

The Study of Nomads

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NOMADS HAVE BEEN the subject of attention from western writers for a very long time indeed, and it is possible to compile a long bibliography of items in several languages about them. But the simple if somewhat gloomy truth is that we really know extraordinarily little about human behavior in nomadic societies. Certainly much of what passes for knowledge about nomads (inside or outside the anthropological profession) is quite misleading. Apart from commenting on the place of this particular set of essays in the general anthropology of nomads, I would therefore like to use this introduction to explain (as far as I can) why nomadic studies are so backward, and to suggest the direction in which a more coherent and satisfactory study of nomads might be developed.

Nomadic studies seem always to have had a curiously inchoate, non-cumulative character. To go back only a century, the work of Robertson-Smith in the 1880s should have provided the same kind of impetus for the anthropological study of nomadic groups as did the armchair reflections of his contemporaries for the study of Australian aborigines. His style of thinking was as applicable to living communities as any anthropological thinking then available. For example, the major characteristics of what we now call segmentary lineage systems are clearly brought out in the first few pages of *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885): that is, the formation of groups on a reduplicative principle, and the essential instability of such groups. In the same place, he touches upon contracts, which we still recognise as a significant feature of the nomadic political situation. In *Religion of the Semites* (1889) he had postulated a distinctive "pastoral religion" in which groups "transferred to their herds the notions of sanctity and kinship which formerly belonged to species of wild animals," with the consequence that "the way was opened for the formation of religious and political communities larger than the old totem kind" (1894 ed., 355). Since he also perceived the consequences of religious beliefs for group solidarity, and suggested that the study of ritual had primacy over the study of beliefs in understanding religion, one would say that here as much as in Australia was offered the incentive to study religious origins by observing native practice.

Nor, when compared with the Australian case, did the nomadic world particularly lack first-hand observers whose information might similarly have tested and stimulated armchair scholarship. A good hundred years before

Robertson-Smith's work, Volney had presented western Europe with a remarkably lucid discussion of Near Eastern pastoral peoples, their relation to each other and to sedentary groups, and the mixed ecological and political facts (as we would now phrase it) accounting for their manner of existence. (Volney, 1787. See especially pp. 195–214 of Gaulmier's 1959 edition of this work.) Steadily closer to Robertson-Smith's time, Burckhardt's *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys* had appeared in 1831; Duveyrier's *Les Touaregs du Nord* came in 1864; Guarmani's account of the Northern Nejd was available in 1866, closely followed in 1867 by Palgrave's account of his travels in *Central and Eastern Arabia* (1867) de Crozals had provided explicitly ethnological work on a pastoral people with *Les Peulhs* (1883) and in between Robertson-Smith's two major works appeared Doughty's massive *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888). Unfortunately, the complex interaction of scholarly speculation and direct observation which elsewhere did so much for the early growth of anthropology simply never developed as far as pastoral nomads were concerned. Orientalist, geographical and anthropological impulses remained separate, and such knowledge as there was became scattered across three largely self-insulating fields of enquiry.

Thus despite its variegated interest in nomads, the nineteenth century had bequeathed only sloppy foundations for building a coherent anthropology of nomadic societies; and the early twentieth century showed little signs of doing so. Compare, for instance, Jaussen's *Coutumes des Arabes au Pays de Moab* (1908) with its (now highly regarded) contemporary, Junod's *Life of a South African Tribe* (1913). Both are missionary works, and to my mind one is as good a "tribal ethnography" as the other. But what has made Junod a classic is that much professional anthropological work has flowed from it; whereas the first professional anthropological work on Arab nomads after Jaussen (Seligman, 1918) was for many years also the only one. Again, the early comparative study of nomads by Bernard and Lacroix (1906) was a remarkable effort for its time. But it was geographical rather than sociological in spirit, and one might well consider it an early obstacle rather than an early contribution to an anthropology of nomads in that it has bent subsequent French studies of northern Africa into a typologising-generalising mode. To take a final example, neither Lönneberg's early insights into human-herd relationships among Lapp reindeer nomads (1909) nor Hatt's subsequent more general work in English (1919) seem to have been taken up by those concerned with pastoral nomadism in other areas of the world.

Decade by decade into the twentieth century, the lag in nomadic studies became more pronounced. By the end of the 1920s, Malinowski had charted a new direction for anthropology; but all nomadic studies had to show was continued separate efforts by men whose main skills and principal duties were other than anthropological. Thus, Kennett (1925) is, for its time, a commendable study of customary law, but is nonetheless the incidental observations of an administrator – and still almost alone in its field. Again, Musil (1928) is essentially the result of allowing explicatory footnotes on poetry to run into each other; and a clear reminder that linguistic expertise may be necessary but