# Commission on Nomadic Peoples

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Nomadic Peoples, Number 21/22, December 1986

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# ON THE FORMATION OF A NICHE: PERIPATETIC LEGENDS IN CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

## by Michael J. Casimir

In the last decade the concept of the niche and its usefulness in the study of human society have been extensively discussed by many. Colinvaux (1982:394), for example, defines a niche as "... a specific set of capabilities for extracting resources for surviving hazard and for competing, coupled with a corresponding set of needs." A specific set of capabilities implies role performance and to every role there is a corresponding status.

Peripatetics have been defined as endogamous and primarily non-foodproducing nomads who subsist on the sale or exchange of goods and/or services. They live in most parts of the world among sedentary or other mobile populations, This inferior status derives largely from their traditional as low-status groups. roles and occupations and their apparently meagre possessions, a symbol for poverty. Not only do peripatetics generally appear to be among the poorest of the poor, in most parts of the world they daily experience that for their macro-society they are symbols of ill-mannered and immoral brutes and thieves, of bogymen and that any However strong group-cohesion may be, and comparison with them is an insult. whatever linguistic or other strategies such a peripatetic community may employ to strengthen group unity, external pressures exerted by the surrounding populations must be dealt with; feelings of being entirely dominated must be faced and sorted out at the psychological level. At the same time strategies must be evolved to use their primary resources, i.e. their customers, in the best possible manner.

## Guilt and Punishment

Assuming that all basic human psychological mechanisms are in principle the same, it can be postulated that psychological stress is worked out in a similar fashion. Of all human processes of cognition, of knowledge acquisition and experience, the following are of universal significance:

- 1. Every event has an origin, or cause which is traceable to natural or supernatural sources.
- 2. All actions which can be related to the norms and values of a given society exert an influence on the status of the actor.
- 3. The violation of social norms and values can be construed as guilt, or sin and may lead to feelings of guilt or shame in the violator. The latter may then atone for his doings through acts of repentance, or by accepting punishment.

4. Atonement and expiation generally consist of unpleasant actions or situations.

The term guilt will be used here to cover all violations of norms and values.

The violation of specifically divine decrees has often been defined as "sin" (e.g. Mitchell 1985:165); I shall, however, consider this here as a specific form, or subcategory of guilt. Following Lebra (1971), a distinction will be made, however, between the feelings of guilt and shame: guilt feelings arise when reciprocal relations are not respected in a social or religious context. Lebra writes:

"Guilt emerges ... when such a balance collapses, that is, when Ego has over-exercised his rights vis-a-vis Alter without fulfilling corresponding obligations ..." (p.243)

Lebra relates the feelings of shame, on the other hand, to contexts in which social structure is asymetrical:

"Shame results from whatever happens to undermine or denigrate the claimed status by revealing something however 'trivial' ... of the claimer which is inconsistent with the status." (p.246)

Guilt-fellings can be converted into feelings of shame, when a person publicly acknowledges his misdoings. As Lebra puts it:

"Guilt and shame may be exchanged on a social market as when the guilty person makes public apology so that the price of shame is payed to buy freedom from guilt." (p.254)

In all cultures physical or mental suffering is often interpreted as a punishment for an act of guilt. Even when no such wrongdoings can be identified, this kind of interpretation is validated by projecting the guilt on some ancestor in the hoary past. This logic of suffering as a symbol of punishment is taken to its extreme when the guilty are condemned to lifelong suffering, or punishment, as in the classical Greek myths of Tantalus, Sysyphus and Prometheus. In later times it is embodied in the legend of the Wandering Jew

"... a man in Jerusalem who, when Christ was carrying His Cross to Calvary and paused to rest for a moment on this man's doorstep, drove the Saviour away ..., crying aloud, 'Walk faster!' And Christ replied, 'I go, but you will walk until I come again!" (Anderson 1965:11)

Christ's verdict must be understood in the context of a society in which an apparently aimless migration (wandering) without apparent possessions (e.g. flocks, or goods in bulk) was viewed as the lot of the wretched. Just this apparently wandering without major, visible resources constitutes the image of peripatetics in most societies. Since these peripatetics at least partly accept the basic values of their macro-society, they too find this image deplorable and pitiful. But they must also live with it and manipulate it to their advantage, as far as this I suggest that many legends recorded among several peripatetic communities reflect this dilemma, while explaining, and almost justifying the origin of their niche. I follow Kirk (1970:31) in his definition of legends (as distinct from myths and folktales) as tales of a "... historical or historizing nature ... (which) are founded, or implicitly claim to be founded, on historical persons or events." The content of legends is, in very many cultures context and audience-specific; this is also true of the legends peripatetics narrate about their origins. Especially when, in certain situations the audience consists of non-peripatetics, such legends may

serve not only to reduce psychological stress, but also to 'manipulate' resources.

#### Legends about Peripatetics

These legends are of two broad types: those narrated about peripatetics by others, and those peripatetics themselves narrate. The basic theme in many of the legends of both types is that ancestral misbehaviour led to the present way of life. The earliest legend known to us, and which is now part and parcel of every historical study of 'Gypsies' is that narrated about the Luli, or Luri, who are reputed to have entered Iran during the reign of the Emperor Bahram V (known generally as Bahram Gur, 420 A.D. - 438 A.D.). According to this legend (cf. Dehhoda 1330 HS: 344-347) as narrated by Firdausi in his Shah Nemeh (Borxim edition, pp. 2258-2260) and by Hamza al-Isfahani (p. 38) the Emperor gifted these Luri an ox, an ass and 1000 measures of grain, so that they could till the land and become farmers. In return they were to play music. The Luri, however, ate up all the corn and meat and all they had after a while was the ass. Angered, the Emperor took them to task and sent them off to wander through the world and play Since then, the Luri wander in search of a way out of their troubles; and dogs and wolves are their companions. In this legend the Luri paid no heed to the Emperor's advice and squandered his gifts; as a consequence, they and their descendants wander around the world.

Here now is another example of a legend narrated about peripatetics, by sedentists, this time in Turkey (Garnett 1891:356-357):

"In the early days of their wanderings the Gipsy tribe arrived at Mehran, and during their sojourn there they constructed a wonderful machine which was to be worked by turning a wheel. All their efforts, however, to turn this wheel were in vain until, by the advice of an evil spirit under the guise of a holy man, or, as some say, a sorcerer, their chief, Chen, consented to marry his sister, Guin, a union which gave to the Gipsy nation the name of Chenguin, by which they are generally known in Turkey at the present day. This unnatural marriage the knowledge of a Moslem saint in the to neighbourhood, not only the parties to it, but the whole tribe were laid by the holy man under the following terrible curse:-'May you ... be scattered as outcasts and wanderers to the four corners of the earth, ever homeless, poor, and wretched, never enjoying the fruits of your labour, realising wealth, or acquiring the esteem of mankind."

Finally, the following legend has been reported from Afghanistan, where an informant of one peripatetic group (the Ghorbat) narrated it about another peripatetic group (the Jogi) (cf. Rao 1986):

"The Ğōgi are ... the descendants of Afğat, an Arab who lived in Medina at the time of the Prophet Mohammad. One day a small landowner mortgaged his plot of land to Afğat, but later when he returned to reclaim his land Afğat said it was his property. A quarrel began and finally both men appealed to the Prophet Mohammad. In the meanwhile, God asked the

archangel Gibrail to ask the land the truth about the matter and He sent word to the Prophet to wait for the land's reply. When Mohammad told Afgat that everything depended on the land's own reply, he went and buried all his money in the four corners of the plot and beseeched it to tell Gibrail that it When questioned the next day, the four belonged to him. 'We are Afgat's'. But God knew corners of the plot replied: that something was wrong and He made Gibrail and the Prophet They found a man in each of the four dig up the plot. corners, pulled them out and again questioned the plot. came the real answer: 'I'm God's, but for generations I've been the property of Säheb-e Mulk who mortgaged me to Afgat'. On hearing this God cursed Afgat, saying 'O wretched Gat, may you wander forever!".

I shall now take a closer look at a few legends which peripatetics themselves narrate about the origins of their lifestyles. Here, first are the legends themselves, listed according to the group concerned, in alphabetical order.

## Ghorbat (Afghanistan):

"Once there lived in Iran the Emperor Kayhan. The Prophet Mohammad sent ambassadors to all the Kings on earth. Kāyhan received his letter he trod on it and unceremoniously sent the ambassador back to the Prophet. When all the the Prophet how ambassadors returned home. they told respectfully his letters had been handled by the monarchs - only Kayhan had been arrogant and disrespectful. On this, the Prophet cursed Kāyhan, saying 'Since he trod on my letter, may his house be ruined!' Since then, we, the descendants of King Kayhan are scattered ... and live in tents". (translated from Rao 1982:220)

## 'Gypsies' (Europe and North America):

Unlike the other communities referred to here, among various traditionally peripatetic 'Gypsy' groups several legends have been recorded concerning the origins of their niche; for a recent discussion of these legends see Mirga (1985). There is a particularly great contextual variation in these legends, the most well known of these being, perhaps, that about Christ's Crucifixion and the forging of the Nails of the Cross by a 'Gypsy' smith. Clebert (1961:17-19) summarizes this legend, following Bercovici (1928) and de Ville (1956) as follows:

"Lorsque ... Jesus fut livre aux geoliers romains pour etre crucifie, deux soldats romains furent charges de se procurer quatre solides clous ... ils sortirent de l'enceinte de Jerusalem. Ils rencontrerent un Tzigane qui venait de dresser sa tente et d'installer son enclume. Les soldats lui ordonnerent de forger quatre clous et poserent devant lui les quarante kreutzers. ...

Le Tzigane, content d'avoir mis les quarante kreutzers dans sa poche avant d'avoir commence son travail, termina le quatrieme clou. Alors il attendit que ce clou refroidit ... (Mais) le clou restait incandescent ... Terrifie, le Tzigane chargea sa tente sur son ane et s'enfuit. ... Et ce cloud apparait toujours devant les tentes des descendants de l'homme qui forgea les clous pour crucifier Yeshua ben Miriam. Et quand le clou apparait, les Tziganes fuient. C'est pour cela qu'ils se deplacent toujours."

While this version of the legend portrays a purely negative attitude, condemning the 'Gypsy' smith and his descendants and explaining nomadism in terms of a punishment, there are other versions of this legend in which a positive view is taken on the whole, since the smith, when he learned what the Nails were for, hid, or stole the fourth Nail. These positive versions are sometimes used to explain that, unlike sedentists, 'Gypsies' are 'free' to go where they like, pursue any occupation, and may even steal (cf. Rao 1974:38, where a Sinti woman stole the fourth Nail), without being caught (cf. Salo 1977). Salo (1977:44) briefly sums up the negative and positive versions of this legend thus:

"Various versions of the Nail of the Cross legend account for the Gypsies' nomadism and success in theft. According to one story the Gypsies are rewarded for stealing the nail intended to pierce Jesus' heart by being forgiven for future thefts, but punished by being made to wander. Another has the Gypsies condemned to wander for having forged the nails for the crucifixion ... . In a third, nomadism is seen as a blessing given as a reward for having stolen the nail: Gypsies will never go hungry, they may order their lives as they please, may decide to move on when they wish. A fourth has the Gypsies rewarded by a promise of success in theft:

Yea, it was supposed to be a Gypsy fellow that stole the nail, that was supposed to go into his heart, or something. And ever since then, they say, the God's supposed to say, Christ, he says there'll always be Gypsies. As long there'll be Gypsies, there'll be stealing going on. And they'll never get caught. That's pretty well the truth, pretty well the truth..."

Salo further suggests that, while several 'Gypsies' are aware of one or more versions of this legend, they narrate them less out of conviction, than out of curiosity - more as an example of the image non-'Gypsies' have of 'Gypsies'. We know next to nothing about the specific contexts in which 'Gypsy' legends were narrated in the past, but at least some of these legends have been recorded. Here are two examples:

"Once upon a time a tribe suspected its chief of practicing incest. He and his followers were banished and a fearful curse was pronounced on them by a powerful magician: they should wander forever across the earth, never spend two nights in the same spot, never drink twice from the same spring, never ford the same river within one year." (Berovici 1929:25 in Berger n.d.:822, author's translation)

"God, having created the nations of the world, summons them

before Him. Having stopped to gather fruit, the Gypsies are late; God decrees they will always be so. The Gypsies are together with the Jews in Egypt, and are drowned in the Red Sea. The sole survivor, a blind and lame woman, marries her handsome savior, who turns out to be the Devil. 'And we were all her children ... There is no one more devilish than we. Since then, we are people who wander without a country, homeless ...(A1630)" (Maximoff 1948:110-114 in Salo 1977:44).

## Inaden (West Africa):

"The Inaden were living independently when a famine struck. The Prophet Mohammad passed through their territory and they asked Him for help. He gave them a strand of His hair and said, 'You will never know misery as long as you keep this strand of hair'. And indeed, the Inaden enjoyed prosperity. In time, they forgot that they owed their prosperity to the Prophet's strand of hair and sold it to some passing Arab caravan traders. Once again, the Inaden fell into misery, and since then the Arabs have been wealthy and the Inaden poor, begging their food from the mighty of this world." (Casajus, 1986)

### Killekyatha (South India):

"It is said that one ...Mahratta Okkaliga woman became intimate with a man of the Goldsmith caste named Kattare Kalachari and had seven sons by him. They were, of course, put out of caste, and the smith taught his sons to make dolls out of mats, leaves, pieces of leather, and earn their living by exhibiting marionettes before village audiences. The brothers of the woman, who were poor, were induced to join their nephews subsequently, and they formed a separate caste by themselves, reinforced by other accessions. It was after this that they migrated to different parts of southern India." (Nynjundayya & Iyer 1930, Vol. III:517-518 in Morab 1977:15)

## Mawken (the so-called 'Sea-Gypsies' of Southeast Asia):

"Once there lived in China a king's daughter who had a dog. When she grew up, she played with the dog and became pregnant. The king, angered, put the girl in a boat and let it drift down a great river toward the south. The boat floated in the sea and landed on an island. Here the girl bore a son, who in two days grew to manhood. The mother sent the lad to the other side of the island, and after his departure, changed herself into a young girl and went to meet him. The lad took her as his wife, and she bore the first Mawken." (Bernatzik 1938:45 in Sopher 1965:64)

### Qalandar (Pakistan):

"During the period of Sikander (Alexander), before Jesus or Mohammed ... our forefathers were zamindars (landowners) living a very happy life with land and many cattle.

One day a woman among our ancestors was preparing the evening meal at her house. There was a knock at the door. When she opened the door, there stood a beggar asking for something to eat. "Go and beg from other places first," she said, "my food is not prepared yet. But come back later." Some time later the beggar came back, but just at that moment the woman burned her hand and so she shouted at him, "Go away, you are like a dog sitting there begging."

Before he left, the beggar gave her a <u>bedua</u> (bad wish) and said, "your entire family will always wander around like a dog begging for food." ... A few months later, a big disaster came and destroyed all the buildings, crops, and animals, and the family was starving. The entire <u>biradari</u> (brotherhood) met and discussed the beggar's bedua. They decided to search for the beggar and apologize for the woman's sharp words.

After searching for many years they found the beggar and cried at his feet to please turn the bedua... The fakir told them that a bedua cannot be called back from God and that they would always have great disasters in their lives. "However," said the beggar, "to help you earn a daily living take this bear and this monkey, train them, and they will earn your bread... Since that time our life is dependent on our animals. We always have to move for two reasons. We cannot perform animal shows in one area every day, and if we have land, a disaster will come and destroy us..." (Berland 1982:75-76)

#### Waata (East Africa):

"Once upon a time, four people were walking along together in single file: Sky-God, a Gabbra man, a Waata man and a Boran man. Sky-God pretended to trip and fall. The Gabbra man, who was following him, murmured words of sympathy and averted his gaze from the Mighty One out of awe and respect. The Boran man immediately went to Sky-God's side and helped him to get up. The Waata man merely laughed. God said that henceforth, the Gabbra would be blessed with all the stock; the Boran would be blessed with the gift of cattle. The Waata, however, would always be beggars, dependent on the Gabbra for milk and must live to the West of a Gabbra camp and be an eternal object of mockery." (Kassam 1985:3; for other versions of this legend see Dahl 1979:177).<sup>2</sup>

All the legends mentioned here broadly follow a pattern which can be

identified in several other such peripatetic legends, and which can be dissected into three basic parts. These parts are: the beginning, the transgression and the resulting fate. Table I lists 18 such legends pertaining to 12 peripatetic groups in various parts of the world; all these eighteen legends are included fully in Casimir 1986. In most of these legends the beginning is characterized by high status and even princely heritage. The transgression is either against divine, or human order. The resulting fate is becoming peripatetic with, in most cases, the accompanying stigma of the peripatetic niche – namely, poverty, homelessness and subjugation.

#### Legends of Origin as Adaptive Strategy

Two recent types of contextual interpretation of legends are the historical (e.g. Luig 1985) and the ecological (e.g. Wright and Dirks 1983). Whereas in the former an attempt is made to reconstruct the history of a community by interpreting its legends more or less literally, in the latter it is assumed that legends mirror the strategies adopted by a group in new habitats. A contextual interpretation of peripatetic legends however, must be, I suggest, of a psychological nature. These legends largely illustrate how peripatetics see that part of their niche which is their status. Figure 1 illustrates the universal expression of the relation between transgression of norms and values, guilt and punishment. It shows that the cognitive process found in peripatetic legends is in fact the reverse of this expression.

On the one hand the legends are a consolation to them, since they assure them of a decent genealogy and also of the fact that they themselves are not to blame for their present condition. On the other hand, these legends can serve-and have done so in the past - to get the maximum out of their host societies. Noble ancestry, true remorse and destitution are, in many societies factors which contribute to the success of peripatetics in their spontaneous dealings with customers. Several 'Gypsy' groups migrating in western Europe in the fifteenth century made use of such a strategy. Calling their leaders Princes, Dukes or Counts, many such groups proclaimed themselves christian pilgrims trying to expiate their sins; they were well received by local authorities (cf. de Vaux 1970:103). In an entirely different context, the following narrative (personal communication A. Rao) may be cited; it is a good example of the formation of a legend, as an adaptive strategy. In November 1976, in the course of conversation, recorded in northern Afghanistan, an old man of the peripatetic Pikraj-e Balkhi group narrated:

"In King Amanollah's time, when Nadir Shah was a minister, he came out touring one day. He saw us and stopped his horse. He asked us why we roamed around, and he offered us land near Nahar-e Boka (in Mazar province). He started official proceedings to give us land. But we refused this land saying that our Pirh (patron Saint/holy man) - you know that we don't have one! - had cursed us saying that we should roam around forever in destitution."

It is likely that in societies where a large proportion of the population is not entirely sedentary, peripatetics too will be socially less marginal, and that consequently their legends will not be centred around a basic guilt-punishment axis. Further, following Lebra's argument (1971:253), one could speculate that the less monotheistic a society's religious ideology is, the less guilt or sin-centred are the legends of its peripatetics. This is perhaps, particularly true of peripatetics in

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PERIPATETIC GROUP	IN THE BEGINNING	THE TRANSGRESSION	THE RESULTING FATE	AUTHOR
BE-DA (Ladakh)	1. Princes 2. Queen	fraternal discord Adultery	Dispossession Begging	Erdmann (1984: 154)
CABULIA LOHAR (North India)	Followers of the King Maharana Pratap	The king disobeys Kalka Mata	Defeat, dispersal, noma- dism and smithery	Misra (1977: 14-15)
CHORBAT	1. King	Insulting the Pro- phet Mohammad	Dispossession, disper- sal and nomadism	Rao (1982: 220)
(Afghanistan)	2. King	Unknown transgression by ancestor	Hunger and nomadism	Rao and Casımir (in press)
	1. A wise man and a woman	Disobedience of wife	Origin of group	Wlislocki (1890: 7-8)
"GYPSIES"	2. Creation	<ul><li>a. Disrespect towards</li><li>6od</li><li>b. Intercourse with the</li><li>Devil</li></ul>	Poverty Homelessness	Salo (1977: 44)
(Europe & U.S.A.)	3. Adam & Eve	Swindling God ·	Abandoned by God, destitu- tion and nomadism	Piasere (1985: 249)
	4. A tribal chief	Suspected incest	Eternal nomadism	Berger (n.d.: 615)
	5. A Gypsy smith	Forging the nails for the Cross	Wandering	Clébert (1961: 16-19
TRADEN (Niger)	Independent people	Ingratitude towards the Prophet Mohammad	Hisery, destitution, subjugation	Casajus (1986)
KILLEKYATHA (South India)	A Mahratta Okkaliga woman and a goldsmith	Intercaste sexual intercourse	Outcasted, migration, present occupation	Morab (1977: 15)
CRIOTS MALINKE (Curnea)	A man Sourakhata	Plotting against the Prophet Mohammad, in- juring him and drin- king his blood	Eternal nomadism for him and his descendants	Zemp (1966: 615)
MANKEN (Southeast Asia)	Princess	<ul><li>a. Intercourse with</li><li>a dog,</li><li>b. Incest (mother/son)</li></ul>	Origin of first Mawken	Sopher (1965: 64)
QALANDAR (Pakistan)	Landowners	Refusal of alms	Nomadism, beggary	Berland (1982: 75f)
SHEIKH MOHAMMADI (Afghanistan)	Sons of Sheikh Ro- hani, a saintly man	Gambling and other forms of misbehaviour	Dispersion and no- madism	Olesen ( <b>1984)</b>
ŞULATB (Arabia)	Relatively high ran- king ancestors	a. Incest (mother/son) b. Forsaking Husayn,the Prophet's grandson du- ring the battle of Qerbala	Origin of first Sulaib	Enzykl, des Islam (old ed. 533)
WAATA (East Africa)	A waata man	1. Mocking God 2. Disrespect towards God 3. Disrespect towards God	Beggary, dependency,ob- ject of mockery; hunting, never own any stock, begga- ry, dependence	Kassam (1985; 3) Dahl (1979: 177)

Fig. 1 The universal expression of the relation between transgression of norms and patetic legends is the reverse of this expression and is indicated here by ( values, guilt and punishment (  $\longrightarrow$  ). The cognitive process found in peri-

overwhelmingly Hindu or Buddhist societies, in which not only is renunciation institutionalised in the <u>āshrama</u> theory but, as Thapar (1982:274) writes, the "... joining of an order by the renouncer often brought him back into performing a social role." It is against this background of noble renunciation that for example the following legend collected by Misra (1977:11-12) among the Gadulia Lohar of North India, and generally told about the group must be understood:

"The Gadulia Lohar claim Chittorgarh as their ancestral home which they had to leave in the past as it fell into the hands of the Mogul army in 1568... Udai Singh, the then ruler of Mewar, fled into the hills; still Mewar refused to acknowledge the authority of the Muslim rulers of Delhi. After the death of Udau Singh in the year 1572, his son Maharana Pratap Singh, offered uncompromising resistance to the Moguls ... Before his death he exacted a pledge from his chiefs that the country shall not be abandoned to the enemy... Tradition has it that the group now known as Gadulia Lohar also left Chittor when it fell to the enemy. Along with other warriors, they fought the war to the best of their means. ... when Chittor fell, the great warriors and the 'Gadi Lohars' vowed before leaving the fortress that till Chittor was liberated, they would not (1) go up to the fort of Chittor, (2) live in houses, (3) sleep on cots, (4) light lamps, and (5) keep ropes for drawing water from wells."

I have tried to show how legends which peripatetics themselves narrate about their origins all follow the same basic pattern; the thread running through them all is the search for guilt, the search for the sinner. Many of the legends narrated about peripatetics by others also follow this basic pattern. This does not mean that peripatetics do not narrate other legends as well; it means simply that this type of legend is narrated among almost all peripatetic communities studied so far. The peripatetic niche is thus, probably the most uniformly and universally represented one in human oral tradition.

#### **Notes**

- I. I would like to thank Dr. Shams Anwari-Alhosseyni for translating the relevant passages.
- 2. This legend was narrated by Waata informants (Kassam: personal communication, Dahl: personal communication).

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