


## Book Review

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*Nomadismes d'Asie centrale et septentrionale* (2013) sous la direction de Charles Stépanoff, Carole Ferret, Gaëlle Lacaze et Julian Thorez. Paris: Armand Colin 2013 ISBN: 978-2-200-27537-2

For those of us who live sedentary lives, tied to one place by buildings or the rootedness of crops, movement is something that needs to be explained. But why should this stationary life seem normal? Movement was an earlier and more basic form of human relationship to space, related to our early dependence on animals for hunting. But with some animals, especially those with a social instinct of their own for grouping in herds, our relationship has shifted from predation to a symbiotic relationship of domestication, in which the herds move with their human partners to follow the seasonal growth of the plants on which they feed. Sedentary farmers and urban dwellers have projections and fantasies about nomads as some kind of opposite to themselves, whether glamorous or primitive, liberated or underdeveloped. But how much do we actually know about real nomads?

*Nomadisms of Central and Northern Asia* offers an unusual and fascinating overview of a region which has seen the rise and fall of both sedentary and nomadic empires. This region is doubly mysterious, firstly as the setting for a belt of nomadic cultures stretching for thousands of miles between other, sedentary populations, but also as a world closed to outsiders during nearly a century of Communist regimes. Its recent opening up to foreign visitors and to the supposedly free market has created extraordinary opportunities for a new generation of scholars to carry out intensive research on the spot and to collaborate with local specialists, even while these circumstances change the very nature of what is there to be studied.

This comprehensive book, brilliantly conceived and executed, presents the richness and variety of the movements, knowledge, sensitivities and skills of societies which range from the scorching deserts of Central Asia to the frozen tundra of the Arctic Ocean shore. Their variety is reflected in the plural 'nomadisms' of the title, but the authors convincingly demonstrate an underlying common structure, logic and (a major strength of this book) aesthetic and sense of being in the world. The volume is systematically structured, starting from the broad canvas of ecosystems, through local spaces of migrations and encampments, passing through the embodied subjectivity of nomads and their intimate relationships with animals, to the sweep of history from ancient empires to modern industrial development, so that we finally arrive at the current variant of an ancient tension between nomadic and sedentary lifestyles. This work shows clearly that nomads do not wander but move in annual cycles, and that nomadism is not an archaic or obsolete way of life, but one which is highly adapted to both ecological and historical circumstance. It is particularly refreshing to see an emphasis on the social and ideological dimensions of nomadism, as the nomads of this region have passed through, and endured, various political and management regimes, from 'traditional' systems, to state socialism, to privatisation.

Human nomadism is an adaptation to the seasonal movement of herd animals, and there is a continuum between the movements of hunting and nomadic herding, which require similar skills.

This imperative to migrate, shared between animals and their humans, creates a special relationship to space. Humans are poised between mastery and humility on the landscape, as they take care to leave as little trace of their presence as possible when moving from one camp site to another. Space itself is in constant metamorphosis, and in indigenous cosmologies it also becomes a special kind of fluid abstraction with a sensitivity and agency of its own, as expressed in concepts of local spirits.

There are chapters on each species, from the horses, cattle, goats, sheep and camels of the south to the purely reindeer herds in the north. These chapters show how the speed and long range of the horse provide a key to Mongol history, and explain the differences between methods of reindeer herding in the forest (*taiga*) and the tundra. Other sections also cover dogs, bears, wolves and fish, to explain what is a totally animal universe. The reader is taken through vertical and horizontal migrations, as animals ascend and descend mountains or migrate from north to south to follow the growth of plants or seek warmth in winter and cool breezes in summer. The text covers their adjustments to snow, predators or gas pipelines, the impact of microclimatic niches, the migration patterns and speeds of different species, and perhaps the most fascinating question of all: who leads whom? Both herders and animals have their own knowledge and make their own judgements. Decisions about exactly where to migrate and when, arise from a subtle interaction between them as they influence each other in a symbiotic ecology of mood.

This work can be browsed like a coffee-table book, and being visually beautiful, it satisfies sedentary society's emphasis on the visual image. But the text takes us far beyond the picturesque and goes deeper into the nomads' own sensory world of smell, taste and sound. Divination emerges as a sight beyond ordinary sight, and auditory signs as especially revealing in the dense forest where nothing can be seen. From our own experience among the Eveny of the far north, we know the taboos on shouting or singing in the forest, the power of a bad word once uttered, or the need for secret language so that animals will not overhear a hunter's intentions, but these feelings remain largely veiled. However, at the other end of the region this book offers a society of Mongols who have elaborated an entire 'écologie sonore' structured around an opposition between sound and noise.

Nomadic cultures are very discreet about bodily contact with other humans. Yet the body is the foundation of their orientation within space. Here the very French emphasis on *habitus* and 'techniques du corps' pays off handsomely: in one area the parts of the tent have the names of body parts; in another, one should tie one's belt to keep one's body enclosed. Throughout the region people sniff each other rather than kissing, and in one place a person going on a long journey is sniffed only on the right cheek, saving the left cheek for their safe return. In nomadic religion with no temples, the shaman's body extends to the space stretched outside, and the shaman may turn his body in one direction to reach the spirits of the upper world and the other to go down below.

Animals act as intermediaries or metaphors for humans, through an all-pervading sense of analogy or homology. A Kazakh child's ability to walk is symbolically marked and strengthened by hobbling the child's legs, like a horse, with woollen thread, and then cutting the thread to release him. The awareness of animal anatomy extends to humans, as the Mongol body is composed of bone inherited from the male and flesh from the female. The various senses lead to an extraordinary sensitivity in reading animals' behaviour and an elaborate interpretation of these as omens, while sound and smell underpin the very animal-like skills of finding an invisible person or other living creature on the landscape: even places carry the distinctive smell of the spirits who own them. Humans smell of the animal skins wrapped around their bodies, and indeed in their dependence on eating animals, humans are 'a wolf in reindeer's clothing'. Regional differences are acknowledged, sometimes with fascinating rationales. We were familiar with the consecrated reindeer which protects its owner and his herd through its own agency and volition among the Eveny. But from the far south the book offers an almost identical belief among the Todzhu, with the additional option of a Buddhist interpretation, that the consecration of an animal brings merit.

Such elaborate animal cosmologies seem specific to nomads. But for millennia throughout this region, nomads have interacted with sedentary populations. Nomadism occupies a niche in a complex system of specialisation and exchange, and this niche is not just ecological but also political. This system is in flux and the balance has shifted throughout history. In a period when military advantage lay with the nomads, the Mongol empire was based on features of nomadism itself such as the speed of horses. More recently, the Chinese and Russian empires have constrained the scope of nomadism, not least by encroaching on their ultimate resource, space.

Within the book's vision of short-term and long-term trajectories of sedentarisation, this is the old tension with a new twist. A case study of the Kazakh steppes reveals how tsarist restrictions created spaces in the nomads' own region from which the nomads themselves were excluded. These spaces expanded as Russian peasants flowed in during the nineteenth century and the Kazakhs themselves were impoverished and driven into the new towns. But with the advent of Soviet power, the goal was not so much to exclude nomads from the state as to include them, and their irreversible sedentarisation became state policy and an ideological goal. For nomads, their herds are not only capital but also insurance against a bad year. The Soviet authorities ignored this necessity in their programme of collectivisation and purges of supposedly over-rich herders. Regarding sedentarisation, collectivisation and the resulting famines, the chapters in the book deal mostly with the southern regions inhabited by Kazakhs, Mongols and Buryats. There were similar persecutions in the north, but for this region the book focuses on the later post-war period, when the rupture and influx of outsiders came from the encounter with industry. The Russian economy today depends largely on the export of oil and gas extracted from under the pastures of northern reindeer herders, especially Nenets, Khanty and Mansi. This leads not only to conflicts about land use and pollution, but also to what the authors call a 'permeability' between the otherwise rather separate indigenous animal economy and white man's mineral economy. A revealing chart presents some biographies or career paths, as a person may move in the course of a lifetime between forest, village and town, sometimes also working for a time in the oil industry.

For those who stay with the animals, the collective farms and state farms have been broken up, to be replaced by a variety of individual and semi-collective structures. The authors point out that the traditional and socialist lifestyles were equally collective, both in the organisation of labour and in relations between persons, so that the individualism of post-socialist privatisation since the 1990s is something new and unprecedented.

This remarkable volume gives a feel for what it is like to live as a nomad, right across this region. It brings together material, locations and perspectives which are not otherwise available to anyone without a library of specialised Russian sources. The examples pass from one specific group to another, but the reader is consistently guided towards a vision of the Asian nomadic worldview and lifestyle as a whole. Everything is lucidly explained for non-specialists, but there is much that any specialist can learn too. There are interesting and helpful maps, from the expansion of the Russian and Mongol empires to local seasonal migration routes. These include specific examples, such as the changes at a site in Mongolia between 1921 and 1989, a period during which long migrations by large herds of horses and camels owned by monasteries were replaced by shorter migrations of smaller herds with mixed species. Tables and charts summarise dates, calendars of migrations, and names of peoples and populations, while there is even a satellite photo showing an accumulation of animal dung next to a Tuvan camp site. There is a bibliography, but no index, so that a reader wanting to find references to a particular people or a particular topic, such as spirits or castration, must guess where to look by studying the section headings.

This is a coffee-table book with a difference: all the authors are experts, and this expertise is based on a long-term fieldwork experience which has only recently become possible. Edited by French anthropologists and geographers in collaboration with colleagues from Russia and

elsewhere, the book is a testimony to a flourishing French school of Siberian and Mongolian studies whose researchers were already accomplishing remarkable things back in the old days of Soviet near-inaccessibility. This book contains a lot of information and insight, and it would be very good if it could also be translated into English and Russian.

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