

# The Challenge of Reaching Nomadic Pastoralists

*Nomadic pastoralists are a challenge to Christian missions as they comprise what is probably the largest remaining block of unreached peoples to be won for Jesus Christ... Of all people in the world, they are probably the most God-conscious but culturally the most remote from the Western Church.*

by Malcolm Hunter

**B**edouin with TV antennas sprouting over their tents. Tuaregs giving up their camels to drive around the Sahara in Toyota Land Cruisers—only their enigmatic eyes peering out between their turbans and veils. Maasai warriors in full regalia and flowing mud-plastered hair, hurling sticks at one another and performing their flat footed dances at 3:15 every afternoon for the benefit of camera-toting tourists.

These and a few other weird and wonderful aberrations of the twentieth century are what most people know of pastoral nomadic societies. For every one of these commercialized manifestations there are thousands of authentic herdsman, women, boys and girls living a very similar existence to that of our well-documented pastoralist predecessors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They are little known, except through the pages of *National Geographic* magazine and a few exotic TV documentaries. They often live in uncongenial places where tourist buses do not run.

For Christians, these shepherds of the remotest deserts and mountains are not just colorful reminders of the earliest ancestors of our faith but a striking challenge to that faith. They are not just a bizarre anachronism in human society which will disappear if we ignore them. They are the natural descendants and successors of many races who have learned to survive and make a living in some of the world's most undesirable real estate, not just in Africa, but on all five continents.

## Who are They?

We need to understand that there are as many variations of nomadism as

there are reasons why people adopt this way of life. The simplest and probably most ancient expression of this socio-economic system are the hunter-gatherers. Many societies still exist in the least developed parts of the world, especially in Indonesia, South America and more remote parts of Africa. Australian Aborigines, the Bushmen of the Kalahari desert and Pygmies of Central Africa are some of the better known survivors of what was once probably the dominant lifestyle on earth.

Pastoralists are people whose major source of food, or income is dependent on animals. Because many of them occupy land that is usually arid or semi-arid with unreliable rainfall, they have to be able to take their animals to the places where grazing and water can be found. These pastoralists are described as nomadic or semi-nomadic, depending largely on how much they move looking for grazing. Pastoralists who spend more than half their time herding animals away from homes or cultivated settlements are generally described as semi-nomadic. They may engage in other farming activities or seek seasonal or temporary work in settled agricultural areas, or in cities as casual laborers, but their traditional and preferred lifestyle is in animal husbandry. The animals are often essential for transporting goods and people to new locations as well as more frequent haulage of water. Farmers with animals who spend less than half their time in herding them and more time in cultivation are usually known as agro-pastoralists.

Nomadic pastoralists do not wander

aimlessly around in the bush. They are following carefully planned opportunistic strategies, utilizing the resource of spatial mobility. One of these survival strategies is that some, or even all of the family members may have to leave the traditional grazing lands to find temporary alternative employment or food. This does not mean that they should cease to be considered as pastoralists since their primary orientation is still towards pastoralism. There are many displaced pastoralists living in cities; working as casual laborers or guards, or in famine relief camps, whose main goal in life is to gather a few animals to enable them to return to nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralism.

There are few pastoralists left on earth who can live exclusively as nomads; most are semi-nomadic, operating somewhere along a continuum from pure nomadism to agro-pastoralism. Agro-pastoralism has become so much the norm that it is impossible to define nomads as those who do not cultivate. It is also incorrect to say that their use of agriculture shows that nomadic pastoralism is dying out. There have always been examples of this mixed form of agriculture (a harvest from digging in the dirt and a harvest on the hoof). Whatever their position on the continuum, they will think of themselves as primarily animal herders who rarely own land privately.

One of the defining features of nomadic pastoralists is that they cannot own any particular piece of land as they must be able to move their "harvest on the hoof" to the grazing areas where the rain will fall. This is the primary reason for their nomadism in the

arid and semi-arid lands where erratic and unpredictable rainfall can be expected to bring rain somewhere in their grazing area during the year, but not usually everywhere. It is this unpredictability of rainfall, rather than its paucity, which is often the chief problem for pastoralists, and the main reason for their needing to keep moving.

Nomadic pastoralism is often the most efficient if not the only means of resource extraction in semi-arid lands. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that on comparable grazing land it is considerably more efficient than ranching, as well as much less demanding in initial capital costs.

There are many specialist skills and trades which are practiced by people in third-world societies which result in them moving widely without any fixed abode, e.g., blacksmiths, leather workers, tinkers and tent-makers. There are even some societies in India where the women serve as prostitutes as they move with their men folk doing seasonal manual and agricultural work. These can be differentiated from migrant workers who have a house or piece of property to which they will return periodically.

#### **Where are They?**

Nomadic pastoralists can be found in desert or semi-arid regions of the world, as well as the mountains or high plateaus. Africa is the most obvious continent, having several different types of lands. Some, therefore conclude, this is where most nomadic pastoralists reside. Others think that central Asia may have the greatest numbers: Tibet, Mongolia, Northern China, Southern Russia, Afghanistan, Iran, even Iraq, and Israel and the Arabian Peninsula. There are some surprisingly ancient nomadic herders in the Andes of South America. As for Europe, Australia, the Arctic there are not many survivors left after the onslaught of Western exploitation of land and its traditional occupants.

A recent study published by Winrock International states that arid and semi-arid lands cover about one-third of the earth's land surface, but nearly two-thirds of the African continent. The majority of African livestock and possibly 30 million livestock-dependent people reside in these dry zones (Ellis 1994).

This is the natural habitat of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists in Africa. Because of the difficulty in defining who are nomadic pastoralists it is even more difficult to count numbers. Added to this problem is measuring a moving target. In Asia there may be as many or more people dependent on herding animals, although the reasons for their nomadism may be different. Their movement is often due to extremes of cold and snow at certain times of the year, requiring them to change altitude, and therefore location. This is sometimes called transhumance as it involves moving between different soils and climatic zones.

There is another major area of the world where a specialized form of pastoralism is practiced—herding reindeers. This area extends from northern Scandinavia through Siberia. Like many other areas in the former USSR where pastoralism was practiced, official communist policies have had devastating effects on the lives and productivity of people who were once self-sufficient nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists. Whether these people can or will want to return to their former way of life is uncertain. Much of their traditional range land has been destroyed by misguided communal agricultural projects. This has demonstrated again, as in Africa, that nomadic pastoralists usually occupy land which is only marginally suitable for cultivation. If the land is put under the plow it may yield an occasional but diminishing harvest. The land soon becomes unprofitable for agriculture and will be useless as reserve grazing when it is most needed by

pastoralists.

There are of course other well known nomadic societies in Europe, the Gypsies or Romanies. The tenacity with which most of these maintain their traditional way of life in spite of every effort by Western government and local authorities to restrict their movements and to induce them to be "socially responsible" and settle down is quite remarkable.

#### **How Many are There?**

It is quite impossible to say with any degree of precision that will please Western numerologists of the global population of nomadic pastoralists. The maximum computation using the broadest definition could be as many as 200 million. It is equally difficult to say how many ethnic groups can be described as nomadic or semi-nomadic. But this could range between 100 and 1,000 nomadic groups depending again on definition.

#### **Why are They a Challenge?**

Nomadic pastoralists are a challenge to Christian missions as they comprise what is probably the largest remaining block of unreached peoples to be won for Jesus Christ. In terms of numbers of people they are not large, but in terms of the number of ethnic entities with the same socio-economic homogeneity, where the Church of Jesus Christ has not yet been established, they are certainly a very important challenge. Of all people in the world, they are probably the most God-conscious but culturally most remote from the Western Church. If the command and promise of the Lord Jesus is taken seriously, that the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world to every ethnic group (Matt. 24:14), then these nomadic pastoral groups must be included, and effective evangelistic strategies must be found and employed.

At present, most nomadic pastoralists are Muslim because Islam is usually seen as a religion suitable for nomads.

As one old Somali camel herder expressed it, "When you can put your Christian church on the back of my camel then I will think Christianity is for us Somalis. As it is, I am a Muslim because all I need is a prayer mat and I can pray anywhere. We only see you praying once a week in church where one man says what he thinks and everyone else sits down with their eyes closed."

If pastoralists have seen anything at all of Christianity it is probably in the form of a mission station or institution, such as clinics, schools or settlement programs. Even worse is the image where Christian development workers give the impression that nomadic pastoralists should settle down and start cultivating if they want to become Christians. This inevitably places an unnecessary obstacle in accepting the gospel to people whose way of life is strongly orientated towards nomadism. In some nomadic pastoralist societies, cultivation was something done only by slaves. There are others who might be willing to "dig in the dirt" as a last desperate measure, but it is most regrettable when this becomes synonymous with following "the Jesus way."

The most unfortunate misrepresentation of all occurs where the Church is presented as a building or even a particular "sacred place." The Church is, and always has been, essentially based on relationships. That is what nomadic pastoral societies have in depth, whatever else they may lack. God has no problem communicating with nomadic peoples. It is Christian missionaries who seem to have the problems.

Nomadic pastoralists are a challenge to all concerned for the well being of the most neglected and marginalised people. It is sometimes thought that the poorest people on earth are those who live on the garbage of the more affluent. Most pastoralists live and move in a

world where there is no such luxury as a rubbish heap of the rich. If their animals die, they have no other resource to fall back on. A farmer affected by lack of rain may get a reduced crop, but he can plant again for the next rains. If a pastoralist loses his animals he has nothing left to allow him to start again. He either "dies in the desert" or he moves to the margins of the city— usually to the poorest slums. There he will take the lowest place with the least chance of getting work, other than the

---

**...relationships. That is what nomadic pastoral societies have in depth, whatever else they may lack. God has no problem communicating with nomadic peoples. It is Christian missionaries who seem to have the problems.**

---

most low paid and dangerous jobs such as guards or night watchmen. Nomadic pastoralists are not usually physiologically capable of carrying heavy loads nor of digging gardens. Psychologically they are most unsuited for the fierce competitiveness of urban life.

It is at last being widely acknowledged by the rural development industry that whatever progress may have been made in assisting settled agricultural people, their Western-based efforts amongst nomadic pastoralists have been unhelpful. There are even some experienced evaluators who are prepared to say that nearly all development projects attempted by outside agencies, both foreign and national, have been of negative value, creating massive dependency. This has led a few wise men to say that wise development planners must take a humbler approach, listening to and learning from the nomadic pastoralists, before any plans are made. The pastoralists have learned over many

generations how to live with the hardships and uncertainties of their environment. That indigenous knowledge has been passed down effectively to all successful herd owners. Should we not try to benefit from that knowledge before trying to introduce new ideas and approaches?

#### Common Misconceptions

1. "*Pastoralists are a dying breed.*" It is true that in terms of present influence compared with past power, their power has greatly diminished, as have their population. That is primarily because of the exploding population of settled people in cities and rural communities. But in reality, it is believed that the number of individuals living more or less dependent on animals is not diminishing. The combined and cumulative effect of loss of grazing lands, and increasing desertification, is the impoverishment of the pastoralists to the point of destitution and dislocation from their means of livelihood.

2. "*Just leave them alone and the nomadic pastoralists will soon all settle down or come to live in the cities.*" The first response to this misconception is that they will not give up easily. They have learned to live in the most adverse conditions over the centuries and have developed great resilience and fortitude. Drought, famines, outbreaks of disease and losses to cattle raiders are nothing new to nomadic pastoralists. When they are forced to leave their grazing lands and move into cities to work or beg for food, the conditions in which they live are usually so awful and alien to their traditional way of life that they provide a great incentive for the pastoralists to return to the bush. They can often be seen in the cities starting to gather together a few animals to form a small flock, usually of sheep and goats, which they hope will one day enable them to return to the old grazing lands. Alternatively, some individuals

who can find gainful employment, will work in the cities or agricultural schemes in order to send money back to their family. These remittances can enable part of the family to survive in the bush and even to increase the size of the herds more rapidly by buying animals at the lowest prices when other less fortunate pastoralists are forced to sell in drought times.

3. *“Nomadic pastoralists will soon accept the inevitability by becoming farmers if given the right assistance and incentives.”* This misconception is usually based on the presupposition that cultivation is a natural progression for rural people as they “develop.” It ignores several important facts: (a) most nomadic pastoralists live in areas of the world where cultivation is not a viable alternative due not just to the paucity of rainfall but more often its unpredictability, (b) if this land is not used by pastoralists then it will probably be totally nonproductive and the numbers of people who could have lived there will have to find land or employment elsewhere, (c) nomadic pastoralists are not a recent or passing phase of human society. They are some of the most resourceful and resilient people on earth. In the words of a recent expert witness, “All nomads are opportunists, and the adaptability and cultural flexibility that opportunism demands means that they are possibly better equipped than any of the world’s traditional peoples to withstand dramatic change” (George Monbiot, *No Man’s Land*), (d) the alternative to pastoralism, experienced by those who are forced due to herd losses to live in city slums or famine relief camps is so alien and the conditions so appalling that they will do anything to get back to their traditional lifestyle, (e) pastoralism, even semi-nomadic or agro-pastoral, is more attractive to many cohesive, socially integrated peoples than modern individualism found in cities, and (f) pastoralism can be more efficient than

commercial ranching in meat production, as well as being much less costly to set up. It offers employment and food to many rural people rather than wealth to a few.

4. *“Nomadic pastoralism is the cause of much of the increasing desertification in the world and therefore should be controlled or even eliminated.”* In reality it has been proven from long-term observations that it is not the alleged overgrazing of pastoralists which causes most of the damage, but more often, attempts to plow up grass lands which were not suitable for cultivation (too dry and sandy). This is most clearly demonstrated in the Sahel where farmers from the south have pushed further and further northwards into the fringes of the Sahara. They have cut down the natural bush and broken up the root system of the grasses so that erosion quickly begins to occur from water and wind. Crops may be harvested initially if the rains fall on that place at the right time, but the soil will soon lose its productivity or will be carried away by erosion.

If rain falls one mile away or a hundred miles away from his field, the farmer receives the same yield, nothing. In the same circumstances, the pastoralist can take his animals to the place where the rain fell and derive the benefit—a harvest on the hoof. This is one value of nomadic pastoralism in areas where rain fall is unpredictable. Contrary to ecologically based dire warnings, under-grazing can be more serious a problem than over-grazing. Coarse bush can take over traditional grazing areas if not used for several years. If land is apparently over-grazed, a few days of rain can quickly replenish the pasture for months of grazing.

5. *“Nomadic pastoralists are primitive and resistant to progress in developing countries.”* This unfortunate attitude is most commonly held by officials of developing countries where pastoralists comprise a significant

component of the rural population. Those government officials are most likely to come from settled urban or farming societies, and therefore have considerable difficulty understanding the values and worldview of nomadic pastoralists. In many countries there are deep historic social differences between pastoralists and farmers, even centuries of hostilities. In some cases, resentment of former slaves towards dominant herd owners exists.

Nomadic pastoralism may be the only means of resource extraction from arid and semi-arid lands, and pastoralists are usually the only people willing and able to endure the hardships of living in those remote areas. They will inevitably have to live without the benefits of modern urban facilities, such as electricity, piped water and sanitation. Third-world governments may have to provide basic services, such as health, veterinary care, water development and education. These services often fail due to the unwillingness of trained staff to serve in remote assignments.

### Key Issues in Christian Ministry

1. *Recognize the existence and complexity of the problem.* Ministry to nomadic peoples is quite different from ministry to settled rural or urban people. It is generally assumed that the same strategies that have proved effective in nearby areas with settled cultivating people will be effective among pastoral people. Both Western and national missionaries from non-nomadic cultures seem to have similar difficulty understanding the worldview and values of people whose primary orientation is nomadic or semi-nomadic.

2. *Little serious missionary effort has been directed towards nomadic pastoralists as they are generally considered to be resistant to the gospel, difficult to get to and to live amongst.* Most missions have preferred to concentrate their limited resources on more accessible and apparently responsive people. This misses the missiological point that

they are an essential part of the Great Commission. If it is true that they are “among the most difficult to reach” peoples then there is little point in leaving them until last. We need to address this challenge more urgently and intelligently. As to the charge that they are resistant to the gospel, it seems that it may be more correct to say that it is our presentation of the gospel which has been resistant to their value system. Much of current missionary work among pastoral people may have been negative to them as it gives the impression that Christianity is for settled people, while Islam is the religion for nomads.

3. *There has been a general misconception by outside agencies, both secular and missionary, that nomadic pastoralism is a “primitive,” inefficient and unsustainable socio-economic system that is “dying out.”* Several recent studies have shown that it is considerably more efficient than ranching or any other agricultural system in making use of land which is marginally productive because of inadequate rainfall. It is quite true that many of the children of traditional pastoral nomadic people are leaving that life style to look for work elsewhere but that is often seen as an opportunity to diversify the economic options for the family. The most competent herd managers stay with the animals while those who find work in settled areas usually start to collect money or animals to send back to help rebuild the herd.

4. *There are often immense material needs that the missionary cannot avoid addressing, if living amongst them.* The people make the missionary appear uncomfortably rich at the best of times. In the inevitable drought and famine, the demands of human suffering and starvation can overwhelm the missionary. When he does try to respond with famine relief, it is usually in a situa-

tion of “unplanned crisis” which makes it almost impossible to maintain a realistic balance of spiritual and physical ministry. It can be even more difficult to make the transition from short-term relief to long-term development and rehabilitation.

---

**As to the charge that nomadic peoples are resistant to the gospel, it seems that it may be more correct to say that it is our presentation of the gospel which has been resistant to their value system.**

---

5. *Most missionaries want to have a house somewhere to call home.* If they choose to build it “as close to the people as possible,” meaning somewhere in the middle of the grazing lands, they will soon attract an assortment of the most desperately needy people around. They may encourage them to come to live around the home because of the need for manual help in clearing land or collecting local materials. What they will find is that they have attracted the poorest, laziest, most incompetent herd managers who have lost all their animals, the most destitute and disenfranchised members of the nomadic pastoral community.

Missionaries may be encouraged at first to find a ready audience for the gospel from these former pastoralists gathered for whatever they can receive. They may even be able to write home after a surprisingly short time and tell exciting stories of numbers coming to services and professing to accept Christ. There may well be some who truly do believe the message and become Christians but unfortunately their dependence on the missionary devalues their profession. It is the same lack of credibility accorded to any new convert who is dependent for physical help

on his mentor or master. “How much is he paid to believe this new religion? His faith is worth as much as his wages. When the income or assistance stops, so will his religion.”

In a pastoral society this lack of credibility is magnified if the first professing believers all happen to be from the destitute families who have lost all their animals. In such societies, to lose the herd you inherited from your father is the ultimate disaster and disgrace. Loss of the animals means serious loss of self-esteem and usually the respect of the other pastoralists who manage to keep their herd, even if much diminished.

It is not hard to see why the missionary does no great service by concentrating efforts on the poorest dependent people who gather around his “dwelling in the desert.” If he does choose to live as “close as possible to the people” he will need to make deliberate and determined efforts to direct his main communication towards the elders and respected herd owners still in the bush or in the main settlements, if they are semi-nomadic.

6. *The alternative to the settled missionary approach i.e., “dwelling in the desert” is to take the approach of trying to be as nomadic as possible.* This implies that the missionary and his family, if he/she has one, will need to find a house in a suitable urban location as near as possible to the pastoral area, but far enough outside it so that he can get adequate rest periodically. This should probably be located in a large enough town or village so that he can hope to assume a lower profile without facing the constant demands of ministry to the local community.

From this base he, and possibly his family, sometimes can move out to the true pastoralist heartland—the actual grazing areas. He does not need to follow them around in the bush as is often imagined—feared by most missionary

recruits. When pastoralists are watching their animals in the bush it is not at all the best time to try to talk with them as they are preoccupied in keeping track of the animals so they will not stray or come under attack from wild animals or stolen by raiding parties from other cattle-herding groups.

In practice it has proved much easier for a "nomadic missionary" to make short visits to a well or water pond. This is especially true if he has contacts who will give him some leads or introduce him to some of the herdsmen who come to water their animals. If the missionary is willing to do this he will find that all the active pastoralists will come to him very regularly: in good times, every day or in drought, at the most every third day. These contacts at the watering point will often lead to invitations to go back to the camps groups in the grazing areas in the evening to spend the night where the people are staying in clusters or extended family. Here is where the real opportunities for the "nomadic missionary" begin. He will find that soon after dark, when all the animals have been secured for the night and milked as appropriate, the people are delighted to spend all the time the missionary wants to give to talk with them.

There is a question that is pertinent in nearly all of the third-world rural areas, "What do you plant after the sun goes down?" Answer: "The Church." This is never more relevant than amongst the pastoralists. They may or may not plant a crop but the missionary has his finest opportunity to plant the seeds of the church in those long evening sessions. He may choose to travel by foot, camel, horse or donkey but it is often quite possible and acceptable to travel by a 4-wheel drive vehicle. This allows him to carry a few people as guides and also to haul enough water back to the camp to make him very welcome. If he cares to boil a large pot of tea for the people at the camp he will be

doubly welcome and will probably assure himself of an invitation to join the people for the evening meal.

The possibilities and positive opportunities in this approach are obvious, but there is of course the negative side. How long can he live that sort of nomadic mission life? It is undeniably exhausting in the heat, dust and flies that come with the cattle to the watering places all day and at certain times all night. Few people can appreciate the isolation and sheer monotony of spending night after night in remote and often noisy camps (the animals regularly stir around, bellowing or bleating with the herdsmen jumping up to quiet them or to drive off the hyenas). It is little wonder that few missionaries care to take this approach. It is certainly more convenient and attractive for missionary families to take the option of building his "dwelling in the desert" to be as "close to the people as possible." The problem with this strategy is that it has been proven over and over again not to be effective if the goal is to plant an attractive church amongst people whose primary orientation is nomadic.

*7. Another problem with the mission station approach amongst nomadic peoples is that however simply the missionary may have initially planned to live, things never seem to stay that way. He may have begun with a simple prefabricated and supposedly portable building but soon he finds that a store is needed to keep the food supplies essential for feeding the needy people gathering around him. Usually he or his wife cannot avoid getting involved in medical work whether or not they are medically trained. It will often begin by the occasional visitor to the back door desperate for a malaria tablet or something for diarrhea. The missionary cannot deny that he has the medicine on hand as he needs it for himself and his family, and of course, Christian compassion compels him to give what he has in a time of obvious need. Once that*

back door has been opened the trickle inexorably grows in numbers and complexity. It is almost inevitable that a separate clinic building will come, just for hygienic reasons to keep the diarrhea off his doorstep. Usually some sort of shelter comes next to allow the sick children and families to sleep over night when they come long distances to get the only help within walking distance.

Sooner or later the inevitable demand for medical attention will require a full-time worker, either missionary or a trained national. In either case, a proper separate dwelling will be needed. Usually by this time a pumped water supply has been installed which may begin with a wind driven pump but will lead before long to electrical power. This used to mean a diesel generator but now we have the considerably more efficient but expensive solar equipment. Not just the array of panels but deep cycle batteries, special fluorescent lights, fans, pumps and solar refrigerators follow. It is true that they are cheap to operate but the time and money spent procuring and installing this high tech equipment are all investments which will tie the missionary more and more to his buildings.

Whatever the original intention may have been in the mind of the missionary not to build a permanent church on the mission station, it seems an almost inevitable development to put up such a structure. Some times it is said that the local Christians insist that they want one but in reality it is more often pressure from supporting churches back in the missionary's home country who send the money to build one. Visitors from overseas who like to come to see their missionary in action usually express surprise if there is no "proper church" amongst all the other buildings that have sprung up. It seems to them such a good cause to present to the fellowship back home for a "worthy project."

How often money is allowed to determine missionary strategy! It would be a very strong person who could resist the pressure to build a “proper church” when the supporters back home are so keen to send the funds. In his heart he should have grave misgivings about the consequences of this ecclesiastical building project. All the problems of the missions station church are greatly magnified in a nomadic community, almost certainly hindering the emergence of a truly indigenous church.

8. *A church building on the mission station confirms to the local community that it belongs to the missionary, whether or not the local people have shared in the construction costs.* Everyone knows that whatever the local professing Christian community gave is nothing compared with the amount that the missionary provided, however much their local labor is said to have contributed. Everybody also knows that it was the missionary’s plan and project as they had no idea what a Christian church building looks like.

The missionary is bound to make the church building of good solid construction to show that it is at least as important as any other building on his station, but unfortunately, the more permanent the construction the more he demonstrates that this is a church for settled people. This definitely confirms what the nomadic pastoralists had been thinking: Christianity is not for them. It is fine for people like farmers and town dwellers who can stay in one place and go to the services each Sunday wearing their best clothes. Many pastoralists in the bush have little idea which day Sunday is and they certainly cannot plan to stay near to the new church building every week. For most of them in Africa, Islam seems a much more attractive and appropriate religion. It

allows them to pray anywhere and really anytime that is convenient, as long as they try to do it five times a day. All they need is a prayer mat. Everyone has something that will serve that purpose, even an old goat skin if nothing else is available.

The only surprising part of this frequently repeated scenario is that virtually every Christian, missionary or not, will strongly agree that the Church is

---

**All the problems of the missions station church (the church building projects) are greatly magnified in a nomadic community, almost certainly hindering the emergence of a truly indigenous church.**

---

of course not a building, but people. It is not dependent on real estate but relationships, especially amongst nomadic rural peoples who have nothing besides their animals and relationships. Why then do we continue to build not only these burgeoning mission stations but also the permanent churches which more than anything else frustrate the emergence of what the missionary really wants—the indigenous church?

9. *The difficulties brought about by material goods.* This is not just a problem for Christian missionaries but perhaps even more so for the large international or national governments as they attempt to “do good.” The fact that missionaries in general have not made such big mistakes and costly failures in their attempts at development work can probably be attributed to the relative paucity of resources that Christians have to throw at the problems. Appropriate development must include the indigenous church as the transformed and liberated Body of Christ in every

society, which is especially true among nomadic pastoralists.

#### **Development Projects**

Following are lessons that have been learned in relation to development in both West and East Africa. Large scale irrigation projects and resettlement schemes have generally been the most common and costly intervention attempted but the least helpful if dependent on outside technology such as water pumps. Where seasonal surface water or sufficient rainfall has allowed small scale cultivation to be introduced using crops which require minimum rain to yield a harvest; then it may be appropriate to use this level of indigenous agriculture to supplement the traditional dependence on animal husbandry.

Animal and human medicine are certainly the inputs most commonly appreciated by nomadic pastoralists. Where these are dependent on the services of trained professionals from non-pastoralist peoples nearly all programs seem to fail because of the unwillingness of the government or project employed personnel to serve in remote areas where their help is most needed. The only hope of supplying effective if basic medical services to pastoral peoples will probably be through what is usually termed “bare foot primary health workers.”

Veterinary medicine is particularly vulnerable to the reluctance of “trained professionals” from non-pastoralist backgrounds. The demand for their skills and the medicine they control is often so high amongst herd owners at times of outbreaks of disease that the professionals unfortunately usually demonstrate their susceptibility to corruption.

Education is usually the last component of development options that nomadic pastoralist care about as in most cases it is seen as taking away the young people who are needed in meeting

their perennial labor shortage. Only in a few relatively sophisticated situations is education seen as a worthwhile alternative that could bring benefits to the brighter students who survived the local rudimentary primary education, to make it through the remote boarding secondary schools to the even more remote higher levels of education. The advantages of sending their children through the long process of education are seen not just as the potential for remittances from future salaries but also for acquiring influence in a government departments and policy making that can be expected to yield benefits not only to the family, but to all of the pastoral people.

It is easy to see the negative effects of most development interventions attempted amongst nomadic pastoralists but one rather more hopeful option may be mentioned—animal restocking. There are several examples where this has been tried, normally on a small scale. The results have proven to be surprisingly positive, in spite of mistakes and mis-management.

The most significant discovery that I have observed in several situations in both East and West Africa is the traditional practice of restocking within the particular pastoralists societies. In each case there was a requirement for those who had animals to share them with those who were without. Amongst the Borant of northern Kenya it was stated over and over again during field research that if a man lost all his animals through a disaster such as an outbreak of disease or enemy raids, he does not have to ask others for help. His fellow clansmen will gather together to decide how many animals the unfortunate man needs to support his family, and how many they will give him.

This tradition is so strong

with each herd owner proudly stating how often he had given such help to less fortunate clan members that it was surprising to find that none of the several restocking projects that had been undertaken independently had utilized this culturally well-established procedure. In each situation the project manager, a Western expert, had taken responsibility for deciding who should be given animals, and how many they should receive. He may have formed a committee of a few employees or local government officials but none of them even consulted the traditional community leaders or the elders in none of these projects.

It would be very interesting for a long-term, well integrated development worker or missionary, who knew his pastoralist community well, to see how a matching offer of restocking within the clan system would be received. All the evidence acquired during field research indicates that it might well be a great incentive in reviewing the traditional restocking methods by “pumping the pump.”

*Dr. Malcolm Hunter did his doctoral work in development for nomadic and pastoralist people and also founded the Nomadic Research Program. He has served in Niger, Benin, Burkina Faso and the USA with SIM since 1963.*

Photo here  
of  
Malcolm Hunter

Full Column  
ad here  
by  
Adopt-A People  
Clearinghouse.

Same ad as in  
last issue on  
Tentmaking  
(see page 147)