

Peoples on the Move Towards Christ

Christ calls us to reach all the peoples of the world, nomadic peoples included. Reaching all the peoples on the move must receive special advocacy for missions alongside other strategies to evangelize the unreached world. Christ calls us to demonstrate his love to nomadic peoples in ways that make the Gospel and His Church relevant and accessible to their worldview and way of life.

by David J. Phillips

Nomadic peoples are societies that maintain their distinct identity by occupations that require systematic travel. The term "nomad" was originally used only for those, like the Bedouin, who lead animals progressively to different pastures. Today "nomad" is used more widely to include all societies whose culture and way of life is formed around the need to systematically travel to find their main means of subsistence.

There are three main types of nomadic people differentiated by their principle means of subsistence. These are the hunter-gatherers, the pastoralists and the peripatetics. The Aborigines of Australia and the Bushmen and Pygmies in Africa are examples of hunter-gatherers. A special form of hunter-gatherer are the boat nomads such as the Bajau of South East Asia and the Boso fishermen on the Niger River. There are also shifting cultivators, examples of whom are the Iban of Kalimantan, Indonesia or the people of the Bijagos Islands, Guinea Bissau, who move to different islands to grow their rice crops. By far, the two largest categories of nomads are the pastoralists and the peripatetics.

The Nomadic Pastoralists

The pastoralists support themselves with herds of sheep, goats, cattle, yaks, camels, horses, llamas, or reindeer, and move to find pasture in semi-arid grassland, deserts or mountains, or on the taiga and tundra of the Arctic. They are the only humans to utilize one third of the earth's surface that is arid and semi-arid. They are successful even where modern technology and development projects have often failed. The Bedouin of the Middle East and North Africa, the Sami of Scandinavia and the Fulani of West Africa are examples of the typical pastoralists.

Because they are dependant primarily on natural ecosystems and only partially require human resources, they develop close knit societies. Although the nomadic pastoralists may also hunt and grow limited crops, their chief asset is their domesticated animals, which give them considerable self-sufficiency from the products of their herd or flock, such as wool, hair, meat, hides, and especially milk, cheese and other dairy products. This economic independence, however, is not complete and almost all of them are interdependent with the sedentary peoples from the larger surrounding societies. They need contact with markets to exchange these products and any surplus livestock for those things they cannot produce themselves.

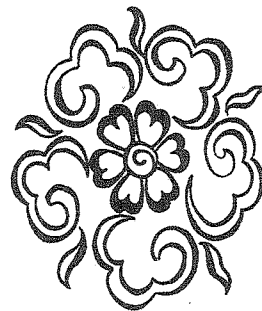
The Peripatetics

The peripatetics, sometimes called commercial nomads, work as traders, entertainers, craftsmen, sellers of all sorts of articles, fortune-tellers, acrobats and even as casual workers, traveling between villages and towns for customers. They meet the limited demand for services and goods that the surrounding society does not provide for itself and require access to limited resources or markets by their traveling. Examples are the Gadulyia Lohars or traveling blacksmiths of northern India and the Roma or Gypsies of Europe.

Groups of peripatetics sometimes work attached to pastoralists as both craftsmen and minstrels, such as the Ghorbati in Iran. The Inadan craftsman of Tuareq society and Lawbe woodcarvers of the Fulani now are found working independently of their original pastoralists. Frequently the peripatetics are associated with magic and are often despised and therefore need a specialized approach to reach them.

Use of Marginal Resources

The nomad is much more flexible than sedentary people to respond to chang-



ing circumstances, and is able to combine different methods of subsistence. Pastoralists may use their animals for caravanning, or peripatetics may breed and sell animals as a sideline. For example, the Mursi of south-west Ethiopia, combine with cattle pastoralism a shifting, slash and burn cultivation during the rains and a flood plain crop in the dry season by the women. In the dry season the women plant small plots along the river banks made fertile by the floods while the men bring their cattle nearby to benefit from pasture on the flood plain. When the floods begin the women move into the hills and plant another crop in clearings that have to be changed every three years. Meanwhile the men move into the hills with the cattle. This is a skillful use of different environments according to the seasons.

The end of nomadism is predicted many times by those who do not understand the adaptability of the nomad. Young Bedouin move into town, get jobs and raise a family. All along other members of the family maintain a limited pastoral way of life, to which the one in town relates and often returns later in life. To those like the nomad, willing to live simply and be mobile, adapting to changing fortunes is easier than the farmer or town dweller. A flock of sheep or goats can be re-established in two years, and be moved to wherever there is water and pasture.

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A farmer's field is imprisoned in drought and infertility and his future is found only by abandoning it.

Even though many nomads have abandoned this lifestyle, it still permeates and shapes their thinking, values and social relationships. All nomads show a great resourcefulness in adopting secondary methods of subsistence being able to use limited resources and opportunities to the full.

Ready to Move, yet Always at Home

The nomads' view of themselves, their way of life and much of their culture is shaped by their nomadism. Their movement is determined by the seasonal changes of pasture, raw materials or needs of rural communities. Their migration allows for the natural environment to replenish itself.

Nomads are not homeless, but people whose whole way of life makes them "at home" on the move. Both the pastoralists and peripatetics travel systematically. Nomads are not aimless wanderers, refugees nor displaced people, nor are the individuals of settled societies whose work requires them to travel often. For instance, the peripatetics in Pakistan use the term parytan to describe their life as deliberate thought-out patterns of movement to use their specialized skills.

The nomadic pastoralists and peripatetics are operators of an industry, which although a part of the informal economy using marginal resources, must be taken seriously. By traveling, they exploit the differences in the seasons, to find pasture, grow crops, or to gather natural produce. They visit festivals and markets, or find seasonal work in the town and farms.

With any given nomadic people different methods can be used, such as the whole family moving regularly, or only part of the family moving while the rest stay for other work or to be close to schools, etc. Others may stay in one place for part of the year and move for a season. Many of them live in villages, but spend part of the year on the move plying a trade, or move with their herds and flocks. In one small village of FulBe all these methods are used, and the village itself could be moved in a few days after being in one place for years. Empty villages used for a season are found. Because of varieties of working terms like semi-nomadic need to be defined each time.

Independent Peoples

The nomad prefers to have few ties to place and property that sedentary people like to have. They are committed more to relationships and to their trade or animals, that can be moved with them. Ideals of self-sufficiency and independence are a more basic characteristic of the nomad, than merely traveling, so that they are, a people distinct from the rest of society. This distinctiveness is possible because they develop resources or commercial opportunities the dominant surrounding society does not use.

The nomad has an ideal of independence, self-sufficiency and subsistence, but this is often modified by trade for what they cannot produce or for commercial production. The Tibetan Drok-pa nomads need to buy their barley while the FulBe buy millet for their staple food. Many of the smaller peoples are completely nomadic. But



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Turkish designs on pages 5 and 7 are cloud motifs on vessels of a later period (1600-1660).

among the larger ones the nomads form a section of a larger society of their own people but still have their own subculture. This is true, for example, of the Fulani, Bedouin, Qashqai, Kazaks, Tibetans and Mongols.

Nomads have the ideal of self-sufficient subsistence even though this is more common in Africa, while elsewhere their produce is used for the commercial markets. In tune with nature and the Supernatural, all nomads value their independence from the surrounding society. Nomads have a deep attachment to their families and their way of life. They have learned to be content with very little. They have a respect for nature and live by dependence on the supernatural, as they conceive of it. Most nomads are Folk Muslims, or Folk Buddhists or Folk Hindus. All have traditional religious practices to appease spirits to gain their co-operation for the necessities of life.

While some nomads are well known, like the Tuareqs, Bedouin, Maasai, Gypsies and Mongols, most are unknown to Christians. Many, like the Tahtaci in Turkey or the Sab in Ethiopia, pass unnoticed in their own countries. Their mobility either means they are in remote areas, or they spend only a short time in any given village or town. Even where there is a Christian witness they often remain unknown and unreached. Nomads are often thought to be primitive or backward, and as not "fitting in" to the modern world. For this reason they are disregarded by governments, and sometimes even in missionary thinking. Prejudice and persecution have dogged them in most areas, and still continues. However, they have developed the image of God in subduing the earth. Over the centuries they have learned to live successfully in terms of a way of life that is very economical and efficient in very difficult environments and situations.

Unreached but not Out of Reach

The majority of the world's nomadic peoples are not evangelized. The few Christians that are among them have been forced out, or belong to former subjected peoples. Today, many exciting projects are directed towards these peoples, such as translation projects, radio programs, cassettes of oral storytelling, relief and development of all kinds. However, these are only beginning. The vast majority of nomads do not have complete Scriptures or disciple-making contact with Christians.

Whole nations are being evangelized but the nomads are left or bypassed. The reasons for this are: Sustained contact requires more effort and even sacrificial living in tents in the most remote places of the world. Westerners have little understanding of their way of life. Our idea of a conventional church cannot develop among people that

move around in small groups. Furthermore, governments are suspicious of foreigners showing interest in minorities or who travel to remote places.

So often nomads consider the gospel to be for farmers or for town-dwellers. Our methods, media and message must be empathetic and fully relevant to the nomadic way of life. This requires creative and consecrated effort so that they may take their place and give their unique contribution to Christ's Body.

God's Way for Travelers

God calls us all to be travelers and pilgrims, fully dependant on him and content with what is sufficient to serve him. God is the pastoralist or shepherd of his traveling people. This key theme runs through the Bible. Jesus challenged people to follow Him both literally and spiritually so that the gospel and the early church in Acts is called the Way. It is quite certain that Jesus would be more at home in a nomad camp than in most Western churches. The nomads have a right to meet him through us. Jesus, who himself was a Traveler, calls Christians to preach the gospel to every people on earth, and this includes the nomadic peoples, many of whom have not yet been reached, who are the least reached of the unreached, who have no access to the gospel of Christ. What is our response?

Striking Camp for Action to the Call of Christ

1. Christ calls us to reach all the peoples of the world and nomadic peoples must receive special advocacy for missions alongside urban evangelism, destitute children and other strategies to evangelize the unreached of the world.
2. Christ calls us to demonstrate his love to nomadic peoples by our lives in their camps, practical help, and present the message of the Bible, in ways relevant to their worldview and way of life
3. Christ calls us to a partnership with nomads to both learn from them values of simplicity, corporate responsibility, reliance and fortitude and to teach them their Creator's values and his reconciliation in Christ.
4. Christ calls us to disciple nomadic peoples and rediscover biblical principles that result in a church of Christ that is compatible with their culture and equipping them to evangelize others.
5. Christ calls us to support nomadic peoples to maintain a viable nomadism where possible, and to encourage the surrounding society, including governments, to understand nomadic peoples, and to counter the prejudice and injustice on both sides.

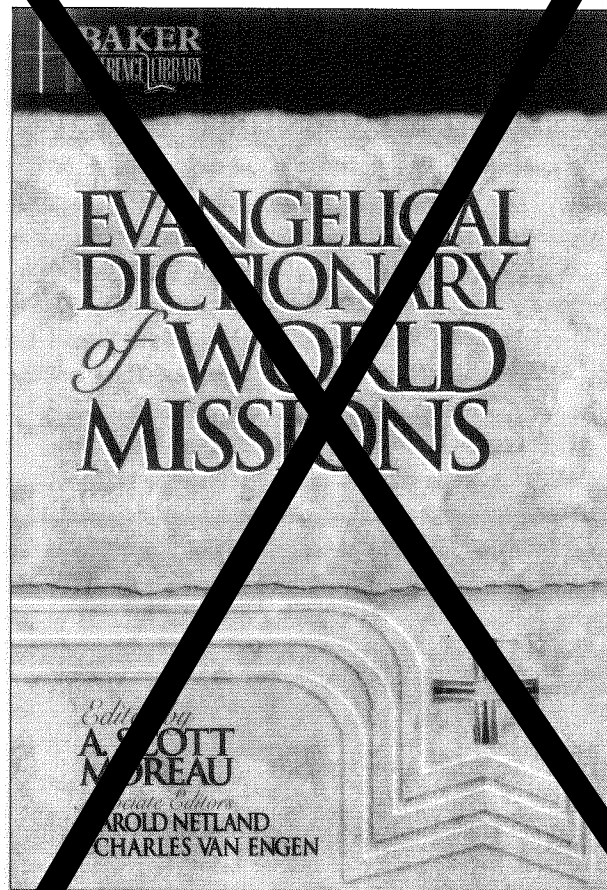
Recommended Reading

On Pastoralists: Thomas J. Barfield: *The Nomadic Alternative*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993.

On the Peripatetics: *The Other Nomads*, editor A. Rao, Cologne: Bohlau, 1987.

Dr. David J. Phillips is a member of the Nomadic Peoples Network and has worked in the International Research Office of WEC International for 11 years. Formerly he was a missionary in Brazil with UFM and gained a B.A. in Religious Studies from the University of Surrey and a Ph.D. in Theological Ethics from the University of Wales.

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