

ENCOUNTERS WITH MUSLIM NOMADS

The Wandering People who have
Shaped the Islamic World



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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

This book is dedicated to
practical Muslim Nomads and
their age-old traditions that
brilliantly shine on these pages.



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'Abdullah bin 'Umar ؓ narrated that Allah's Messenger ﷺ said:
"Be in this world as though you were a stranger or a traveller."

(Bukhari)



'Nomads have, as long as we know, represented a threat and a source of wonder to settled populations... The tension between mobility and stasis, in terms of freedom and security, and the fantasies of an independent, free-floating existence, have perhaps always been part of European settled populations' understanding of themselves and the 'other' (Peters, 2006). The figure of the nomad as the embodiment of freedom and irresponsibility and a challenge to the order of things is thus deeply embedded in European understandings of mobility and stasis. The threatening image of mobile peoples as destroyers of order and progress is as old as the romantic fantasies.'

(Ada Ingrid Engebriksen, 2017)

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Travel is proverbially all about the people one meets; the nomads who crossed my path during a half century of transversing North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, have granted me some of my richest and most rewarding experiences. The genesis of this book began by my reflection on these important encounters.

‘Those scattered beyond the boundaries of the city have long been the subject of puzzlement and fantasy by those within its walls, as well as a metaphor for ways of being in the world.’

(Peters, 2006)

One newly coined phrase of today’s youthful Generation Z is the ubiquitous ‘digital nomad’. As many digital nomads are now choosing to reside in Muslim lands like Morocco and Turkey, one wonders if there might be an occasional, serendipitous encounter between them and the authentic indigenous nomads...

Educated in Vancouver, B.C. on the west coast of Canada, I grew up on a diet of travelogues by authors like the American adventurer, Richard Haliburton, and the intrepid British scholar, Freya Stark. Both authors frequently mentioned their fascinating encounters with local nomadic tribes. After completing my undergraduate education in Modern Foreign Languages and History in 1970, I felt adequately prepared for an extended sojourn abroad. Western Europe proved too tame for my liking, so I headed south and eventually settled down in Lisbon, Portugal, at the time, the last remaining colonial power in Europe. It was in Lisbon, listening to the nightly BBC shortwave radio broadcasts, that I stumbled upon what I believed to be an obvious Arabic language channel, the voice of ‘Radio Rabat’ (*sawt ar-rabat*). The uniqueness of the language only increased my desire to visit Portugal’s nearest African neighbour. During the winter break (1970-71), I ventured across the narrow Strait of Gibraltar to discover Morocco, the most westerly outpost of the classical Muslim world. At the time, the Kingdom of Morocco was still an extremely traditional country, whose mosques were only open to the faithful. As a young Canadian, this was my first encounter with Muslims and their heedful religion. Most impressive for me

was how the Islamic call to prayer (*adhan*) seemed to physically regulate the lives of everyone I met. Unable to converse with locals in their vernacular, I promised myself that one day I would learn Arabic, the language I believed to be the key to unlocking the secrets of this outwardly beautiful, but still very mysterious, religion and its followers. Amongst the sedentary mountain folk of the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco were small bands of migrating Berber families. Their apparent wanderlust instantly appealed to the 'nomad' in myself.

In the 1970s, as a young budget-conscious university graduate and researcher, I often travelled by dubious public transport; in northeastern Afghanistan, I rode on horseback later venturing on foot along the well-trodden paths of the semi-nomadic Wakhi locals. In this book, I have included two photographs taken during my time in the Wakhan Corridor. After a full decade of dedicated travel and the completion of graduate degrees, I became a lecturer at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (Dhahran, Saudi Arabia). This location enabled me to easily travel throughout the entire Islamic world.

Readers of this book might wonder why I describe my encounters in this book in the third person, and use drawings as opposed to photographs for illustrations. Even the chapters of my book follow a geographical progression - from the Berber nomads of northwest Africa to the nomads of Iran and Afghanistan further to the east - rather than a personal one. My intention in researching Muslim nomads was never to write a book. This independent research was a genuine hobby and an extension of my interest in all things Islamic: Arabic calligraphy, tile making, architecture, history, numismatics, to name a few. As a young

traveller, I was simply awestruck by the nomads' sustainability ethos, and instantly recognised it as something worthy of respect and admiration. After all, I was born in Vancouver, where I personally witnessed the birth of Greenpeace, the global environmental movement. Since the late 1960s, I have supported environmental awareness, and as a new Muslim in the early 1970s, I became thoroughly convinced of the importance of our blessed role as custodians of this Earth. Muslim nomads strike me as having truly understood this role. As my own research developed, and news of the concerning impact of stationary nations on the planet gained momentum, I realised that my private honouring of these tribes should be put to good use. The very act of learning – and in some cases, revising our own perceptions – about the honourable lifestyles of Muslim nomads could offer a sound antidote to our increasingly consumerist and unpredictable way of life. I hope this book offers our readers just that. I wanted to make sure this travel book shifts the focus from me to those nomads that society has for so long seen on the peripheries of civilisation.

As a young, sometimes foolhardy traveller, I did take unnecessary risks. For example, in preparing for my trek along the remote Wakhan Corridor of northeastern Afghanistan, I thoughtlessly purchased a bottle of Aspirin as my only medicine. This proved totally inadequate when I contracted typhoid fever from drinking the polluted water of the Panja River. I only recovered when a young German linguist conducting field research in Pamiri languages heard of my plight when passing through Fayzabad, the capital of Badakhshan province. He had prepared much better for his stay in the mountains by packing plenty of antibiotics! Despite my unpreparedness and limited access to a camera throughout my travels, my encounters of the nomadic encampments were vivid and enlightening. I therefore

preferred to paint illustrations of my visits as a personal homage to these noble Muslims, who always seemed preserved in my peripheral vision.

As a septuagenarian, my life has been fulfilling and rewarding. I pray that future generations may live in a more tolerant world, in which the Muslim nomads might finally be recognised for their unheralded contributions to the survival of humankind. Nomads, despite the vicissitudes of their often precarious existence, remain threads in the fabric of the societies they nominally inhabit. In the twenty-first century, we are truly blessed to still have in our midst pockets of these itinerant wayfarers. The eco-friendly lifestyle, traditions, and exquisite material culture of such humble Muslims continue to engender a reverence for them. Ideally, I wish my prospective readers could appreciate these nomads for whom they really are: incredibly ingenious, skilled, God-fearing pastoralists who practise a minimalist, eco-friendly lifestyle from which much can be learnt.

Finally, I hope that the chapters of this book may increase awareness of these fragile, long-marginalised, minority populations that still inhabit the remoter regions of our ever-shrinking world. The nomads' sustainability ethos alone is laudable and is precisely what has been their attraction for me. Indeed, for countless generations they have walked gently on God's green Earth as its respectful custodians.

And the (true) servants of
the Most Gracious (Allah)
are those who walk gently
upon the earth... [25:63]



ناجی

WHO IS A NOMAD?



The word 'nomad' derives from the Ancient Greek word - *nomas* - 'one who roams about in search of pasture'.

The nomads who traverse the deserts, steppes and mountains of the Islamic world have always done so for a purpose; their wanderings are certainly not aimless, but very well-structured.

Over centuries, they have become adept at harvesting the scattered resources of the harsh environment of climatic extremes that they inhabit, and have developed a deep and natural attachment to the earth itself.

It is estimated that there are approximately 30-40 million nomads in the world today, and they fall into three distinctive groups. Foraging, in existence since the beginning of time, is the oldest form of nomadism. These hunter-gatherers were constantly on the move in search of food: game (deer, antelope, polar bear, walrus, seal and whale) that they could hunt and kill, and wild berries, nuts and fruit that they found along the way. Today, there are very few such nomads, the most well-known hunter-gatherers being the San Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa, and the tundra Inuit of Canada's Arctic North.

However, most traditional nomadic tribes today, many of whom are discussed at length in this book, are pastoralists. These communities breed herds of cattle and ruminants, such as goats and camels, and are in a perpetual search for new forage for their animals. Pastoral nomads such as, the Tuaregs of the Sahara Desert, may cross many hundreds or thousands of kilometres during their migrations, while the Qashqa'is of southern Iran may cover much less territory in their seasonal treks. Their wealth lies in their cattle, so once an area has been depleted of its herbage, the nomads are compelled to migrate elsewhere. Pastoralists struggle to maintain their independence in a world that increasingly favours sedentary existence.



'They have become adept at harvesting the scattered resources of climatic extremes that they inhabit'

The nomads seen in the industrialised West are peripatetic ones. These people are usually traders, craftsmen or farm workers, who move where their work takes them. The Gypsies or Roma (Romani) people are an itinerant group of nomads originating in northern India, from where they spread west into central Asia and Türkiye. They eventually arrived in Europe about a thousand years ago. The English word 'gypsy' derives from the Greek word for Egyptian, *Aigyptios*. The commonly-held belief in the Middle Ages was that these dark-skinned travellers had migrated from Egypt. Today, the peripatetic Roma are found in sizeable numbers in Türkiye and most European countries, as well as in North America and Brazil.

To what degree, if any, are pastoral nomads, (the focus of this book) reliant on the outside world? Is there any symbiotic relationship between nomadic and sedentary peoples? Anthropologist and historian, A.M. Khazanov, maintains that nomads could never exist totally independent from the sedentary agricultural and urban outside world with its diverse economic and social systems.¹ In the following chapter, we will examine what the great fourteenth century Arab historiographer, Ibn Khaldun, had to say about nomadism and its crucial role in social history.²

1 Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*, 3.

2 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun al-Hadhrami (1332 Tunis -1406 Cairo) was an Arab Muslim social historian, who, over a long life closely observing the human condition, developed a unique theory of history that was eloquently laid out in his seminal work: the *Muqaddimah* ('Introduction'). The *Muqaddimah* presents Ibn Khaldun's theory that essentially discusses the causes of the rise and fall of empires throughout history.



