as a result of ‘rabid factionalism’ was held in check only by a standardised opposition to some ‘enemy’ village (1953: 129). Since governmental control was strong, the actual threat from such ostensible enemies was minimal. Economically, agricultural co-ordination could not be viewed as an indigenous form of creative economic activity or enlightened co-operation. Rather, as with the collective control of farming organisation in landlord-dependent Iranian villages, the collective scheduling of crop routines ‘is administrative rather than wealth-
producing’ activity which tends ‘to retard . . . village economic growth and specialization’ (English 1966: 94–6).

While the distinction between tribal and non-tribal organisation does appear to be sociologically significant, the socio-economic consequences imputed to that distinction are less clearly so. There is no rule of the matter that settled tribal groups need eventually suffer a decline in their preference for parallel cousin marriage and lineage endogamy. This may be so no matter how advanced the process of sedentarisation (E. Marx 1967: 232) and regardless of whether the agnatic section remains weak or strong (Aswad 1971: 72–3, 115), although polygyny may also facilitate a strong section’s ability to maintain a wide network of affines on the outside as well.

Indeed, contrary to predictions by both Chelhod (1965; 1969) and Barth, settled non-tribal groups do not differ as a rule in this respect from tribal groups. For those tribal and non-tribal groups who consistently practise parallel cousin marriage, the proportion for such marriages seems to hover between 10 and 15 per cent. (Barth 1954: 169; Granqvist 1931: 81, 194; Rosenfeld 1957: 35, 44; Ayoub 1959: 267; Peters 1963: 177–9; E. Marx 1967: 225; Khuri 1970: 598; Atran 1985b). This figure appears to characterise any statistically functional world where, as generally seems to be the case, no more than one of every two available parallel cousins is actually taken for a spouse (cf. Antoun 1972: 125; Cresswell 1976: 106–9). To be sure, as with non-sedentarised tribal groups, the relative frequency of in versus out marriage may increase among sedentarised non-tribal groups when external conditions take a precarious or threatening turn, as among Palestinian Arabs following the creation of the State of Israel (Cohen 1965; Rosenfeld 1976); although insecurity could also lead to an increase in exogamy for economically and genealogically weak groups seeking to ‘buy’ protection from stronger groups by giving women to them (Barth 1954; Peters 1963; Aswad 1971; Cresswell 1976). Furthermore, while it may be the case that tribally organised societies often have a higher degree of independence from centres of urban and government control (cf. Fernea 1970), it does not follow that the socio-economic organisation of non-tribal village societies is ‘feudal’, as Barth suggests.

Yet, according to Rosenfeld (1968: 732), socio-economic organisation in Palestinian villages was just so: ‘Politically, the feudal landlords and overlords . . . promoted an internal hamula (patrilineage) system in order to maintain the collective order necessary to keep their tax, tenant, and rent economy operative’; whereas economically, the system of redistributing ‘communal’ [masha’a] lands, while underwriting a minimal level of subsistence for the peasants, was a creation of the feudal regime. Its purpose was to keep people on the land, fix a two or three field wheat and/or barley and durra seed cycle and serve for the orderly collection of taxes and rent in kind. The redistributive system existed also in many tenant villages where it similarly prevented agriculturalists from gaining fixed rights in land or building on or improving plots (Rosenfeld 1964).

At first blush, this claim would appear to contradict Barth’s, inasmuch as Palestinian villages are allegedly ‘tribally’ organised in the sense that a man’s corporate status is genealogically defined and patrilineally prescribed: ‘families
are linked together in patrilineal descent and form patrilineages’ (Rosenfeld 1976: 13; cf. Antoun 1972: 87–8; Lutfiyya 1966: 143). But in point of fact, there are scarcely any such villages in Palestine. In virtually all the villages described in the literature, and in those Sunni (e.g. Umm el-Fahm), Christian (e.g. El-Bireh) and Druze (e.g. Isfiyya) Arab villages whose inhabitants I questioned, the constituent patrilineal units (jeb) of any one hamula are rarely connected genealogically. These units vary in depth but never encompass fewer than two, and almost never more than five, generations; and it is recognised by one and all that few, if any, of the component jeb of a hamula are of the same ‘sinew’ (aṣāb). As for general social relations between ham'a'il, these are usually phrased in idioms of affinity (nasab) and matrilaterality (makhwal), although relations between groups having the same patronym, but belonging to different villages (e.g. El-Bireh and Ramallah), are expressed in terms of patrilinearity (e'ammam).

Since there is admittedly no sense in calling today’s hamula ‘feudal’, the question arises as to whether past practices of social control, hamula endogamy and inter-hamula competition were feudally determined or oriented. The division of Palestinian villages into ham'a'il competing against one another for the economic and political patronage of the State is attested to by native sources of the first half of the nineteenth century (collected and analysed by Macalister and Masterman 1905: 345–6). The sheikhs of the more powerful ham'a'il served as intermediaries between the authorities (first Turkish, then Egyptian, then Turkish again) and the peasants and ‘guaranteed the taxes due from their several districts’ (1905: 344).

Conditions hardly changed over the course of the century. The hamula operated as a corporate group co-liable to answer for one another’s honour and crimes, and recognised as such by other ham'a'il and by government authorities. It was also a group of co-succourage, with members helping one another at those various times of the life-cycle that required extraordinary capital outlay (marriage, setting up a new residence), and also jointly contributing to the alleviation of a member’s outside debts, especially if those debts carried the risk of alienating a valued portion of the hamula’s patrimony (Baldensperger 1906: 14). In matters of physical defence the hamula often acted as a unit: most often a hamula occupied a distinct quarter (bara) of the village and could readily convert the interconnected houses of its quarter into a virtual fortress if need be. Members of the hamula also controlled the disposition of each other’s women: ‘Cousins have the first right to each other; sometimes they may pay less [dower] than should they be strangers’ (Baldensperger 1900: 180). Finally, in regard to the peasants’ principal economic activity:

It is commonly ordered that the farmers shall proceed to reap simultaneously, and it is often forbidden to go out to the fields to reap until all are ready. By this arrangement the assessment of the tax on the crop may be made with more uniformity and thieving rendered difficult. In all these matters, requiring the regulating authority of organized overseers, it is the so-called ukhtiyarīyah, or as we should say, selectmen, the chiefs of the tribes [dar or ham'a'il], who decide questions from the day that the land was parcelled out to the feddans [i.e. those who had the right to participate in the lottery that periodically redistributed masha'a lands] until the crop is gathered (Grant 1907: 135; cf. Robinson & Smith 1841: 11, 387).
But for all the collective village responsibility exemplified by the functioning of hamula and the operation of the masha’a system, there is nothing even remotely resembling European feudalism. In the Arab East there was never any ‘direct relation of lordship and servitude’ (K. Marx 1967, III: 790) that tied the agricultural labourer to the land (cf. Cahen 1953). As Volney (1787: 377) stressed at the end of the eighteenth century: ‘the peasants are oppressed by the tyranny of government, but not degraded by feudal servitude’. Nor could the masha’a system simply be the creation of an exploitative system in the manner, of, say the Russian system of communal tenure whatever the latter’s superficial resemblances to masha’a (cf. Blum 1971: 527). Rather, as with the original land-equalisation systems of Walachia and Moldavia (Stahl 1969: 32), there is no indication whatsoever that the State officially prescribed the system, or presided over any aspect of its operation; and there is clear evidence that semi-nomadic tribal groups, who more often than not ignored government authorities or directly opposed them, spontaneously cultivated their lands as masha’a (Jaussen 1908: 238; Musil 1908, III: 58–9, 293).

Still, it would be a mistake to see the masha’a system simply as ‘a carry-over from the Bedouin tribal organization’ (Tannous 1943: 174). For whatever its degree of compatibility with Bedouin relations of production—and it is considerable—the masha’a was eminently a peasant system of production (cf. Weulersse 1946: 108). True, the grazing schedule of peasant herders was intimately associated with the agricultural regime. Especially among the marginal peasantry living in mud dwellings in the exposed plains, herding offered the option of assuming an alternative semi-nomadic livelihood should adverse socio-political or climatic conditions warrant it. But masha’a aimed primarily at ensuring a low though constant level of sedentary productivity in a politically and climatically fluctuating environment. This it did by equitably distributing risk, not gain. It was not a primordial form of socialism (as some recent Revolutionary Palestinian tracts claim); for, the fruits of cultivation accrued exclusively to the individual or household (before taxes and rent), and there was no general redistribution of surplus.

Assuredly, the Turkish pasha was well aware of the practice of masha’a, as he was of the organisation of the village along hamula lines, and sought at every turn to exploit this knowledge. But then so did the powerful Bedouin sheikh or agha who endeavoured to usurp the government tithe (‘ashr) by offering the hapless peasant ‘protection’ (kuwuwa) from government agents and other Bedouin in return for an even greater share of the crop. Whatever complicity there might have been between Bedouin and government agent in matters pertaining to the milking of the peasantry, it did not directly require, sanction or sustain the masha’a system, at least in the Levant and Iraq.¹

There is, perhaps, a looser interpretation of ‘feudalism’ meant, namely, ruthless exploitation of the mass of fellahin by powerful agents: Bedouin sheikh, urban effendi, government pasha or nahiyeh (‘landed gentry’) family. According to nearly all colonial reports on the economic conditions of agriculturalists in Palestine (e.g. Strickland Report 1930: 11), as well as the only detailed anthropological piece (Patai 1949), which is based largely on these sources, the masha’a system was an unmitigated socio-economic disaster for the peasantry precisely
because it facilitated such 'feudal' exploitation of the village collectivity in manifold ways. The most recent historical treatment of the subject has done nothing to dispel this story:

The masha' land system evolved from tribal organization in which there were common grazing rights over a certain territory. . . . The most harmful aspect . . . was its process of periodic redistribution. Most fellâeen lacked interest in improving their temporarily held land when the fruits of improvement would be taken from them . . . manuring, weeding, terracing, or crop alternation was rarely employed, and the already nutrient-deficient soil was further depleted. . . . Local notables and landowners who were most often entitled to large percentages [rent-shares] . . . were unwilling to give up the local economic and political leverage that they maintained over a masha' community. When masha' shareholders fell into debt, they often remitted their shares as debt payment and remained as tenants on the land they once owned collectively. . . . Masha' shares that devolved through inheritance forced a fixed amount of land area to be divided among a geometrically increasing number of heirs. . . . [Musha'] was described by every major authority on land in Palestine as the most debilitating factor affecting the [fellah's] economic betterment (Stein 1984: 14–15).2

Curiously, no serious inquiry into the relationship between masha' agriculture and the social organisation of a Palestinian village was ever undertaken. Nevertheless, British colonial authorities and Zionist colonising agents—often quoting one another (e.g. Peel Commission Report 1937: 233; see also Aumann 1975: 22–3)—argued that the periodic break-up of farms that the masha'a system entailed had to disturb the social harmony of the village profoundly. The celebrated 'Five Village Survey' executed in 1944 by the Palestine Office of Statistics (published in the General Monthly Bulletin of Current Statistics, 1945–1946) did examine the relation between plot distribution and social organisation at the time of Land Settlement, that is, after the masha'a system had ceased to operate. But most of the conclusions drawn from this study as to the social and economic fragmentation of the peasantry pertain only to consequences ensuing from the stabilisation (ifraz'), or 'freezing', of masha'a into mafruz, that is, permanently allotted parcels. These conclusions echoed earlier inferences as to the supposed long-term economic consequences of masha'a; such analyses wrongly assumed, however, that the baneful effects of the abortion of masha'a were caused by its conception (e.g. Granott 1952: 216–18).

In an important monograph on the tribal Al-Shiukh of the Hatay (formerly part of French and Ottoman Syria, today of Turkey), Aswad (1971) shows that most of the socio-economic evils associated with land fragmentation were avoided by villages that remained masha'a. Moreover, despite persistent attempts by authorities to abolish masha'a, these villages have proved most resistant to outside interference and most successful at economic co-operation and conversion to intensive agriculture. Anthropological studies of Syrian (Sweet 1960), Israeli Arab (Cohen 1965) and Jordanian (Antoun 1972) villages that were formerly masha'a and non-tribal note that the complete coordination of the agricultural routine required by the masha'a system could only have been sustained by a considerable measure of inter- and intra-kamula cooperation. But these studies do not detail past social and agrarian relationships, and they provide no hard evidence for or against the thesis that the maintenance of masha'a in non-tribal villages favoured outside control and exploitation.
The nature of the lowland agrarian regime

The length of each redistributive cycle varied widely across Palestine, but was usually either one, two, three, four or five years. Latron (1936: 188) reports a predominance of triennial redistribution in Syria, whereas Weulersse (1946: 99) sees the ‘archaic’ form of redistribution as annual. But it is more plausible that the length of the redistribution cycle depended upon the local character of soil and precipitation. Environmental conditions required that the crops grown be adapted to mostly clays, clayey loam and some light soils, and to a seasonally sporadic rainfall varying annually from 100 to 900 mm. In addition, planting and harvesting schedules had to be suited to the water requirements of these crops during their various stages of maturation.

If the rainy season fails to get under way before the middle of December, as it not infrequently does, each day diminishes the chances of a successful winter sowing, for afterwards there are likely to be such violent and persistent downpours that the soil becomes untillable even for an Arab ploughman, and wheat, barley and winter legumes must all be quickly sown during the few days when work is possible. When at length enough rain has fallen, all of the draught animals of the village, oxen, cows, horses, donkeys, and camels are commandeered in order to put the seed into the ground as quickly as possible (Pinner 1930: 57).

In many parts of Palestine, the two-field system was in vogue (cf. Ruppin 1918: 23; Stavsky 1946: 106). One year half the land would have only a winter crop (shitui) of wheat and barley, while the other half would have only a summer dew crop (seifi) of sesame and Indian millet (dhura beida, i.e., Sorghum cernuum). This second half would then have the winter crop the following season, while the first half would remain fallow (‘ard bour) until the next summer crop.

The major drawback to Arab cereal farming in the eyes of colonial authorities was simply that it was geared to maintaining, rather than increasing, the standard of living. For the colonists, however, the main problem was that it conflicted with the labour intensive policy of settling the maximum number of workers on the land (kibush avodah or avodah irvit): ‘although for technical reasons cereals cannot be avoided, they represent a small proportion of [Jewish] farm income; more labour is needed and more profit is given by other crops’ (Keen 1946: 25). Of all crops grains can thrive under the widest range of soil and moisture conditions. They can be cultivated with comparatively little labour and they provide large yields of dry matter: in Palestine during the 1880’s, the average return on seed was sixfold, reaching twelvefold in good years (Klein 1883: 45; cf. Cuinet 1896: 345–6). Grains are also high in food value (containing a high percentage of carbohydrates, some protein and fat, and vitamins and minerals) and are relatively easy to handle, transport and store owing to their low water content.

The winter cereal crop of wheat and barley thus furnished the peasantry’s basic means of subsistence. The latter also helped to sustain the animals in the winter. Lentils and vetch (Kersenneh, i.e., horse lentils, or Vicia ervilia) were also grown at times to supplement the staples and, when ploughed under, to enhance the principal grain crops by fixing nitrogen in the soil (green manuring). Deep rooted legumes opened up the soil, increasing aeration and bringing nutrients
from deep layers of the subsoil to the surface: soil moisture increased and additional food was obtained. The quick growing nature of the legume crop also made an effective ground cover to prevent soil erosion and check weed growth.

The summer crop of Indian millet provided a good hedge against partial failure of the grain crop, thriving in marginal areas with poor soils and low, but variable, rainfall and responding well to nitrates. It also provided a valuable short-term grazing crop and prepared the soil for cultivation of a succeeding crop of winter barley. The summer sesame crop was the peasants’ main, and frequently only, market crop. But it also had a purely agricultural advantage: ‘Wherever it is grown, the succeeding winter crop is larger in consequence’ (Brown 1938: 133). The additional two or three ploughings and weedings (thenayeh) the summer crop required left the earth in good tilth and was considered an investment in the coming winter crop. It was the unwritten law of the land that those who had planted a summer crop had the right to plant the next winter crop (Atran 1985a; cf. Hirsch to Pinsker, 4 April 1886, in Druyanov 1919: 751).

The seeding and growth requirements of the various crops required conscientious ploughing. This ploughing, which scraped the earth to a depth of 10 to 15 cm. loosened and cleansed the soil, maintained moisture by increasing the soil’s absorptive capacity and killed weeds that prevent transpiration of water. In short, the sporadic rainfall, together with the growth characteristics of the various integrated crop routines, required that ploughing, seeding, weeding and harvesting be done as efficiently, and in as short a time, as possible. This could not have occurred without the complete co-operation and co-ordination of adjacent plot owners.

Clearly, the contention that the agricultural regime of the peasantry took no account of soil management and improvement is unwarranted. In this regard, the significance of the collective discipline involved in the fallowing of masha’a lands can hardly be overestimated:

the small, independent landholding tenure system is maladapted to traditional means of cultivation . . . Extensive cultivation requires a flexible relationship between land and people, a situation in which land may be used for a time and abandoned, as its fertility declines, to the natural processes of recovery (Fernea 1970: 52).

Not only did fallowing ensure the land’s continued productivity, it also supported the village livestock by leaving considerable stubble (20 to 30 cm. high) for fodder. Such livestock included work animals, such as oxen, mules, donkeys and, occasionally, horses and camels, but also sheep and goats. These latter supplied the peasantry with its primary source of meat, milk and durable fabric (Grant 1907: 142). While it appears that pasturing such flocks ‘above the altitude of cultivation’ contributed to soil erosion in the hills (Post 1891: 106), the implication that ‘the plague of sheep and goats has always been reckoned a curse for agriculture’ in the valleys (Granott 1952: 91–2) is greatly exaggerated. Indeed, without the weeding and manuring these animals provided, ‘fertilizer long-term agricultural utilization of alluvial soil would most probably have declined’ (Kolars 1966: 584).
The social organisation of masha’a in the Plain of Esdraelon.

The late nineteenth century witnessed a significant improvement in agricultural production (cf. Schöch 1984) and security of life in the plains of Palestine (cf. Lewis 1955). At the same time, the organisation of production and the distribution of landed property changed markedly. Consider what happened in the interior Plain of Esdraelon (Marj Ibn 'A'amr). From the early 1870’s onwards, the Sursuks, a family of Syrian bankers with headquarters in Beirut, acquired title to the bulk of village lands in the Plain of Esdraelon. By the mid-1920’s most of this land had been sold off to the Jewish National Fund, and its erstwhile tenants evicted. Extensive cereal cultivation and herding were replaced by various forms of intensive agriculture and stockbreeding. Towns such as Nazareth and Jenin that serviced and locally marketed cereal production suffered a considerable drop in fortune (cf. Shaw Commission Report 1930: 453), while towns such as Haifa and Afula that were geared to servicing industrial and farming machinery and marketing cash crops and other fair-market items profited and grew accordingly (cf. Vital Statistics Tables, 1922–45, Department of Statistics, Palestine Government 1947: Tables A4, A7).

The Arab villages in the area had a history of interrupted but recurrent settlement (Robinson & Smith 1841; Schumacher 1887). At the end of the eighteenth century, large tracts of the fertile valley of Esdraelon were abandoned under the rule of Ahmed Pasha ‘el-Jezzar’ (‘The Butcher’) (Browne 1806: 423; cf. Volney 1787) with ‘barely a quarter of this beautiful country under cultivation’ (Archives de la Chambre de Commerce de Marseilles, Série J-835, 10.5.1790). Although by the middle of the next century much of the Plain was still ‘in great part neglected’ (Robinson 1856: 91), migrant settlers from the hills mingled with semi-nomadic arab (as opposed to long-range camel herding bedu), and ‘we could see the tents of nomadic Arabs and the men ploughing the fields’ (1856: 116). Once more ravaged by such powerful Bedouin tribes as the Beni-Skur in the early 1860’s (Tristram 1865: 490), by the next decade ‘many parts’ of the Esdraelon were again being cultivated (Thomson 1882, II: 175) when the Turkish authorities began to implement Land Registration. Shortly thereafter it seems that ‘almost every acre of the Plain of Esdraelon is at this moment in the highest state of cultivation’ owing no doubt in part to the fact ‘that it is perfectly safe to ride across it unarmed in any direction’ (Oliphant 1886: 58; cf. Conder & Kitchener 1882, II: 50).

The social composition of the relatively isolated and exposed plains villages consisted of a somewhat amorphous combination of hill migrants and sedentarising semi-nomads (cf. Steuernagel 1925). The newfound security of life in the plains offered migrants from the agronomically poorer and remote hill areas a more regular source of livelihood (cf. Oliphant 1886); whereas the semi-nomads in the region were faced with a constantly decreasing area of manoeuvre that forced settlement (Ashkenazi 1938: 16–20). Among masha’a villages in the hills bordering the Esdraelon that escaped the initial fate of more exposed plains villages were Isfiyya and Umm el-Fahm. These were older continuously
inhabited villages with a relatively solid social fabric characterised, in the one case, by a persistent network of inter–hamula ties, and, in the other, by a strong intra–hamula organisation.

The masha’a lands of these villages were nearly contiguous, forming a strip of land extending from the northwest to southwest frontier of the Plain. This strip lay by the ancient via maris linking Egypt with Syria. Isfiyya was perched on the summit of Mount Carmel (Jebel Mar Elias), overlooking its 5,000 dunams of masha’a land in the valley below from a height of over 500 meters. Umm el-Fahm was also situated at an altitude of nearly 500 meters in the Samaritan Hills at some distance from its 144,000 dunams of valley land, only a portion of which were held in masha’a. From its branch-village (Khirbeh or esbiyeh) at the ancient tell of Megiddo (Armageddon), encompassing Khirbat Lajjun and Tell el-Mutsellim, the fields of Isfiyya’s branch-village, Jelameh (or Khirbat ‘Asafneh) were in view at a distance of some 10 km. For both villages, as throughout Palestine, only valley lands devoted to field crops were systematically held in masha’a. Garden plots in the built-up area of the village (hawakir), as well as olive and fruit orchards, were generally free-hold (mulk).

For Umm el-Fahm, already a large village of some 2000 souls by the 1880’s (Oliphant 1886), evidence for a strong hamula organisation was clear-cut: ‘The village is divided into four quarters, each under its own Sheikh—el Jabarin, el Mahamin, el Mejahineh, and el Akbariyeh’ (Conder & Kitchener 1881, I: 46). The division of masha’a lands followed strictly along hamula lines. Each hamula received a permanent allotment of land: 100 feddan each for Aghbariyeh and Mahamid, 67.5 for Maḥajneh and 79.5 for Jabarin. Each feddan represented the amount of land that a team of oxen could work in a season (26 to 30 days). Each hamula holding was also permanently divided into a number of agrarian zones, each zone (mawqa’) being characterised by its soil quality, accessibility, topography and so on (cf. Bergheim 1895; Latron 1936; Weulersse 1946; Atran 1985a). The various zones ranged in size from a few hundred to nearly 3000 dunams (the Aghbariyeh mawqa’ of tell el-wayat) and from fairly shallow, rocky and hilly land to deep, rich and even soil. For example, the masha’a holdings of the Maḥajneh were divided into seven zones. Proceeding in order from the Khirbat Lajjun towards the town of Afula these were:

1. Tell el-asmar (‘Tell of the black stones’) was characterised by good yields but difficulty in plowing owing to the numerous stones.
2. Wadi es-sit (‘Wadi of the [beautiful passing] woman’) was rugged and rocky (wa’ar) and thus not very productive.
3. Khalt es-suq (‘The marketplace’) where formerly livestock were bought and sold had reasonably good yields.
4. Dhaher u dabt esh-sherif (‘Hill of [the Bedouin ‘A’ id] Sherif’) had good soil but uneven terrain.
5. Edh-dhra’ (‘The winnowing place’) was level land considered the richest and easiest to work.
6. El-khubeh (‘The tell of the khubeh [plant]’) was hard to clear because of the underbrush.

7. Tell el-wayat wa el-na’imi (‘The place of the wild animals and the na’imi [plant]’) was the least productive (khafifi).

Each zone was divided into exactly as many equal parcels as there were shares (feeddan) in the hamula corporation. These shares were then distributed by lot (qura’) to member households in proportion to the number of shares each household possessed in the hamula corporation. Originally, the number of shares equalled the number of teams of oxen that a household possessed. After registration, however, the number of shares were fixed. Over time, each household’s share tended to decrease owing to the practice of equal inheritance among sons.

The hama’il of Umm el-Fahm, like most hama’il in Palestine, were corporate patronymic groups that were not genealogically integrated. Nevertheless, membership in the corporation was expressed in a patrilineal idiom: aid due (a’una) a member of the same hamula was aid owed a patrilineal kinsman (cf. Stavsky 1946: 109–10). If a man were too sick to plough, harvest or thresh, it was incumbent upon his fellow hamula members to come to his aid without recompense. If he was in conflict with someone outside the hamula, then members of his patronymic would be obliged to come to his defence. When this happened, the whole residential quarter of the village might be converted into a veritable stone fortress (this was true of Umm el-Fahm even into the 1950’s). Hamula members also exercised a marked degree of control over the disposition of one another’s women. Although direct lineal kinsmen (in the jeb) had first say as to whom their women should or should not marry, other hamula members could veto giving women over in marriage to other hama’il. Moreover, the fact that hamula members were adjacent plotholders in the masha’a lands required constant co-operation in agricultural details. The political, economic and social integrity of the multifunctional village hamula were thus one.

But the village was also a moral agent that encouraged the political, social and economic association of the different hama’il. Conflict between hama’il was subject to the arbitration of at least those village elders whose own families were not directly involved. The elders (ikhtiariyeh) assured the common defence of the village against attack, and set the particular modalities for protecting the village patrimony. For example, in anticipation of a Bedouin raid during harvest time, the elders would see to it that hama’il helped one another to cut and bury away (in makmura) the greatest quantity of crop in the shortest possible time (cf. Laorty-Hadji 1856: 514; Volney 1787: 379). The elders also mediated between government authorities and the various hama’il, although here there was a greater tendency for each hamula to come to its own terms with the agents of the government, especially in matters of tax collection.

Control over the disposition of women at the village level involved persuasion rather than the injunction of rights. A woman should presumably always have been given to a son of the village (ibn el-balad), all things being equal. By doing so one could keep a constant eye on the family honour (ard) that a woman invariably put at risk. Moreover, a wide network of affinal connexions
between sections of different hama'il supplied a ready and effective store of potential political and economic allies. If renewed, affinal ties could be converted into matrilateral bonds that would underscore more lasting political and economic relationships. Matrilateral kinsmen, for example, could be expected to bolster’s one’s position in the competition for ascendancy within one’s own hamula, and, if one lacked capital, to be available for co-cultivation partnerships.

The overall composition of village and hamula was such as to discourage capital investment in the hamula’s masha’a holdings from persons outside the village, but not from members of other hama’il within the village. A member of one hamula, finding himself short of capital, could enter into a partnership (sharika) with a member of another hamula who would supply the necessary oxen or seed for cultivating the land during one masha’a cycle. Such a partnership had to be agreed upon before the allotment of land by the hamula, and could not be dissolved until the next redistribution. In this way, members of one hamula could buy shares in the masha’a holdings of another. Each hamula sought to minimise the extent of the other’s infiltration by offering more generous terms to fellow members when possible. But the general requirements of village life also fostered some degree of corporate interfacing between hama’il.

Besides, even if a certain number of shares in the hamula’s holdings were transferred to an outside owner, no actual plots of land were lost. The new owner (mallik) only had the right to participate in the hamula’s periodic redistributions, just like any other hamula shareholder (saḥib fil masha’a). Even then it was usually the former proprietor who actually cultivated the land, paying the outside owner a rent on the land (qism el-’ard) of one fourth of the produce. So, the alienation of land shares did not necessarily entail alienation of the hamula’s source of livelihood.

In the long run, regardless of who actually cultivated the land, the outside owner was only assured the right to collect rent on a (mathematical) share of the hamula’s masha’a holdings, since plots invariably changed hands among owners after each cycle. The cultivator himself would be entitled to one fourth of the crop for his labour, and the remaining half of the crop would be directly apportioned according to the amount of capital contributed. Seed (bdhar) accounted for a full quarter of the produce, and a team of oxen for the other quarter. The tithe was usually taken from the threshing floor (bedar) before the division of the crop and apportioned among the four main factors of production: labour, land, seed and team.

Owing to its religious prestige as a patron of the Mosque and to extensive private holdings of olive groves and orchards, one section of the Aghbariyeh hamula was able to gain ascendancy over the others. From that position it also managed to acquire a dominant political role in the village by mediating with government authorities and gaining the right to collect the village’s taxes. By thus obtaining access to large amounts of ready capital the head of the section, Hassan Sa’ad, having taken the title ‘Effendi’ managed to acquire substantial economic interest: about one third of the Aghbariyeh’s masha’a lands, one fourth of Mahamid’s and one fourth of Jabarin’s. Only the rival Mahajneh hamula refused to cede land to Hassan Sa’ad Effendi; the Mahajneh did, however, sell off upwards of ten feddan worth of masha’s shares to a Christian resident of
Nazareth. Still, members of the Maḥajneh ūmula worked as co-cultivators (contributing labour and occasionally capital) on Aghbariyeh lands.

Although Hassan Saʿad Effendi had title to about one fourth of the total mashaʿa land of the village, he was unable to stabilise his plots and force an end to their periodic redistribution. Not only the Maḥajneh, but also the majority of Jabarin, Maḥamid and even Aghbariyeh fellahin refused to block or make exceptions to the periodic redistributions of any mashaʿa lands. Arguments that the land could be converted into more profitable orchards failed to move them: not only because they recognised that it would take at least seven years for the trees to bear marketable fruit, but because they realised that the entire culture of cereal production would thus be undermined. Informants who took part in the controversy over whether to stabilise or ‘freeze’ the land (ifraz barani) were cognisant of the social effects of the decline in traditional cereal culture. In their eyes, mashaʿa came to represent the last safeguard against the destruction of a whole way of life—a way of life that was evidently collapsing all around them.

The social corporations that were bound to extensive cereal production not only supplied a reliable, if economically uninspiring, source of livelihood. They also furnished a familiar strategic framework that allowed a certain latitude in directing social (e.g. marriage alliances) and economic (e.g. co-cultivation partnerships) life choices (cf. Atran 1985b). Such a framework thus provided for a continuing measure of control over one’s fate at a time when the majority of fellahin seemed destined to become ‘partners of the wind’ (šrīk el-hawa‘, cf. Post 1891: 105). It is this sentiment that the Palestine Royal Commission acknowledged, but did not seem to understand: ‘it appears evident that, in certain areas, the Arabs regard this [mashaʿa] system of tenancy, destructive as it is of all development, as a safeguard against alienation’ (Peel Commission Report 1937: 219).

It was the internal strength of the ūmula, fostered by competition within and between ūmaʿil, that prevented the dominant shareholder from gaining a controlling and directing interest in the village corporation. Although the village ūmaʿil did permit sale of land shares to persons outside the village, such sales were carefully watched and required at least the tacit assent of the village elders. Sales were prohibited to any outsider suspected of trying to convert land shares into alienable plots. This included representatives of various Zionist agencies. In this way also, the villagers managed to resist attempts by the authorities at Land Settlement, at least until the lands were seized by the new Israeli Government in 1948.7

Unlike the original inhabitants of the neighbouring Druze village of Dalieh who apparently came from the Aleppo region, the first settlers in Isfiyya probably immigrated from Lebanon.8 The retreat of the Egyptian armies in 1840–41, brought in its wake the destruction of all but the two named Druze villages in the Carmel (Oliphant 1884). These two absorbed some of the homeless, as well as refugees from other ruined villages as far away as the Hauran. In 1859, when the British Consul estimated the number of inhabitants of Isfiyya at 400, tilling
twenty feddan (Conder & Kitchener 1881, I: 281–822), Isfiyya already had a heterogeneous (though by no means amorphous) social composition consisting of several unrelated patronymic groups.

The twenty feddan mentioned apparently refer to the ‘corn-land and olives [that] surround the village’. What is not reported, however, is the fact that the villagers also cultivated the lands of Wadi Kishon (Wadi Muqata’a), a narrow valley linking the Plain of Esdraelon to the Plain of Acre. Since the grain on the hills matures some weeks later than grain in the valleys the fellahin were able to work both. The yield in the valley, though, could attain double that of a comparable surface in the hills. In the Wadi, which had two productive seasons a year, each feddan represented twenty-five hectares and was correspondingly referred to as a double, or ‘Greek’, feddan (feddan roumi), which also designated the amount of land that could be worked in a year. Shares of land in Isfiyya were distributed directly to shareholders, and not indirectly through their hamam’il as in Umm el-Fahm. Thus, each shareholding was counted as a fraction of the twenty feddan roumi of the village corporation. Accordingly, each of Isfiyya’s several agrarian zones were divided into twenty equal parcels. A quadrennial lottery would then award a full shareholder, who was usually capital owner (shaddad) as well, one parcel (maress) per zone; holders of half a share (shaqha) received half a parcel, etc.

As the village grew the reduction and disproportion of household shares in the masha’a lands increased. Reduction ensued from the practice of equal inheritance. This meant that sons would receive like fractions of the household share when their father died, or when he no longer felt able to administer household budget and farming operations. Disproportion resulted from differential reproduction of families, and from the buying and selling of shares. Yet, until its abrogation in Isfiyya in the early 1930’s, the masha’a remained the socioeconomic linchpin of the village corporation in general, and the extended family household in particular. With its demise, factionalism would become the dominant mode of social integration above the level of the patronymic group, and the extended family household would soon fragment into nuclear families (Atran 1985a).

The corporate efficacy of the masha’a system in the face of reduction and disproportion depended to a significant extent on the availability of land elsewhere. Such land existed on the Carmel itself as open woodland (ahrash). Although appreciably less fertile and harder to work and clear, this land served as a safety valve against the fracturing of the domestic community and the fragmentation of its joint farm. Indeed, villagers considered both jointly farming lands and open woodlands as masha’a.

In Isfiyya’s masha’a days, the village family (ayli) was generally a patrilocal extended household consisting of as yet unmarried sons and daughters, married sons and their families, spinster sisters, and, on occasion, bachelor brothers. Married sons with grown children could only remain economically viable if they had about eight to ten hectares of land to work. Moreover, if they were bound exclusively to their share of the masha’a lands their contribution to the labour of the joint household would be greater than that of the unmarried sons; their parts of the inheritance and the disposable budget, however, would be the
same. In that event, the unbalanced relation between production and consumption would prevent the extended family farm from persisting, much less from increasing, at a rhythm at which new individual households formed. But if, as was the case until 1921, the woodlands around the village could be opened up and held privately by anyone desiring to do so, then the excess labour represented by the individual households of married sons could be productively channelled off and their greater land needs met. In this way, division of the father's estate and the setting up of separate households would represent a natural fissioning, rather than a brutal scission and fragmentation.

In fact, the old estate, that is, the patrimonial masha'a farm, might still be, and often was, managed jointly since the criteria for efficient economic planning would not have changed. Although there would no longer be a common budget, nor necessarily a common residence, agricultural management need not suffer. Furthermore, sisters-in-law would no longer be subject to the domestic pressures of a common account or to the ensuing suspicion that the brothers-in-law take advantage of their husbands. Still, sisters-in-law would work together seeding the joint farm (when their husbands shared the ploughing), minding each other's children, fetching water and generally offering sympathy and help to one another. Finally, there would be a tendency to create a jural link that would solidify the social, political and economic bonds of the domestically divided extended family by taking a brother's daughter as spouse for a son.

Now a father did not always decide that a son should exercise what the community recognised as a right to take one's patrilateral parallel cousin (bint 'amm) in marriage. Although it is impossible to obtain accurate statistics for unrecorded marriages that occurred from fifty to a hundred years ago, it appears that the decision was taken in regard to only about one of every two available patrilateral cousins. Yet, such marriage, while ideologically sanctioned and undoubtedly preferred as a consecratory union incarnating the integrity of the joint estate, was by no means the only sociologically significant or normative form of union. For once the preferred union had served to preserve the family patrimony, further economic, political and social calculations could not but favour various degrees of exogamous alliance (see Atran 1985b for recent statistics).

By thus keeping a woman in the family, one would be in a position to give up a woman to a more distant kinsman, and even to a villager from another patronymic group; or, since little or no brideprice would be given for a parallel cousin, one could better afford the capital outlay required to take in a woman from the outside. Such 'exogamous' unions could well serve to strengthen further the internal solidarity of the domestically divided extended family, by opening the joint farm to a wider network of potential suppliers of land, capital and labour. These other sources could then be tapped by the joint farm or the individual domestic unit as the need arose. With economic integrity comes political integrity, and affines might thus not only aid in the production of wealth but also in the accumulation of power and prestige.

The institutional importance of exogamy within the system of preferential endogamy is even more crucial to an understanding of masha'a operations beyond the level of the joint farm. The general structure of co-operation and
co-ordination between members of the village corporation was expressed in the idiom of affinity (nasab); that is, villagers interpreted their mutual dependence in all masha’a operations other than those of the joint farm in terms of the duties and obligations that belong to affinal relationships. Thus, aid given was aid due to an affine; conflicts resolved were conflicts that were not supposed to have arisen between those ‘whose wives are our sisters’.

The Druze of the village still consider one another affines (nasayib). Today, village endogamy runs to over 80 per cent. and was doubtless higher in the past owing to the relative isolation of the Carmel villages. Informants of the older generation visualised relationships with their various sets of adjacent masha’a plotholders chiefly through the women (wives and sisters) relating them. Unless a neighbour happened to be a Christian, it was seldom that an affinal chain could not be found to link up adjacent plotholders, and often several alternate chains could be elicited. Yet, even Christians were treated as if they were affines in masha’a matters, being entitled to all considerations due affines in this respect.

If adjacent plotholders happened to be agnates or close cognates (one generation removed) genealogies were invoked; for neighbours who were neither agnates nor close cognates, however, there need not be any significant genealogical segment interposed in the affinal chain ultimately linking them. When it came to partnerships, though, the mode of reckoning was generally mediated by genealogy, unless the partnership was between Druze and Christian. In other words, informants usually tried to visualise their various partnerships in an idiom of consanguinity (see Atran 1985a for a schematic representation). Partners were considered ultimately married to the sisters and daughters of either agnates (‘ammam) or cognates (ikhwal). Most often, it appears, partnerships were not renewed from one redistribution to the next, except those between brothers; although some partnerships were later repeated and partnerships between close consanguines were seemingly more frequent, such as those involving paternal or maternal uncles and their nephews. Thus, despite the fact that partners tended to change as often as neighbours, the former were treated in an idiom that implied some measure of social-structural duration. In fact, partnership (sharika) was not infrequently compared to ‘mother’s-brothership’ (makhwal). Both imply, rather more informally than with patrikinship, mutual material aid, with the emphasis in the comparison on aid in tilling the land.

Yet, the conceptual line between neighbour and partner was not hard-and-fast. Yesterday’s neighbours were potentially tomorrow’s partners and vice versa. Indeed, the village as a whole was not only bound together by overlaying networks of affinity, but also thoroughly integrated through overlapping relationships of matrilaterality (the consequences of affinity in the ascending generation). This is not to say that such relations were always or generally harmonious, but by cross-cutting lines of social and economic division, they did prevent, or at least dilute, tendencies to scission in the community.

Unlike the idiom of patrilineality, the idioms of affinity and matrilaterality bespoke a situational rather than mechanical solidarity. But affinity and matrilaterality underscored different aspects of the village condition. Recourse to the
idiom of affinity allowed the villagers to respond to an indeterminate set of needs. It was an eclectic means of expression, forming a kind of social canopy allowing villagers to configure all contingencies that might arise: for example, of the various sets of circumstances that the lottery might turn up with each redistribution of masha’a. The ties expressed in the idiom of matrilaterality were also widespread throughout the social body politic, but they branched out in particular directions. Through them, the affairs of the moment became transactions between groups. Matrilateral links thus represented special nodes where hamula corporations interfaced. The partnerships that interlinked the more enduring joint estates might dissolve; the matrilateral relationships that interlaced the more permanent patronymic stocks might wither (if the affinal link were not renewed after a couple of generations); but in their passing they would knot and strengthen the social fabric.

As long as the social fabric held firm, Isfiyya, like Umm el-Fahm, was able to avoid alienation of its common landed patrimony. Nevertheless, two extraneous developments combined to put an end to the masha’a in Isfiyya by the early 1930’s. Informants cite the British decision to close off the woodlands to further expansion as one of the two main causes of the masha’s system’s demise. The other cause cited was the acquisition of titles to some of the communal land by Jewish colonists who pressed the Mandatory Government to allow them exclusive cultivation rights under the Land Settlement Ordinances.

In Turkish times, a village’s confines were set as the limits beyond which a man shouting from a house in the village could no longer be heard (a court decision at the beginning of the British Mandate fixed this at 2.5 km.). All land not cultivated and lying outside the territorial limits of the village was considered ‘dead’ (mewat), and any land left fallow for three consecutive years was deemed ‘abandoned’ (mahlul). Until the Mahlul Land Ordinance (1920) and the Mewat Land Ordinance (1921) rights to cultivate such land could be obtained by payment of a ‘redemption price’ or upon proof that it had been under continuous cultivation for at least ten years. After passage of the ordinances these lands could only be opened with prior consent of the authorities. Any lands cleared without consent were subject to seizure by the State. Despite Isfiyya’s stiff resistance to the ordinances (cf. Sawyer 1925: 8), in the end opportunities for the expansion of village farming were greatly reduced, if not eliminated.

Although Umm el-Fahm also disposed of communal woodlands, they were not part of a large forested block of territory such as the Carmel, which the Mandate authorities sought to convert into a prime example of the State Domain. Nor did Umm el-Fahm’s woodlands serve quite the same ‘safety-valve’ function as Isfiyya’s. Not only did Umm el-Fahm have considerably more income from olive and fruit orchards, but its richest families also brought in income from land and land shares acquired from other villages.

In the late nineteenth century, Badi’a Effendi of Acre (one of the principal benefactors of the Bahai faith) began buying into Isfiyya’s masha’a lands with the consent of the Mukhtar and the village elders. Ultimately he acquired about one fourth of the total. In the mid 1920’s he sold the titles to the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet) without consulting the villagers (cf. Granovsky 1931: table 8). When the villagers discovered this they decided to end the periodic
redistributions of the land in order to benefit from the law granting title to anyone who could prove continuous cultivation for ten years.

The Land Settlement Ordinance (1928) and the Land Settlement Amendment Ordinance (1930) had just come into effect. These aimed to end masha‘a’s in the country as a whole through a village by village cadastral. Henceforth, individuals would receive title deeds for each separate plot of land they had cultivated in the last masha‘a cycle. Between June 1929 and February 1932, however, masha‘a had been abolished by official action in only eight villages (see Granott 1952: 241). In Isfiyya, the last redistribution had occurred in 1927. Thus, when Nejib Mansour became Mukhtar in 1932, the decision was made to ‘unofficially freeze’ (ifraz barani) the land in the knowledge that the Settlement Officer was unlikely to reach the village for some time.

As it turned out, the Settlement Officer did not reach Isfiyya until 1941 despite the entreaties of the Jewish National Fund representatives. Although the representatives had official deeds to the land (qawashin) and signed documents from the villagers naming locations and proprietors of the sold plots, the latter documents proved problematic in the Land Court. This is because those same plots had since been redistributed to several other villagers in succeeding lotteries. The village finally came to an out-of-court settlement by granting the Fund lands in the extreme northwest and east. So, for the time being, the villagers had managed to save the bulk of their masha‘a lands. But these were now stabilised (mafruz), with individual holdings permanently fixed and scattered. Much of this land was later bought off, especially after the establishment of the State of Israel; it had, in any case, since ceased to function as a patrimony for the village corporation and the joint farm.

Conclusion

For the marginal population of the plains, the masha‘a system proved particularly susceptible to outside interference that would eventually dismantle it. First of all, it was a native system that imperial and colonial authorities had little, if any, economic regard for. The authorities were also largely oblivious of the social nature of masha‘a, that is, of the organic relationship between village social organisation and the agrarian regime. They were thus content to force, or allow the peasantry to suffer, economic changes with minimal consideration of the social consequences. 13

Secondly, for the increasingly large marginal population of the plains, the social-structural mechanisms most apt to resist, or at least stall, the economic fragmentation and social disintegration of the village were lacking. Forced registration of lands and the consequent large-scale transference of titles placed the economic fate of the marginal peasantry in the hands of absentee landlords. In the competition for the economic control of Palestine that pitted the capital of the Arab landlord against Jewish capital in a depressed agricultural market, it was the latter that proved more in tune with the market forces then prevailing in the world economy and which, through the Mandate, predominated in Palestine (Stein 1984; cf. Bonné 1935: 117; Firestone 1975). Thus, the fact that Arab landlords were compelled to sell off (surreptitiously) their holdings to the
colonists, coupled with the inability of the peasants to block the decisions of their landlords, meant that the peasants would have to give up their familiar, if not wholly chosen, way of life.

The case was otherwise, however, for a significant minority of older, continuously inhabited, hill villages. For the most part, they had evolved flexible, self-sustaining mechanisms of economic isolation and internal social integration. Before registration, these mechanisms had enabled the hill villages to implement masha'a when conditions allowed, and to retreat from it when circumstances were no longer favourable. With registration, retreat became possible only on pain of forfeit. But income from the hills, coupled with a history of socio-economic coordination, maximised the possibilities of wholesale registration of their valley lands and minimised the opportunities for piecemeal alienation.

Political considerations briefly alluded to above have doubtlessly abetted in the often rigid and simplistic interpretation of the intricate relationship between social organisation and the agrarian regime in the masha'a villages of Palestine and elsewhere in the Levant. While the area was under Ottoman rule, European inquiries into the region’s political, social and economic character were almost exclusively devoted to biblical and geographical surveys. There was little interest in the people as such. Thus, Thomson, who joined in Robinson’s explorations and was acknowledged by Oliphant as an authority on the country, typically remarked:

In reality, many parts of Esdraelon are remarkably productive, and there are numerous villages around it. But there is little profit in mere names to which no historic interest is attached, and therefore I leave you to admire, without interruption, the ever-varying plain along which our pathway lies (Thomson 1882, II: 174).

To this day, the only competent descriptions of masha'a agriculture in Palestine consist in a handful of pages written by a few contributors to the British-run Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The discussions are fairly general and barely suggest the wide variation in the forms of masha'a prevalent throughout the country. There is no sustained case-by-case (or even a single detailed case) study of the relationship between village social organisation and the actual implementation of masha'a. In Syria as well, the only serious, but still summary, evaluations of masha'a are those of the French colonial geographer-historians, notably Latron and Weulersse. Although Weulersse especially had a decided anthropological bent, he did not attempt a systematic analysis of village social organisation, much less its relationship to the agrarian regime.

Only in the last three decades has anthropology turned its considerable analytic skills on the Middle East. Understandably, it is the evolving relationship between agriculture and social organisation over the last thirty years that has come most clearly into focus. The actual operation of masha'a is generally excluded from this purview, having largely disappeared by the time methodical fieldwork commenced. Yet, to reconstruct this many-faceted socio-economic regime, anthropologists and historians usually depend on the often limited and unreliable reports of explorers, colonists and colonial functionaries.
This has done much to obfuscate, but little to clarify, the politically sensitive issue of the land problem in Palestine.

To be sure, there is something to Barth’s suggestion concerning the internal strength of a village’s social fabric and its susceptibility to outside interference and control. But apart from a few noteworthy exceptions (e.g. Peters 1976), an unfortunate tendency to assume the adequacy of Bedouin tribal models vitiates many of the generalisations about the nature of colonial and precolonial peasant societies in the Middle East. For these all too comprehensible and beguiling accounts of agnatic association and dissociation fail to capture crucial regional differences in the history of social and agrarian interrelations. Given a heavy added dose of political sensibility often leading to biased appraisals of the Palestine land problem in particular, knowledge of the varied course of sedentary organisation and plains agriculture remains in a predictably lamentable state. This article, while still woefully insufficient, aims simply to introduce some subtlety into the question.

NOTES

1 Concerning Egypt, in particular, and the Middle East, in general, Baer (1966: 151) concludes:

Under the masha’a system there is no incentive to invest for ameliorating land, which in any case passes sooner or later into the hands of others. The aim of a landholder under such conditions is to exploit the land to its utmost. . . . Because of the fragmentation of landed property, many farms are too small for efficient exploitation to be worthwhile.

Now, in Upper Egypt where masha’a was common, detailed knowledge of landholdings was available to authorities from an early date, unlike the case in the Levant and Iraq. This circumstance may indeed have facilitated a ready exploitation of the peasantry, specifically by appropriating the collective discipline of the masha’a system (cf. Poliak 1939: 69–70). But this state of affairs by no means warrants the conclusion that masha’a was intrinsically disposed to, or created by, a ‘feudal’ management.

Similar considerations apply to North Africa. Some see masha’a as the creation of a fiscal system imposed by the authorities on settling tribes. This supposedly had nothing to do with agrarian collectivism, but was a creation of the Turkish or Moroccan system of government (see Bonne 1955: 117–18). Nevertheless, even when government control was lax, peasants kept to the system (Hoffherr 1932: 124; cf. Ageron 1968). In Tunisia: ‘In certain tribes (Frachich, Nefzaoua), a periodic division of plots was decided upon by the m’ad after the rains’ (Valensi 1981: 714; cf. Bardin 1939); while in Libya, too, tribes spontaneously decided that, ‘whenever the rain falls, the land is available for all, in equal measures, to plough; the decision concerning the detailed allocation of strips of ploughland is taken summarily by casting lots as soon as the rain falls’ (Peters 1976: 70).

2 According to the Johnson-Crosbie Report (1930: 45), where masha’a prevailed in Palestine, ‘It is useless to expect that any land will be weeded or fertilized, that trees will be planted, or, in a word, that any development will take place’. In the case of Transjordan, Walpole (1944) opines: ‘it is doubtful if a tenure more inimical to farming could have been devised by any community’. For Syria, Klat (1957: 19) avers that: ‘Musha tenure is, undoubtedly, one of the main reasons of the present low productivity of the once prosperous plains of the interior of Syria and constitutes an obvious bar to any form of agricultural progress’. Likewise for Warriner (1966: 76), commenting on masha’a in the Levant and Iraq: ‘Of course the system has great disadvantages, since it prevents any investment in the land and is an obstacle to any attempt at progress. The individual cultivator is precluded from manuring the land or undertaking any improvement such as terracing against erosion’.

3 In fact, Ottoman attempts to end fallowing and grazing by imposing a ‘thorn’ or ‘weed’ tax (mal shok) on the ‘lost’ produce of temporarily idle land could not but undermine the system of extensive agriculture in the country (Shaw Commission Report 1930: 450). Without rest or the enrichment
and weeding contributed by grazing animals, the fertility of valley lands would inevitably decline. Forced into the hills, flocks would do considerable damage to the vegetation protecting against the erosion of shallow hill soil. In sum, the peasant would have to expend ever increasing amounts of (unavailable) capital and labour on an ever decreasing return for both high and lowland cultivation.

It is worth noting in this respect that the first serious disputes between the fellahin and Jewish colonists in the 1880's at the Gedera and Petah Tikvah settlements in the Maritime Plain have been attributed to what 'was really a customary village quarrel (tigrah kifirit rigilah)' (Dinor 1954: 96); that is, 'the Jewish purchasers were not acquainted with local customs regarding freedom of pasturing' (Porath 1975: 375). Yet like other disputes that followed, the quarrel over 'grazing rights' was nearly always a quarrel over attempts by the fellahin to recover at least partial use of lost masha'a lands, as eye-witness accounts by the colonists themselves make clear (e.g. Hirsch to Pinsker, 4 April 1886, in Druyanov 1919: 747–53). But inasmuch as the first colonists were generally unaware of the intermittent nature of masha'a and its intimate relationship to peasant herding, the erroneous conception of the Palestinian plains as largely given over to pasturage is comprehensible. The mistake is less comprehensible, or at least less easily dismissed as ingenious, when repeated by modern commentators (cf. Haycraft Commission Report 1921: 57).

4 Articles 8 and 9 of the Ottoman Land Code of 12 Ramadan 1274 A.H. (21 April 1858) prohibited communal ownership of the land and granted a prescriptive right of usufruct (tasarruf) only to individuals who could demonstrate actual possession and cultivation of a plot for at least ten consecutive years (baq el-qarar). Since land previously held in masha'a precluded prior possession for more than a few years (i.e. for not more than one redistributive cycle of the masha'a), peasants could only obtain usufruct rights under the second and third provisions of Article 78. Here registration (tabu) was granted against payment of a redemption price (bedal el-mithl or bedal et-tabu). Villagers refusing to pay the tabu lost any claim on the land, which could then be auctioned off.

5 This permanent division of masha'a lands among hama'il was somewhat unusual for Palestine. Most villages with strong hama'il periodically apportioned land among the hama'il; and each hamula, in turn, then redistributed parcels among its member households by lottery (cf. Stavsky 1946; Cohen 1963; Antoun 1972). In Umm el-Fahm, though, there were only periodic redistributions within the hamula, and not first between hama'il. But the method of redistribution current in Umm el-Fahm was not unheard of elsewhere. For example, in the village of Isdud about a quarter of the land was held in masha'a, as with Umm el-Fahm (Auhagen 1907: 50). Also, Isdud's masha'a land was divided into four blocks and given to four hama'il that lived in four separate quarters of the village. Each hamula received its holding with fixed boundaries. A given block was reckoned as the property of the hamula and could not be exchanged. Within the hamula, land was divided among the individual households by lot every two years. In Umm el-Fahm, redistributions were sometimes every two years, at other times every four, as with Isfiyya.

6 Conder (1878, II: 255) sets the feddan in the plains at 112–144 Turkish dunams (one Turkish dunam equaling 0.09153 hectares). By the 1880's the Ottoman Government had fixed the standard feddan at 100 dunams (Schumacher 1889: 163–4). During the British Mandate the Turkish dunam was superseded by a metric dunam equal to 1/10 hectare. Occasionally, however, the double, or 'Greek', 'feddan (feddan roumi) was the accepted surface measure. For example, Isfiyya's masha'a lands measured 20 feddan roumi, each feddan roumi comprising 250 dunams.

7 The opposition of certain segments of the Arab landowning elite to the political ambitions of Zionism did, it is true, slow the process of breaking up the masha'a and alienating the land. But this political strategy of resistance proved economically most effective with those villages whose internal corporate structure was strong enough to meet that of the landowning elite half way (see Atran in press).

8 With the permission of the editor of L'Homme, this description of masha'a in Isfiyya is taken from a more detailed discussion of the historical relationship between the village's social organisation and agrarian regime (Atran 1985a).

9 Isfiyya was the subject of a study by Leonard Kasdan (1961) in the mid-1950's. In line with Murphy and Kasdan's (1959) thesis about Arab kinship generally, Kasdan argues that: 'the Druze are patrilineal in descent, yet their pattern of integration is bilateral'. Furthermore,

Within Isfiyya... consanguinity can only operate as a basis for the organization of ongoing groups of a corporate nature when conflict occurs between unrelated groups. As a consequence,
integration at larger levels of magnitude must be based upon some other principle . . . the principle at work is affiliation with factional groups (1961: 90).

The two chief sources of error in Kasdan’s analysis of this purported ‘type case’ of Arab sedentary society are the related presuppositions that (1) patronymic groups cannot constitute social corporations because they cannot structurally discriminate agnates from cognates, and that (2) the practice and ideology of preferential endogamy applies only to agnatic groups. Concerning (1), however, even if (2) were correct, the fact that the various jej of a hamula are not genealogically linked entails that the hamula is not bilaterally integrated, since matrilateral connexions thus also cannot ramify through the genealogy of the hamula. Moreover, as indicated below, (2) does not apply to Isfiyya, in particular, nor to sedentary Arab villages, in general (Atran 1985b). Indeed, in the past the faction scarcely had a corporate function in village life. Up until the end of the village mash’a’, the village as a whole constituted a political and economic corporation based on affinity and matrilaterality, which was largely undivided along factional lines (Atran 1985a). Kasdan, though, makes no mention of mash’a’, arguing that ‘economic co-operation is a strictly family affair. Consequently it plays no part in defining solidary kin units. Land is not only alienable but must be divided among one’s heirs’ (1961: 85).

He further errs in his contention that Isfiyya’s valley lands, where mash’a’ was practised, were since ‘Turkish times . . . secondary in importance and value to the villagers from an agricultural standpoint’, as supposedly were valley lands elsewhere in Palestine (1961: 30).

10 The population of Isfiyya increased by about 50 per cent. over the second half of the last century. Three quarters were Druze and a quarter Greek Catholic (Schumacher 1887: 178; Mäen 1907: 150). By 1932, following the last mash’a’ redistribution on record, the village numbered 750, with about the same proportion of Druze to Christians (cf. Ben Zvi 1954: 71).

11 Under Muslim law, which also applied to the Druze, sons were entitled to equal parts of the father’s estate and daughters to half parts. In practice, however, daughters rarely pressed their claim. To do otherwise would mean losing the protection of her father’s family, which would leave her completely at the mercy of her husband’s family for whom she always remains a stranger.

12 ‘Aylli is also a generic term for something in the order of ‘family’. As such it may also designate the members of a hamula, a jej (or ‘aṣab), or a nuclear family. The same applies to dar, which encompasses a more general notion of ‘household’. It may also denote the members of a hamula, a jej or an isolated dwelling unit. ‘Aylli and dar, however, are by no means synonymous. Although both may have identical extensions, their intensions differ. ‘Aylli signifies a kin group in its relationship to other like kin groups, whereas dar refers to a given ayli’s domestic constitution. Thus, political alignment is usually ascribed to the ayli, while dar indicates domestic activity and co-residence (to the extent it exists: for example, in the ‘quarter’, or hara, of a hamula).

13 As a political aftermath to the disturbances of 1929, two different inquiries by representatives of the colonial government on the state of Arab agriculture in 1930 indicated that the traditional methods of extensive cereal cultivation, in general, and mash’a’, in particular, could not accommodate both an increasing Arab rural population and continued colonisation (Shaw Commission Report 1930: 120–1; Hope-Simpson Report 1930: 142). The official Zionist response insisted that accommodation was possible far into the future if only the Arab peasantry were to learn to live intensively on less land, as the colonists obviously were capable of doing (Granovsky 1931). Since it was economically impossible for the Jewish population to continue to grow apace with the fellahin by adopting the methods of Arab agriculture, it was up to the latter to retool their economy and reorganise their culture accordingly: ‘A very important point bearing on the development of the colonization is that the Jewish authorities rejected the idea that the standard of living of the colonists should be dictated by the economics of the farming system at any given time’ (Keen 1946: 25).

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