NOMADIC PEOPLES

Why They Matter to God and the Great Commission



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Who Are Nomadic Pastoralists?

Bedouins with television antennas sprouting over their tents. Tuaregs giving up their camels to drive around the Sahara in Toyota Land Cruisers, with only their enigmatic eyes peering out from between their turbans and veils. Maasai warriors in full regalia and flowing, mud-plastered hair hurling sticks at one another and performing their flat-footed dances at 3:15 every afternoon for the benefit of camera-toting tourists.

These, along with a few other weird and wonderful aberrations of the twentieth century, are what most people know of pastoral nomadic societies. For every one of these commercialized manifestations, there are thousands of authentic herdsmen, women, boys, and girls living a similar existence to that of our well-documented pastoralist predecessors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They often live in remote and uncongenial places where tourist buses do not usually run. Newsreels caught occasional glimpses of a few of them in the days leading up to the Gulf War. Cameramen, looking for a change from high-technology war machines in the desert, managed to snatch a fleeting shot of camels on the horizon, led by a robed figure who could have walked straight out of Genesis.

Nomadic pastoralists make up what is probably the largest remaining bloc of unreached peoples to be won for Jesus Christ. Of all people in the world, they are probably the most God-conscious, but culturally they are the most remote from the Western church. They are little known, except through the pages of *National Geographic* and a few exotic documentaries. They often live in uncongenial places where tourist buses do not run.

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For Christians, these shepherds of the remotest deserts and mountains are not just colorful reminders of the earliest Jewish ancestors of our faith but also a striking challenge to that faith. If we understand the command that the Lord of the church gave to his people, we will appreciate that we are responsible for those far-off, forgotten nomadic societies. They are not just a bizarre anachronism in human society that will disappear if we ignore them. They are the natural descendants and successors of many races who have learned to survive and make a living in some of the world's most undesirable real estate, not just in Africa but in North and South America, Europe, and Asia.

It is God's declared purpose that they shall be included in his church in all their authentic diversity. They do not have to become Westernized and sedentary to become his people. God knows perfectly well how to communicate with nomadic pastoralists. In fact, the first men he chose to be his special people were of that exact socioeconomic inclination.

They may not be numerically impressive, and it is undeniable that, as a proportion of the global population, they are certainly diminishing. However, their significance does not depend on their numbers as United Nations statisticians count them, but on their authentic ethnic identity and their viable, tenacious social systems, which God includes as some of those tribes and tongues and nations for whom he has great promises.

Who Are They?

There are as many variations of nomadism as there are reasons why people adopt this way of life. The simplest and probably most ancient expression of this socioeconomic system is the hunter-gatherers. Many nomadic societies still exist in the least developed parts of the world, especially in Indonesia, South America, and more remote parts of Africa. Australian Aborigines, the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, and Pygmies of Central Africa are some of the better-known survivors of what was once probably the dominant lifestyle on Earth.

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Pastoralists are people whose major source of food or income is dependent on animals. Because many of them occupy land that is usually arid or semiarid with unreliable rainfall, they have to be able to take their animals to the places where grazing and water can be found. These pastoralists are described as nomadic or semi-nomadic, depending largely on how much they move looking for grazing.

Pastoralists who spend more than half their time herding animals away from homes or cultivated settlements are generally described as semi-nomadic. They may engage in other farming activities, seek seasonal or temporary work in settled agricultural areas, or work in cities as casual laborers, but their traditional and preferred lifestyle is in animal husbandry. The animals are often essential for transporting goods and people to new locations as well as for more frequent haulage of water.

Farmers with animals who spend less than half their time herding them and more time in cultivation are usually known as agropastoralists. Nomadic pastoralists do not wander aimlessly around in the bush. They follow carefully planned opportunistic strategies, utilizing the resource of spatial mobility. One of these survival strategies is that some or even all family members may have to leave the traditional grazing lands to find temporary alternatives for employment or food. This does not mean that they should cease to be considered pastoralists since their primary orientation is still toward pastoralism. There are many displaced pastoralists living in cities, working as casual laborers, guards, or in famine relief camps, whose main goal in life is to gather a few animals to enable them to return to nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralism.

There are few pastoralists left on Earth who can live exclusively as nomads; most are semi-nomadic, operating somewhere along a continuum from pure nomadism to agropastoralism. Agropastoralism has become so much the norm that it is impossible to define nomads as those who do not cultivate. It is also incorrect to say that their use of agriculture shows that nomadic pastoralism is dying out. There have always been examples of this mixed form of agriculture (a harvest

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from digging in the dirt and a harvest on the hoof). Whatever their position on the continuum, they will think of themselves as primarily animal herders who rarely own land privately.

One of the defining features of nomadic pastoralists is that they cannot own any particular piece of land, as they must be able to move their "harvest on the hoof" to the grazing areas where rain is expected. This is the primary reason for their nomadism in arid and semiarid lands, where erratic and unpredictable rainfall may occur somewhere in their grazing area during the year, but not usually everywhere. This unpredictability of rainfall, rather than its paucity, is often the chief problem for pastoralists and the main reason for their needing to keep moving. Nomadic pastoralism is often the most efficient, if not the only, means of resource extraction in semiarid lands. On comparable grazing land, it is considerably more efficient than ranching and requires much less initial capital.

People in Majority World societies practice many specialized skills and trades that result in their moving widely without any fixed abode: blacksmiths, leather workers, tinkers, and tentmakers. There are even some societies in India where women serve as prostitutes while accompanying their menfolk who do seasonal manual and agricultural work. These can be differentiated from migrant workers who have a house or piece of property to which they return periodically.

Where Are They?

Nomadic pastoralists can be found in desert or semiarid regions of the world, as well as in mountains or high plateaus. Africa is the most obvious continent, having several different types of land. Some, therefore, conclude that this is where most nomadic pastoralists reside. Others think that Central Asia may have the greatest numbers: Tibet, Mongolia, northern China, southern Russia, Afghanistan, Iran, even Iraq, Israel, and the Arabian Peninsula. There are some surprisingly ancient nomadic herders in the Andes

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of South America. As for Europe, Australia, and the Arctic, there are not many survivors left after the onslaught of Western exploitation of land and its traditional occupants.

A recent study published by Winrock International states that arid and semiarid lands cover about one-third of the Earth's land surface but nearly two-thirds of the African continent. The majority of African livestock and possibly thirty million livestock-dependent people reside in these dry zones.[1] This is the natural habitat of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists in Africa.

There is another major area of the world where a specialized form of pastoralism is practiced—herding reindeer. This area extends from Northern Scandinavia through Siberia. Like many other areas in the former USSR where pastoralism was practiced, official communist policies had devastating effects on the lives and productivity of people who were once self-sufficient nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists. Whether these people can or will want to return to their former way of life is uncertain. Much of their traditional rangeland has been destroyed by misguided communal agricultural projects.

This has demonstrated again, as in Africa, that nomadic pastoralists usually occupy land that is only marginally suitable for cultivation. If the land is put under the plow, it may yield an occasional but diminishing harvest. The land soon becomes unprofitable for agriculture and will be useless as reserve grazing when it is most needed by pastoralists.

There are, of course, other well-known nomadic societies in Europe, the Romani people. The tenacity with which most of them maintain their traditional way of life in spite of every effort by Western governments and local authorities to restrict their movements and to induce them to be "socially responsible" and settle down is quite remarkable.

1 Ellis and Swift, *Stability of African Pastoral*.

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