

Of the sharecropping compacts that prevailed in Palestine over the last century, only a few survive today. Those tend to retain the form of earlier compacts but, in substance, operate in the context of a transformed agrarian economy. It is necessary therefore, to examine the history of these transactions as their function changed within each set of agrarian relations in which they were embedded.

### Three functions of share-cropping arrangements in Palestine

There seems to be a consensus that during the first half of this century, sharetenancy in Greater Syria involved primarily the cropping of the big estates of absentee landlords ('Ashour, 1948a:32-33; Warriner, 1966:77; Granott, 1952:286). It seems also that the dismemberment of the big estates during the Mandatory period was accompanied by the decline of sharetenancy itself (Granott, 1952:302). At its peak, Tannous estimated that "not less than 50% of all cultivated land in the Middle East, including Iraq, was worked out by tenants or metayers (Tannous: cited by Granott, ibid.).

The increasing spread of sharetenancy during the first decades of the twentieth century in Palestine (and perhaps even more so in Syria and Iraq) has been attributed to the peasants' perpetual indebtedness to landlords-financiers; a phenomenon which is rooted in turn in the uncertainty of grain yields in arid agriculture (Warriner, 1948:22; 1966: ibid.). This is a process in which peasants, compelled to borrow at cumulatively higher rates of interest, eventually become tenants on their alienated land (Carmi and Rosenfeld, 1974:475).

Both the French and British colonial land policies, despite their serious attempts at stabilizing the land tenure system and securing the peasants title deeds, reinforced this pattern of indebtedness-borrowing-