

Commission on Nomadic Peoples

“Recent Research on Nomadic Peoples: Contributions from the German Democratic Republic”

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Recent Research on Nomadic Peoples: Contributions

From The German Democratic Republic¹

by Lothar Stein

in cooperation with Wolfgang König² and Wolf-Dieter Seiwert

The growing interest in research among nomadic peoples during the last years at an international level is derived mainly from practical demands and as a consequence of the integration of nomadic peoples into the contemporary economic, political and social development of many Asian and African countries, especially those in arid zones. During the past, mainly historians, ethnologists, geographers and philologists were engaged in research into different aspects of the life of nomads; but of recent years they have been joined increasingly by economists, sociologists, psychologists, medical specialists and representatives of various other natural and technical sciences. These experts are searching by means of complex investigations for ways of integrating the nomads into the modern society of their respective countries. These activities frequently take place under the guidance and with the financial support of international organisations such as UNESCO, WHO, FAO, ILO and others. Specialised institutes for research into nomadism have been founded in a number of countries.

As a result of this development the literature on nomadism and associated problems has increased considerably. Not only are there many monographs based on fieldwork but there are also many papers dealing with theoretical aspects of nomadism. It is my aim to present here a summary of the research work on nomadic peoples carried out by scholars of the German Democratic Republic.

I propose first to deal shortly with the main literature that has been published in the German Democratic Republic and secondly, to give an outline of the subjects dealt with at the three conferences held in my country in recent years. I hope in dealing with the matter in this way, that I am able to indicate the approach of the GDR-specialists and to characterise their theoretical conceptions in respect to nomadism.

There are some twenty scientists in the German Democratic Republic who are professionally engaged more or less full-time in investigations on nomadic peoples in the fields of history, ethnology and museology, archaeology, philology, and veterinary medicine. (See the bibliography at the end of this paper). These colleagues are working in universities, museums, and academic institutions in Berlin, Leipzig, Halle, Dresden and Rostock. These studies resulted in a number of monographs based mainly on field studies. In chronological order these monographs are as follows:

First: "The Achal-Teke. On the economy and society of a Turkoman group in the XIXth century" by Wolfgang König. (Die Achal-Teke. Zur Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft einer Turkmenen-Gruppe im XIX. Jahrhundert. Berlin 1962). This study is based on field research carried out in 1955/59 together with intensive archive studies in Tashkent and Moscow where the author at the time was a post-graduate student of the Institute of Ethnography at the Lomonossov University.

Secondly: "The Sammar-Gerba. Bedouins in transition from nomadism to sedentary life" by Lothar Stein. (Die Sammar-Gerba. Beduinen in Ubergang vom Nomadismus zur SeBhaftighkeit. Berlin 1967). The author collected field data and other material during his studies in the Republic of Iraq in 1960-62. The monograph deals mainly with the change in the economic and social conditions of the four Sammar tribes in Iraq since the First World War and contains an analysis of the alterations in the social structure.

Thirdly: "Paralipomena Mongoliae. Scientific notes on land, people and way of life in the Peoples' Republic of Mongolia" by Johannes Schubert. (Paralipomena Mongolica. Wissenschaftliche Notizen über Land, Leute und Lebensweise in der Mongolischen Volksrepublik. Berlin 1971).

The late Professor Schubert carried out several expeditions which covered virtually the whole country; his notes are of almost encyclopaedic character as they refer not only to history, geography and archaeology, but also to ethnography, philology, economy and sociology.

Fourthly: "Holding, breeding and care of livestock among the nomads of eastern and north-eastern Africa. A contribution to the traditional economy of pastoral nomads in semi-arid areas" by Hans-Georg Schinkel. (Haltung, Zucht and Pflege des Viehs bei den Nomaden Ost- und Nordostafrikas. Ein Beitrag zur traditionellen Ökonomie der Wanderhirten in semiariden Gebieten. Berlin 1970).

This study provides a large amount of ethnographical information about pastoralism obtained from the study of the literature; the special concern of the author is with the animal production process and with the organisation of labour.

There are three other monographs dealing with nomads that are either in press or in an advanced stage of preparation: A field work report by Abdi Gaileh Mirreh on the "Nomadic life in Northern Somalia"³, and another by Wolf-Dieter Seiwert on "Pastoral Nomads of the Western Sahara". Seiwert's results can be summarised as follows: The traditional Western Sahara society was a class society with a socio-economic base in private property of herds. When one of the principal means of production - as in this case the herds - is in private ownership, the appropriation of the product is consequently also private. The conditions of production are characterised not by the right of using land and water in common but by the private property in herds. Putting this in another way, the owner of a large herd can appropriate all the surplus product of his herdsmen, even though these herdsmen as free members of the tribe have the same rights of possession in respect to the pastures.

The socio-economic classes in the traditional society of the Western Sahara can be distinguished only by their position relative to the means of production: that is to the herds. The classes do not exist as politically conscious groups. In other words, the Saharians were not aware of belonging to this or that class in the socio-economic sense. Although political consciousness, the awareness of the same socio-economic interests is a principal precondition for every class-struggle and for the formulation of the state, the big herd-owners nevertheless exercised the economic, political and spiritual leadership of the nomadic society.

In the Western Sahara the tribe included the principal units of the economic structure (the camps, nomadic groups) and the principal units

of the socio-juridicial structure (the fractions or subdivisions of the tribe).

The third forthcoming monograph is by Walter Rusch and Lothar Stein on "Siwa and the Aulad Ali", which deals with the change of inter-relationship between the Berber population of the Siwa Oasis in the Libyan Desert and the nomadic groups of the Aulad Ali Bedouins. This study is based on field work carried out during 1976 (cf. Rusch/Stein 1977a and b).

Besides the monographs already mentioned there are a number of specialised articles based mainly on field studies but also on theoretical and historical analyses.

Moreover - in the field of museology - we have permanent exhibitions in the Leipzig Museum for Ethnography on the material culture of the Mongolians, Turkomans and Bedouins; we also have temporary exhibitions on the nomads of Somalia and the pastoralists of Hungary.

I now want to say something on the conferences we have held. In close cooperation with our colleagues from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Mongolia we have organised three different conferences on various aspects of nomadism. We also invited scholars from several developing countries, western Europe and the United States of America to participate.

The first conference was organised by the Academy of Sciences of the German Democratic Republic under the title: "The relationship of sedentary peoples and pastoral nomads from the historical viewpoint". Some 150 delegates from eight European and Asian countries discussed the twenty-two papers presented during the three days of the conference in November 1966.

The first problem to which closer attention was given by this conference was that of the social division of labour. Although we possess only very incomplete information about the earliest times, later material at least permits the assumption that the nomad pastoralists never lived isolated from the people of other economic forms and that there were different types of contact and mutual relations. These ranged from acting as herdsmen for settled agriculturalists - that is for tillers of the soil; and acting as middlemen in trade relations up until they were invaded and subjugated by civilised peoples. The nomad's economy was far too specialised and thus too one-sided for these contacts not to have been sought (by their neighbours). But this alone does not lead to a social division of labour. Nevertheless, there are cases in which tillers of the soil and livestock breeders became so mutually interdependent through regular exchange of their main products, that it is possible to speak of a kind of social division of labour. But in many cases such close interdependence does not exist. Often it cannot arise because many nomad pastoralists carry out seasonal agriculture, and on the other hand, many settled people also rear herds (cf. Sellnow, 1968, p. 21/22).

The next question discussed at the conference was the problem of social differentiation: The nomads occupy a special position in the development of society insofar as social differentiation began to develop very early - earlier than this was possible with tillers of the soil. There are two reasons for this: first, livestock very early became private property and secondly, extensive livestock breeding permitted a rapid accumulation of wealth - much more rapid than in the case of extensive tillage (op. cit.: p. 24).

The third important question discussed was the role of pastoral nomads in the formation of the state. Probably no other theoretical question has been answered in so many diverse, indeed contradictory, ways. While some authorities regard the nomads only as disruptors and destroyers of civilisation, other praise them as the only element which has shown itself capable of forming states, because of their talent for organisation and superior military tactics and power. There is a grain of truth in both views.

The great Chinese Wall, for instance, is a reminder of the constant threat posed by the inner Asiatic nomadic peoples. Such tremendous efforts in the making of the wall were justified only if they were to preserve even greater values. On the other hand however, it was the Mongols who, after their conquest of China, were to set up such an imposing system of communications and to achieve such wonders in organisation, both in a symbiosis of their own and the Chinese economy and in creating an efficient military and state apparatus. But should not the complete return of the Mongols to their former nomadic way of life after their retreat to the steppes, make us cautious not to over-estimate the statesmanlike qualities of the nomads? (op. cit. p. 26/27).

Besides the archaeological, philological and folkloristic contributions to this 1966 congress I myself presented a paper dealing with contemporary problems of change in nomadic life entitled: "The problem of landed property in the process of settlement of the Sammar-Gerba Bedouins in Iraq." The material for this paper was collected during fieldwork among the Sammar tribes in Mesopotamia in 1962.

After the attempts of the Ottoman Turks to settle forcibly the Sammar tribes in the middle of the nineteenth century had failed, those in power in the newly established governments of Syria and Iraq after smashing the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, followed a new policy in the 1920s. They offered the tribal leaders the possibility of registering former tribal land as private landed property, if they supported the government in carrying through its new policy. The result of this measure was the division of the fertile lands on the northern boundary of the Gezira among members of the upper social stratum of the Sammar Gerba.

The practical utilisation of the land for extensive grain cultivation only began in the 1930s and 1940s after the dromedary had lost its economic significance as a transport animal, and the strained economic situation during the Second World War offered the landlords good opportunities for making profits.

The data collected in Iraqi archives in 1962 show that 920,445 donum (that is 625,000 acres approximately) of the former tribal grazing land were privately owned by only 52 members of the Sammar tribal groups' ruling families, while the large majority of the members of the tribal groups had no land and were therefore forced either to remain nomadic under severer conditions than formerly or to work for a landowner as agricultural labourers. The new situation has resulted in decisive changes in the economic, social, cultural and legal relations.

The solution of the obvious conflict between the landless Bedouins and the big landlords - who not infrequently are absentee landlords - which prevents most of the Bedouins from changing to a settled way of life, can only be achieved by a just distribution of the arable land available: that is, by agrarian reform carried through to its logical conclusion, which has only rarely been done.

A new field campaign carried out by ethnologists, economists and sociologists to study the present situation of the Sammar tribes in Mesopotamia is urgently needed.

The Second Conference was a colloquium held in Leipzig in January 1973 on "Nomadism as an economic-cultural Type", organised by the editors of the "Ethnographic-Archaeological Journal" (Ethnographisch-Archäologische Zeitschrift). This journal is published in Berlin, German Democratic Republic and the title is abbreviated as EAZ.

This meeting was devoted mainly to theoretical problems concerning the historical periodisation of nomadism. It was attended by some 30 participants who represented Ancient History, Archaeology, Ethnography and various other branches of Asian and African Studies.

The main contribution to this colloquium was given by Wolfgang König, the Director of the Ethnographical Museum in Leipzig. His paper was mainly based on ethnographical and historical material from Middle and Central Asia (cf. Grünert/König, 1974).

According to the conception of the so-called economic-cultural type defined in the 1930s by Soviet ethnographers, nomadism represents a specialised form of development of the productive forces. Nomadism arose historically under specific geographical conditions in the steppes, desert areas and mountain regions of Asia and Africa. Nomadic pastoralism is characterised by certain features of economy and material culture which are not found elsewhere.

The pastoral nomad's economy represents a new form of specialisation of production which contrasts with what might be called "occupational forms" such as those of gatherers and hunters, fishermen and - to a certain extent - extensive tillers of the soil. The cultural and historical importance of nomadism lies in the fact that it enabled new regions in deserts, steppes and mountain areas to be opened up for occupation. It also promoted facilities for far-reaching communication and thereby the exchange of goods (cf. Grünert/König, 1974 p. 455). One of the most characteristic features of nomadism is the lability of its socio-economic conditions.

Once the socialist transformation among the nomads in the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Republic of Mongolia was completed and their integration as a specialised branch of production into the economic system of the state was attained, the research into nomadism by scientists of the countries mentioned was orientated more to historical problems. This was also reflected in the discussion on Dr. König's paper. (A critical comment on the same subject was published by W. Hartwig in the EAZ, No. 16, 1975 under the title: "The 'Specific' of the social organisation of nomadic pastoralists"). A major conclusion of the 1973 colloquium dealing with nomadism as an economic-cultural type is that the development of capitalist conditions leads to the dissolution of the nomadic pastoralists' economy.

The third and perhaps the most important of the conferences on nomadic peoples held in the German Democratic Republic was an International Symposium dealing with "Nomads in history and at the present time". It was organised jointly by the Institute of Ethnography of the Lomonossov University in Moscow and the Museum for Ethnography in Leipzig, and took place in Leipzig in December 1975.

Approximately a hundred scientists from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, the United States of America, Kuwait and the

Democratic Republics of Somalia and Sudan participated. Most of the delegates were ethnologists, but archaeologists, historians, sociologists and veterinarians were represented at this Symposium.

During the three days of the conference, twenty-two contributions were read covering a wide range of subjects dealing with the history, economy and social aspects - including the role of women - of nomadic life in Asian and African countries. (The papers read at this Symposium are to be published in volume thirty three of "Publications of the Museum for Ethnography, Leipzig." At present this volume is in press).

The contemporary situation of nomadic peoples in Asia and Africa, their changes to new ways of life, problems of integration into a market economy, the search for occupations other than animal husbandry and the responsibility of governments in the process of sedentarisation, were dealt with in ten contributions which aroused very lively and valuable discussion:

Erika Taube reported on the "Beginnings of sedentarisation among the Tuwinians in Western Mongolia". Dr. Taube was relying on her own field material collected during several expeditions to this part of the Peoples' Republic of Mongolia. Since 1966 the Government had taken several measures to promote gradual change in the way of life of this Turkic-speaking nomadic population. A number of permanent settlements had been established, each with a school and medical clinic. Several dairy farms had also been established to produce for the national market. Special provision was made for the vocational training of youth in different technical branches. In a relatively short period of time fundamental changes took place in the economic and social life of the Tuwinians. On the other hand, the author reported that the traditional patriarchal manners and customs in the daily life of the Tuwinians were maintained.

Two papers dealt with nomads in the Sahel region of Africa: Rolf Herzog dealt with the "Effects of the last drought period of 1970/74" when an estimated 30 to 42 million head of cattle perished from thirst or starvation. Contrary to the views of some livestock experts, favoring a full restoration of a nomadic herding economy following this disaster, Herzog proposed a reasonable limitation of herds, commensurate with the grazing capacity of the areas considered.

Lothar Hüssel sees the solution of the socio-economic problems of the Sahel nomads in certain measures, such as the construction of deep wells, establishment of an organised and state-controlled system of buying up of animals for slaughter, the utilisation of satellites for observing the herds of the nomads, and various other measures.

Stein's contribution to the 1975 Symposium dealt with "New professions for Bedouins" based on material from eastern Arabic countries and northern Africa. The number of Bedouins who lead a nomadic life has been gradually diminishing for many years. They are changing more and more to occupations other than animal husbandry and are finding new ways of subsistence in the fast developing oil industry where they preferably work as truck drivers, watchmen, unskilled workers, etc. Moreover, they engage in the retail, entrepôt trade and - in border areas - in smuggling goods. In tourist centres they act as guides and service employees. But seen proportionally, the majority find employment in agriculture or horticulture and in the armed forces of certain Arab countries, for instance in the "Bedouin Legion" of the Hashemite Kingdom

of Jordan and in the "White Legion" of the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia; it is well known that these armies strongly support their respective regimes. For widening professional opportunities for former nomads, the improvement and extension of the schooling system and vocational training are of great importance; a special role in this respect is played by adult education. The traditionally restricted social position of Bedouin women is reflected in their limited opportunities of finding an occupation other than housewifery/housekeeping.

As indicated by these reports of research, work on a broad scale into the different problems of nomads has been carried out by scientists of the German Democratic Republic. Regionally this research programme has covered nomadic peoples of Middle and Central Asia, the Middle East and Northern and Eastern Africa. Thematically problems of the historic development of nomadism have been dealt with as well as aspects of socio-economic relations and the change in the way of life of contemporary nomads.

Finally I would like to draw your attention to some questions on which further research activities need to be concentrated:

First, we require more detailed information about the social differentiation within the society of nomadic peoples.

Secondly, more data about the social relations of dependence and exploitation should be collected.

Thirdly, the shortcomings of many projects carried out in the past to settle nomads should be carefully analysed, and

Fourthly, complex investigations should be systematically carried out in order to influence the on-going process of pastoral development for the optimal benefit of the nomads concerned. Partial improvement of the situation of nomads by temporary technical and economic aid of a palliative nature, seems to be of little value.

Abbreviations Used

JBM: Jahrbuch des Museums für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig
VMV: Veröffentlichungen des Museums für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig
EAZ: Ethnographisch-Archäologische Zeitschrift
BTL: Beiträge zur tropischen Landwirtschaft und Veterinärmedizin
AAL: Asien - Afrika - Lateinamerika
AJK: Ärztliche Jugendkunde
VBV: Das Verhältnis von Bodenbauern und Viehzüchtern in hist.Sicht

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Footnotes

- ¹This paper was presented at the Commission on Nomadic Peoples Conference,
NOMADIC PEOPLES IN A CHANGING WORLD, London, 1978.
- ²Deceased, 1979.
- ³A.G. Mirreh, "Die sozialökonomischen Verhältnisse der nomadischen
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