

Think Nomadic

The nomadic peoples of the world present one of the greatest challenges to Church and Missions. They are the most remote geographically, technologically and culturally, therefore most difficult for modern missionaries to understand and reach. They comprise one of the largest blocs of unreached ethnic groups who all share the same socio-economic obstacles that Christian Missions must understand and overcome.

by Malcolm J. Hunter

Physically and socially nomadic peoples, and especially pastoralists, are some of the most misunderstood and marginalized societies on earth because they rarely have any voice or representative in government decision-making circles.

Missiologically they present one of the greatest challenges to the Christian Church as they are usually the most remote geographically, technologically and culturally, therefore most difficult for modern missionaries to access and understand. They comprise probably the largest number of unreached ethnic groups who all share the same socio-economic obstacle for Christian Missions to overcome.

Why are nomads so difficult to understand? The reason is that their lifestyle and values are so different from sedentary peoples and therefore are very hard for modern missionaries to understand. For instance, they do not own title deeds to any particular piece of land. They depend for their survival on utilizing the resource of what is called "spatial mobility". Most nomads are pastoralists whose wealth lies in their animals, for which the optimal balance of water and grazing is the key to the health of their herds and the herders' families.

Various types of animals are herded such as cattle, goats, sheep, camels, horses, reindeer, llamas and even pigs. Some pastoral societies can afford to specialize in less arid areas but most herders diversify and split the herds to maximize survival chances. Many rural societies in arid or semi-arid lands can be found somewhere along a continuum between pure nomadism and agro-pastoralism. Their position on the continuum is not fixed and can change quickly or slowly. Herders who derive more than 50% of their food from their cultivation are called agro-pastoralists or semi-settled nomads. There are very few pure nomads, meaning that they do not cultivate any land. Service nomads move regularly to provide seasonal labor or specialist skills e.g., agricultural workers, traders, transporters, tailors, tinkers, weavers and entertainers. Hunter-gatherers do not usually keep animals but hunt them for food that is mixed with roots, leaves, birds, honey and insects. They often have clearly defined tribal boundaries and symbiotic relationships with other nomadic societies. One other group of traditional nomads are the Gypsies or Romanies whose culture and history constrain them to keep moving for socio-economic reasons.



Where are Nomads Found and How Many are There?

Nomadic peoples are found in 1) West Africa: Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Benin, Cameroon, Chad. 2) East Africa: Sudan, Egypt, Eritrea, Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania, Djibouti.

3) South Africa: Botswana, Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe. 4) Asia: China, Tibet, Mongolia, including Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia. 5) Europe: Northern Sweden, Norway, Finland, Siberia and Russia.

God only knows how many there are, but a good "guesstimate" is that there are between 25 to 200 million nomadic people in the world, depending largely on definition of terms.

The Church Among the Nomads

What is essential? The basic requirement for any Church is people with regenerate relationships, first with God and then with other people. Education and even literacy are secondary. For instance, in the pre-literate history of the Church God appears very willing to

give special gifts and revelations until His Word is available in an appropriate form—and not necessarily in writing. The only essential “structure” is the presence of the Body of Christ with the gifts of the Spirit operating supernaturally to build up the members to become a holy people.

Appropriate shelter is desirable but is not essential in nomadic culture. For most nomads shelter simply means shade. No special building or sacred place was necessary nor was any available for the first 250 years of the Christian Church's existence. By and large, sacred buildings only came along after the pagan temples were “converted” by the Roman Emperor. Before that, dwelling places or homes seem to have been the norm and the limiting factor for meeting places for God's people.

Becoming Relevant to Nomads

How can the Church be made relevant to nomads? Simple... although not easy! The Christian Church and gospel are most relevant to Nomadic societies as the normal social relations between

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nomads are usually much closer to Christian standard and biblical worldview—there are no abused or abandoned children and old people are respected and cared for. Nomads often have a high view of God, usually a monotheistic Sky God who sends rain if the people pray to Him and act properly, according to their defined customs.

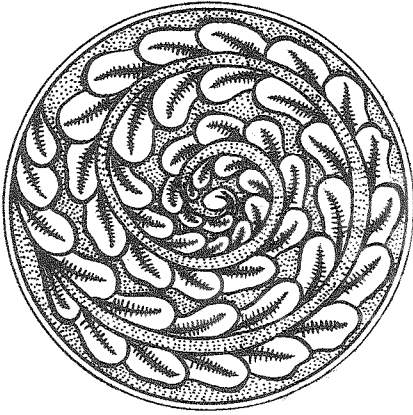
As we look at the Bible it is very clear that God has no problem communicating with nomads. The first people He chose to be His own were called out of a city to be nomadic pastoralists. The patriarchs of the chosen nation were called to be different from all other peoples with a global purpose. The prophets were sent to keep reminding the people that they must remain separate or God would take away their land, destroy their cities and send them into exile. The Old Testament is much more meaningful to nomadic pastoralists than it is to urban dwellers. Furthermore, the New Testament was written for a pilgrim people who have here “no continuing and abiding city.”

The first place in which God chose to meet with his people was the Tabernacle—the Tent of Meeting—which God designed and gave precise instructions according to a heavenly reality and pattern. Gifted men built it from the abundant free-will love offerings of God's people. It was never coveted or attacked. Carrying poles remained in the heavy furniture to show that they would keep moving. On the other hand, building and having the temple was David's idea. Solomon's project built it by forced labor and was done according to the design and decoration of a non-Jew. God consented to occupy the temple conditionally. The gold and wealth led to frequent attacks, plunder, destruction and ultimate exile.

The Church that is most appropriate biblically speaking and therefore most attractive to nomads will have much to say to the Western Church's resources that require expensive buildings and large professional paid staff to maintain them. God's place of meeting should have simplicity of structure, using spiritual gifts not professional qualifications, strength of relationships and care for the weakest in a community of mutual interdependence and willingness to share with the destitute, opportunistic readiness to take risks for the long term good of the family, recognition that for the good of the family some members will have to move away from the preferred security to find alternative economic resources. They will then be expected to remit funds back to help the surviving family. It requires willingness to keep moving, and when necessary dispersing to enable the accomplishment of common goals, with the ability to resume relationships as if nothing had interrupted the commitment.

Nomadic Pastoralists and their Spirituality

First, nomadic pastoralists vary considerably in their religious beliefs and practices but probably without exception they can be described as deeply spiritual people. In many nomadic societies there is a belief in a High God, sometimes called the Sky God. They usually do not worship terrestrial objects such as trees, rocks or mountains like traditional animistic tribal peoples as they do not feel attached to any particular place on earth. They probably acquire their God-consciousness from their total dependence on rain for their survival. In some nomadic pastoralist societies there are individuals whose role is specifically and primarily to pray. In others there are rituals and ceremonies in which larger groups will collectively intercede for rain, for health of the herds and for the people, and as necessary, protection from ene-



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Turkish designs on pages 9 and 11 are carnation motifs, blue-turquoise-white, of the "Rhodian" period (1550-1600).

mies, or success for their raiding forays. As in many other societies (including large segments of our own) there is usually a recognition that there is a good God to whom they can appeal but also bad supernatural powers and spirits whom they must appease to avoid disaster. Where there is a belief in a good God He is perceived to be remote with no sure means of access. It is here where the Christian message becomes obviously relevant.

Second, many nomadic pastoralists call themselves Muslims and follow some of the essential practices of Islam with varying degrees of compliance. Their zeal and fidelity in practice often depends on their proximity to the mosque and Muslim teachers, hence those men, usually younger men, who spend their days out with the animals will tend to be much less strict in observing their prayers. Older men who tend to stay in population centres where there is a mosque usually become more zealous in their faith. This has clear implications for missions seeking to find the most receptive nomads to the Gospel. Unfortunately most missionaries choose to live and minister in or around urban centres, and therefore usually report that nomads are quite resistant to Christianity.

Even in societies where Islam is relatively well established the lower social strata and the women will often retain many if not all of the traditional animistic beliefs and practices. The men folk would not officially acknowledge this nor their own practices but as in most communities where religion is poorly taught or understood there will be a syncretistic adherence to the older traditions "just to be safe".

Third, if they have seen anything of Christianity, nomadic pastoralists have usually seen a very distorted view of it which to them appears inappropriate and unattractive. Most "outside interventions" have come from their own governments and/or from Western development agencies. Some of the people who come in as "experts" as teachers, nurses or even policemen, may be sincere Christians even though most will be non-Christians, or very nominal. However, whatever their personal position, if they are not Muslims they will most likely be regarded as Christians. Their lifestyle and attitude will usually be judged as "Christian" because Christianity is so often seen as the religion of the educated and professional settled people.

In African countries, for instance, where the government is usually comprised of those from sedentary urban or cultivating peoples the official policy towards nomadic pastoralists is often unsympathetic to their problems and the development programs proposed to them are frequently inappropriate. When this is combined with negative attitudes and behavior of those sent in by the government to implement programs or maintain security who are usually viewed as Christians then it is not difficult to see why many nomadic pastoralists acquire a negative attitude towards all outside interventions and Christianity in particular.

It also has to be acknowledged that many Western sponsored relief and development agencies have done little better than the government programs. Too often they have been planned by "experts" who may have had professional qualifications in rural development but little understanding of the particular problems of nomadic peoples. Both secular and religious interventions have frequently been in response to natural disasters or hurried efforts to deal with the effects of civil warfare of inter tribal conflicts. There are always difficulties in moving from emergency relief efforts to long term development programs but these seem

to be exacerbated in situations where the people are pastoral nomads—their needs being so far removed from those of sedentary peoples. This failure to appreciate the difference between these two fundamentally diverse socio-economic systems is probably the greatest problem and challenge in understanding how to help nomadic pastoralists both physically and spiritually in a relevant way.

Fourth, Christian missions in general have sadly been little more perceptive of the distinctive needs of nomadic pastoralists and their worldview than secular agencies. In particular the large scale, well financed Western development agencies have frequently shown the most obvious short comings in their project planning, even though the motivation may have been well-intentioned. Added to this, there also are other pseudo-Christian agencies whose main aim in rushing in to work among nomadic pastoralists appears to be to use them to generate funds for more growth in their organizations. Nomads usually make good subject matter for fund raising media appeals! This is demonstrated by the brevity of

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their commitment to the development of the unfortunate victims of famine or civil war before the organization rushes off to “find another famine.”

It is usually said that nomadic peoples are resistant to Christianity mainly because there has been so little to show for whatever effort has been made by the various ministries working in the name of Jesus Christ. Could it be that the expressions of Christianity the nomads have seen have been so inappropriate that it is our communication that has been far more resistant to the worldview and values of nomadic pastoralist people? For example, most Christian missions which have tried to work among them have been based on the strategy of constructing a literal building of a Mission Center or Mission Station, usually as close as possible to the people group they are trying to reach.

Originally the mission center was planned to be little more than a place for the missionary to live. However simple or elaborate his house is, by making a permanent dwelling the mission and missionary are starting to communicate that the missionaries are “settled” people. As the Mission Station grows, as they inevitably seem to do over time, not only is the missionary absorbed in the building program but the impression grows stronger that the missionary’s religion cannot be for nomads. Whatever good intention may lie behind each clinic, school, workshop, dry season gardening project, there is an inevitable negative communication from the view point of nomadic pastoralists. This is best illustrated by the comment made by one old Somali camel herder: “When you can put your Christian Church on the back of my camel then I will believe that Christianity is meant for us Somalis. As it is I am a Muslim because Islam allows me to pray anywhere, not just in a church on Sundays.”

Perhaps the worst examples of inappropriate Christian communication to nomadic pastoralists are found where a “proper Church” is built for them, usually complete with a pulpit at the front facing rows of pews. There are even some striking examples with bell towers, baptistries and electric organs. It is hardly necessary to point out the effect this will have on the chances of the church spreading spontaneously and effectively among nomadic people.

Guidelines for Ministry to Nomadic Peoples

1. We must recognize that nomads are almost entirely unreached, having virtually no Christian church established among them, therefore they are a priority responsibility for Christian missions, and must remain so until they are all reached.
2. Because there are so few Christians and virtually no churches among them, nomadic pastoralists are among those ethnic groups which are still within Satan’s unchallenged bondage. The effect of this is seen whenever any serious attempt is made to advance the Kingdom of God among them by an appropriate communication of the Christian gospel. This diabolical reaction needs to be anticipated and dealt with by preemptive prayer whenever any Christian witness is being planned to and among nomads.

We must fully own up to the fact that the Christian Gospel is totally relevant to any society and culture, and especially to nomadic pastoralists, without them having to

change their traditional socio-economic way of life. There will be cultural beliefs and practices which are incompatible with Christianity but the Holy Spirit can be trusted to take care of those when the people receive Him and grow in faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

4. It is not necessary to engage in physical relief and development work among nomadic pastoralists in order to have a valid Christian witness. If this is found to be necessary then it should be carefully planned, recognizing the differences between settled and nomadic rural people.
5. It is neither necessary nor helpful to give the impression that Christianity is more suitable for sedentary peoples since God knows perfectly well how to communicate with nomadic pastoralists, witness Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their clans and tribes. Any activity which tends to give this false impression should therefore be carefully avoided or balanced out by a holistic development agenda.
6. Development projects which do not integrate the Christian Gospel will not just be defective but deficient because they will lack the vital transforming effect of the Holy Spirit working from within the heart. It has also been shown in practice that where development projects have been attempted by well-meaning Christians, but without an adequate presentation of the Gospel that is truly relevant or meaningful, nomadic pastoralists are likely to reject both Christianity and the physical intervention. (See my thesis *Appropriate Development for Nomadic Pastoralists*, 1996.)
7. Christianity is not just appropriate and applicable to nomadic pastoralists but can be most attractive to them as many of their cultural values are highly compatible with the Bible and the cultures of the Bible. When the Gospel and Church are properly contextualized among them they could have much to teach urbanized and more sophisticated churches where social strengths are frequently neglected or non-existent.

The mission statement that follows was made by a consultation held last year on nomadic peoples. It was endorsed and made public to the worldwide Church to help us think nomadic as well as to challenge us to reach them.

We believe that the unique worldview, values and lifestyle of nomadic peoples require us to develop an incarnational ministry characterized by: 1) The love of Christ expressed in word and deed, living out the gospel close to the people with a long-term commitment, regardless of severe conditions. 2) An empathy with the nomadic worldview, for example taking a "travel light" strategy in mission. 3) A strategic and Biblical response to the nomads' felt needs with flexible "opportunism" and learning from the nomads themselves. 4) Involvement wherever possible with the national church, (recognizing that they will also need to understand the cultural differences if they are from sedentary societies.) 5) Involvement of those external ministries such as radio and transportation in a sensitive and appropriate way. 6) A commitment to the development of an indigenous church that reflects the realities of the nomadic lifestyle. Our ministry must demonstrate that the Christian message is as much at home in a nomad camp as in a Western church building"

The purpose of this mission statement and its endorsement by all of those present at the consultation was and is intended to challenge churches and missions to respond to the daunting task of planting true culturally relevant churches among all the unreached nomadic peoples of the world. So may it be!

Dr Malcolm Hunter and his wife Jean recently left Ethiopia where they began their missionary work in 1963. Malcolm has accomplished the task that God called him to do 40 years ago in taking the Gospel to 18 different ethnic groups in southwest Ethiopia. The Church is now well established in 10 of those ethnic groups who are sending more than 50 evangelists into the other areas as yet without indigenous churches. They have served with SIM in East and West Africa as consultant for ministry to Nomadic Peoples, in Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Niger, Benin and Burkina Faso. In the last two years Malcolm has made survey visits to Nepal, Tibet, Northern Pakistan, Western China. Plans are in the making to visit Mongolia. The Hunters will continue to seek the Lord and His work on how best to serve His purposes for the unreached Nomadic Peoples of the World.

The Intercultural Ministries Centre

Life Long Learning Centre at Tyndale College & Seminary

• Training • Networking • Resourcing

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For more information contact:

Bob Morris, TIM Centre
25 Ballyconnor Court, Toronto, ON M2M 4B3
(t) 416 226 6620 ext. 2708 (f) 416 226 9464
email: b.morris@tyndale-canada.edu
www.tyndale-canada.edu