"Education for Nomads"

Pauline Heron

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EDUCATION FOR NOMADS

by

Pauline Heron

The past three decades has witnessed increasing efforts by government and development planners to provide basic education for nomadic peoples. The problems involved are many and complex; the success, to date, is limited and uncertain. Indeed, the scarcity of literature on the subject is perhaps a reflection of the tentative nature of progress in this field. In this survey of available literature, two distinct geographical areas emerge as focal points for the development of schools for nomads. All available material refers primarily to Iran and Kenya. The efforts in Kenya to provide education for the Maasai and Somali provide an instructive contrast with those efforts in Iran to educate children among the many tribes (Qashqai, Bakhtiari, Lurs, Baluchi, and Kohkilooyeh). While the general problems and the goals of educational development are similar in both regions, the strategies and outcomes are quite different and provide important clues for successful approaches to pastoral education in all countries and of all cultural backgrounds. The purpose of this paper is first to summarize the general problems related to the provision of educational facilities as discussed in the literature and then to contrast the different strategies adopted by planners as well as the outcomes in both Kenya and Iran.

One might wonder at the outset why education for pastoralists is an issue in the first place. Why should time, energy and expense be expended by a government for small, dispersed groups of people many of whom are resistant to and suspicious of all efforts to begin schools? Are the actual as well as the future expenses for education justifiable? What is the importance for members of a country of providing educational opportunities for all? Nkinyangi (1981) states that for pastoral peoples, the lack of educational credentials effectively blocks them from any representation in national leadership and thus denies them any voice concerning the direction of their own destiny. Education that facilitates social mobility and yet provides knowledge relevant to the local society gives each individual viable alternatives in determining the way of life of his own choosing.

A consideration of five factors essential to any educational system will serve as the basis for analyzing both the nature of the problems and the descriptions of actual attempts to provide schools. The first category is school facilities. This includes the question of tuition fees which may determine access to the schools. Two additional aspects of education that are closely intertwined are educational goals and the strategies adopted to attain these goals. The objectives of education as perceived by the government or by planners are instrumental in determining the policies and strategies taken to provide education. However, the practical constraints of funding and personnel will, of necessity modify plans for educational policies and strategies. Their feasibility and applicability must often be the determining consideration in establishing schools. In some instances however, the policies and strategies determine the objectives. The goals of education as perceived by pastoral nomads influence their motivation and participation. The goals and strategies are closely related to a fourth educational factor, the curriculum.

The relevance and value of curriculum to pastoral society is very often a problem in developing schools for nomads. Finally, central to any school are its teachers. Their availability, their preparation, their methods, their example, their professionalism are essential ingredients for the success of any school. These basic elements of education will serve as categories to guide the analysis of literature on our subject.

The first, most apparent obstacle to providing education for nomads is that of arranging facilities for a people whose very way of life is incompatible with traditional school buildings. Though not necessarily the most important factor in education, the provision of school facilities, given the distinctive nature of nomadism, has become the most manifest challenge in establishing an education for them. Because of low population densities (at the most, ten persons per square kilometre (Gorham 1978)), the provision of schools is a costly matter. A.B. Gorham (1978) discusses in some detail the minimum number of students necessary to make a school feasible. To counter this difficulty, attempts have been made to establish stationary facilities in dry weather grazing areas where there are concentrations of pastoral populations around sources of permanent water. However, the changing composition of individual herding groups and the irregularity of their return to the same water source in successive years means that these schools often remain unused for extended periods of time (Gorham 1978). Children in Kenyan Maasailand who change schools during a term are required to repeat the year and thus spend two to three years at one level (Gorham 1978). To overcome these constraints of mobility, boarding school facilities have been introduced in different regions. However, the cost to parents for boarding pupils in many cases is equal to or greater than average rural incomes (Gorham 1978). Yet these fees represent only a small part of the total cost, the balance of which is paid by the government. Clearly, the fees charged make this type of facility inaccessible to the majority of children for whom they were intended (Nkinyangi 1981). Thus the provision of school facilities is a major difficulty in education for nomads.

However, I think that the underlying goals of education are a more important issue in education than the mere provision of facilities. This is what will influence the direction and shape of education for nomads. Not only are innovative delivery systems needed, but also a proper understanding of social and economic factors that influence participation is required on the part of educational planners (Sarone Ole Sena 1981). Cases from the literature indicate that non-educational objectives or a lack of objectives and a lack of overall understanding of nomadism are what characterize educational strategies. For example, efforts to provide schools for the Somali of Kenya, described by Turton (1974) were largely motivated by political expediency. Early demands by Somali pastoralists for schools were ignored by the authorities. With increasing Somali political activity in the 1960's, the question of education became associated with demands for secession from Kenya and reunification with the Somali Republic. The political value of providing education led to the opening of a Government school at a moment that was politically opportune but before either a school building or teachers were available (Turton 1974). Education was a political not an educational issue.

Nkinyangi (1981) describes the trial and error efforts to provide boarding schools for the Maasai of Kenya. These efforts are characterized by a lack of objectives. Strategies such as running boarding schools, when unrelated to any particular goal, oscillate between contradictory policies. First the Kenyan government dispensed with even nominal school fees.

Boarding school facilities were introduced but public taxes were spent not only on the low-cost boarding schools designed for pastoralists, but also on the middle and high-cost boarding schools intended for the privileged classes where such support was not needed (Nkinyangi 1981). Then, there was a period of disillusionment with the boarding school type of education and an interest in mobile teaching units. But this was soon followed by a return to boarding school strategies without, however, any evaluation of past difficulties.

In Iran the purpose of education was closely tied to creating conditions for the sedentarization of nomads (Varlet and Massoumian 1975). The provision of education was perceived by planners as a means of promoting a change of behavior patterns and as an adaptation to a new way of life in a new and different society (Varlet and Massoumian 1975). This perspective raises difficult yet essential questions: Must nomads settle? Should education lead to sedentarization? Does development in education necessarily include change for pastoralists? Caroline Moorehead (1974) concludes her description of tent schools in Iran with the hope that this educational experiment not be one of the things that destroys the whole nomadic way of life. But perhaps this is unrealistic. The issue of the compatibility of nomadic life and values with those of the national society is one that must be addressed. It is an intrinsic part of the consideration of provision of schools because in every case it is the national organization that is responsible for educational development in pastoral societies. Little attention has been spent by educational planners on the question of the role of education and the goals of education development in a wider society. The resource-based perspective that has dominated development plans regards pastoralists as human resources to be developed through educational institutions (Sarone Ole Sena 1981). The planners' purpose of education as perceived by pastoralists is in direct opposition to their traditional ideology, which results in poor motivation and low participation in schools on the part of pastoralists.

These problems arising from conflicting social goals are particularily apparent in the case of the Maasai of Kenya. The warrior (moran) age set is viewed as the zenith of a lifetime (Sarone Ole Sena 1981). The schools, however compete for membership from this same age group. From a traditional Maasai view point, the one who attends school may be lost forever to the pastoralist society (Sarone Ole Sena 1981). The traditional pastoralist value system is threatened by the opposing value system of schools. The purposes of both have no common ground. It is unrealistic to expect the Maasai children to abandon the society of their peers in favour of attending school (King 1972). Furthermore, the labour-intensive demands for children needed in a livestock economy compete with the demands of education for the participation of children in schools. Subsistence herding necessitates mobility and child labour. As a result, the subsistence-oriented individuals and groups have the lowest enrollment in schools (Sarone Ole Sena 1981). There are fundamental differences between pastoralists and education planners in matters of goals for education, in economic reality and in social values.

The objectives of education in the view of planners are reflected in the curriculum of schools for nomads. School skills do not help in the ways of pastoral life, and school experiences encourage a distaste for pastoralism (Sarone Ole Sena 1981). Often, school curriculum does not relate functionally to any new employment opportunities in pastoral regions (Gorham 1978). In schools where the language of instruction is a national rather than a tribal language, the children's progress is hindered by their being forced to learn

through a foreign language.

Difficulty in finding capable and willing teachers for pastoralists is also a problem. Low academic standards and location in isolated regions reduce teacher interest and contribute to a high staff turnover rate. Turton (1974) discusses how a lack of teachers made it necessary to close the school for Somalis even though pastoralists very much desired educational facilities. King (1972) considers lack of professionalism to be a threat to the value and quality of education. The success or failure of a school is greatly affected by the nature and availability of teaching staff.

Having examined some of the problems that plague efforts to provide schools for nomads, it is time now to consider some aspects of two specific examples. Among the Maasai of Kenya, the government has established stationary schools at both the primary and secondary levels in an effort to provide education for the Maasai pastoralists. These schools are either boarding schools or day schools at some optimal location. Because of friction with other tribes in the area, the schools have developed as mono-tribal institutions. Sectional chiefs are required to provide lists of potential school children. The children selected by the chief are generally those who are least useful to the traditional pastoralist life (King 1972). These unfortunate ones often escape going to school by their parents' inability or refusal to pay the school fees. The result is low attendance at school. Because of this, the pupil-teacher ratios are among the most favoured in the country (King 1972). However, because the tone of Kenyan schools is traditionally a reflection of community interest, the Maasai schools are at a considerably lower academic standard than other schools. Most Maasai primary schools have only four grades compared to the seven grades of other schools. With the exception of teaching, few employment openings exist for students leaving high school. Pastoralists see education as having very little value or relevance to their way of life. The number of trained teachers among the Maasai schools is lower than that of Kenya in general. Maasai teachers comprise only a very small part of the teaching force in pastoral districts. As long as educational planning is unrelated to proposed cattle, land, and health development, the pastoralist Maasai is unlikely to show an interest in education (King 1972), or to generate a participation rate higher than the present five percent.

The efforts to provide education for the nomads of South Persia began in the 1960's. They have been quite different in nature and in results. Although long-range government goals in education (sedentarization) are clearly at cross purposes with nomadism, planning reflects a well-thought out programme that is relevant to pastoral way of life. Policy development has considered the practical aspects of education and of nomadism. Primary schooling for the nomadic tribes takes place in a tent which accompanies the pastoralists in their travels. During migrations between summer and winter grazing lands when the nomads are on the move every day, classes are not held. Although equipment is, of necessity, kept to a minimum, Varlet and Massoumian (1975) describe how teachers plan observation lessons using the resources of the environment. The curriculum emphasizes reading, writing and arithmetic and the basics of hygiene, history and geography. The language of instruction, Persian, is a second language for most tribal children, but according to Varlet and Massoumian (1975), this appears to be not a major difficulty. Efforts are made to retain the tribal identity of nomads (Moorehead 1974). As a result the literature indicates that enthusiasm and participation in such schools are high. In fact, parents have been seen at a short distance from the school tent following the lessons and silently repeating what the teacher

or pupils are saying (Varlet and Massoumian 1975).

In Shiraz, an urban centre in the pastoral region of South Persia, boarding schools provide secondary education for general and vocational studies. Vocational training includes such things as carpet-making, teacher-training, midwifery and industrial apprenticeship, vocations for which actual employment possibilities exist within the local and tribal context. Both primary and secondary education are financed by the government. The student teachers at Shiraz come from the tribes and return to the tribes after a year's training (Varlet and Massoumian 1975). At this time they are required to complete their training by assisting a teacher in a type of student-techer situation. Considerations of personality and standard of education are the basis for recruitment. Varlet and Massoumian (1975) refer to the importance of the educating influence of teachers through the example set by their behaviour. Teachers are a very important factor in the success of tent schools in Iran.

These attempts to provide schooling for nomads in Iran and Kenya highlight important ingredients for such efforts in any country. The Iranian programme establishes facilities that are accessible both geographically (mobile units) and economically (low or no cost) by nomadic peoples. In so doing, tent schools are consistent with the nomadic way of life. This constrasts with efforts among the Maasai where participation in the traditional moran age set was incompatible with participation in government schooling. Curriculum design was made relevant to daily experience and prepared students for actual employment within the pastoralist sector or in neighboring areas of southern Iran. The recruitment and training of local pastoralists as teachers was an important aspect of the success in Iran. Varlet and Massoumian (1975) consider that their example and their professionalism created optimal learning situations. Despite the great difficulties in providing education for nomads, Southern Iran is evidence that these problems need not be insurmountable.

Although the tent schools of Iran present many positive features that one might wish Kenyan educational planners would emulate, the situation must also be viewed from the perspective of the broader historic and socio-economic contexts. The tribes of Iran have a well-established and diversified economic base. They make a considerable contribution to the national economy in several ways. Nearly half the fresh meat eaten in Iran comes from nomads' herds (Varlet and Massoumian 1975). Carpet-making supplements pastoralist incomes and is a valued export industry. The nomads also grow some cereals in their winter quarters. Thus, the pastoralists of southern Iran are already a part of the national economy. They have well-established patterns of relationships in operation with the larger national society. Could it be that this facilitates the ease with which they receive educational facilities from the national society? Foster (1977) would likely agree. He states that a set of social and economic preconditions must exist before a demand for education is established among local populations. This would appear to be substantiated by the opposite situation in Kenya where the socio-economic context of the Maasai appears to be quite different. Their herding practices are primarily subsistence-oriented. Colonial authorities relegated pastoralists to semi-arid regions. It became illegal for pastoralists to sell their animals across reserve boundaries. Post-independence authorities encouraged agricultural encroachment of pastoralist lands (Sarone Ole Sena 1982). Unlike the tribes of Iran, the Maasai are not an important part of the national economy and lack established relationships with the larger society. The corresponding school participation rate is low.

What, then, is the present state of affairs in education for pastoralists in Kenya and Iran? To what extent does the emerging counter-ideology of Maasai farmers described by Galaty (1983) create more receptive conditions for the introduction of school facilities? How has the Islamic Revolution in Iran affected the educational development programmes for nomads? It would appear that political instability can only detract from the establishment of schools for nomads.

The nature of the literature also influences our understanding of efforts to provide education for nomads in Iran and Kenya. The authors' own perspectives and writing styles inevitably shape our thinking. The literature relating to Iran is primarily enthusiastic and descriptive in nature. The papers on the Kenyan efforts are more critical and analytical. This difference in style emphasizes perhaps unduly the contrast between the two.

There are no clear-cut policies or simplistic strategies that will overcome the difficulties of providing schools for nomads. The uniqueness of each nation-to-tribe interrelationship demands its own system of interaction and development policies. Nonetheless, any solution that is to be realistic and appropriate, regardless of geographical, political and cultural diversity, must include a careful consideration of these five educational factors. Ultimately however, political decisions are involved in the provision of schools and these will most likely shape the progress. National and provincial governments generally assume the responsibility of education for members of society. This necessary role of the state very often leads to conflict of interest between the aspirations and needs of the tribal society and the goals and needs of the nation. Dialogue, as well as genuine efforts by policy-makers to understand the special social and economic variables of nomadic life are indispensable to reducing the tension of differing viewpoints. The politics of education for nomads must enable them to be an integrated yet distinctive element in the fabric of national society.

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Pauline Heron
Department of Anthropology
McGill University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada