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Studying nomads: an autobiographical reflection

Philip Carl Salzman

Nomads first captured my imagination when I read of the "fierce and turbulent race of republicans" of northern Somaliland in I.M. Lewis' *A Pastoral Democracy*. These Somali are wide ranging nomads, living in one of the world's harshest deserts, raising and subsisting on their camel herds and small stock by following the sparse and erratic rainfall and the resultant scanty pasturage. Often coming into conflict over the meagre but precious natural resources, they pursue and protect their interests through individual and group action, through violent "self help".

Somali pastoral nomads are individualistic and independent, each male adult carrying responsibility for his family, his herds, and his strategies, each repeatedly calculating and acting and going his own way, with high stakes of livelihood constantly at risk. At the same time, however, the Somali cooperate among themselves and acknowledge collective interests, recognizing public rights in land and pasturage, and establishing collective responsibility for vengeance or restitution in cases of injury and death.

Both the independence and the cooperation struck me as esthetically appealing and morally commendable, and my admiration and romanticism was aroused by the intrepid hardiness and the elegant austerity of the northern Somali nomads. But why was it as nomads that I thought of the Somali, rather than as pastoralists or tribesmen or Africans or Muslims? It seemed to me that their

independent individuality, their intrepid bellicosity, and their collective solidarity all arose from and was intimately related to their wide ranging nomadism, their ready mobility and ease of movement, which both necessitated and made possible action and responsibility and provided at one and the same time opportunities and constraints unknown to sedentary peoples. For the Somali nomads, the people, households, and livestock – the main means of livelihood – could be moved to optimize basic goals: political objectives such as security could be advanced by retreating from threats or by mobilizing allies; economic objectives such as production or exchange could be advanced by relocating to areas of superior pasturage or to markets; religious needs could be served by gaining access to sources of supernatural power, such as shrines. The specific forms of Somali social life – the balanced set of clan and lineage groupings, the egalitarian nature of status relations, the decentralization of decision making – seemed to be intricately intertwined with and dependent upon the nomadism so central to northern Somali life.

It was thus with particular interest that I read Frederik Barth's account of the Basseri in *Nomads of South Persia*, for while the Basseri engaged in impressively extensive nomadism, the nature of their society and way of life contrasted markedly with that of the Somali nomads, so much so that the differences seemed more significant than the simi-

larities. Basseri nomadism was centrally organized, carefully coordinated, corporately executed, regularly timed, and repetitive in direction and spatial objective; an orderly, predictable, oscilinear migration pattern attuned to the macro-environmental variations of major altitude and seasonal differences as the Basseri moved to the high valleys of the Zagros range during the hot summer and to the lowlands during the cold winters. Opposite in major respects was the individualistically directed, irregularly timed, unrepeatable and uncoordinated migrations of the multitude of Somali nomads; a myriad of unpredictable, direction shifting, criss-crossing opportunistic adjustments to micro-environmental variations of rainfall and pasturage alloyed by seasonal shifts and sociopolitical constraints. Basseri small stock, mainly sheep, pastoralism was as an economic enterprise oriented to the marketplace, and many subsistence needs were filled by exchange. Somali camel pastoralism, supplemented by the raising of small stock, was primarily oriented toward subsistence, toward direct consumption by the nomads themselves.

Equally disparate was social organization, with the social fragmentation of independent households and a thin network of bilateral kin characterizing the Basseri, and strong corporate groups based upon patrilineal descent and contract characterizing the Somali. Tribal organization among the Basseri was based upon political allegiance to the tribal chief, who provided an ongoing central authority used in organizing and coordinating tribal activities, whereas among the Somali tribal organization above the corporate vengeance groups was a contingent one of alliances based upon descent and contract without permanent offices or central coordinating powers; thus the Basseri had a permanent, hierarchial and centralized tribal

political structure and the Somali had a contingent, egalitarian, and decentralized tribal political structure. As among the Basseri, the chief made the final administrative decisions, so in matters of law, conflict and enforcement, the chief was the authority and referee, supporting his decisions with legitimate coercion; among the Somali all matters of social control were in the hands of lineage/alliance members, with decision and enforcement a matter of collective determination and action.

Many of the differences between the Somali and Basseri nomads seemed to me closely tied to the differences in the environmental settings of northern Somaliland (now Somalia) and southern Persia (Iran). Rainfall and thus water and pasturage were scanty, erratic and unpredictable in the severe desert reaches of the Somali, while the rainfall of the Basseri *il-rah* (tribal road) through the Zagros mountains, between the lowland plain and the highland plateau, was considerable, relatively dependable, and more or less predictable. Thus the differences in Somali and Basseri nomadism, as a strategy of adaptation, exploiting resources and avoiding deleterious conditions, reflected the environmental differences of the two regions. There were also very important differences in the social environment which were partially reflections of the environmental differences; most notably, there were a much higher population density, a substantial agricultural population, and a significant state presence in south Persia, which provided for the Basseri a crowded and complex social milieu quite unlike the almost entirely nomadic, tribal milieu of northern Somaliland, which was tempered only slightly by sedentary, commercial, and colonial presences on the coast. The differences in the social environments were themselves to a substantial extent reflections of differences in physio-biotic

	SOMALI	BASSERI
PRINCIPAL SOURCE	I. M. Lewis, <i>A Pastoral Democracy</i>	Frederik Barth, <i>Nomads of South Persia</i>
LOCATION	Northern Somalia, Horn of Africa, East Africa	Fars Province, southern Iran (Persia)
NOMADIC MOVEMENT		
organization	decentralized, uncoordinated, individualistically executed	centralized, coordinated, corporately executed
timing	irregular	regular and predictable
direction and course	opportunistic and variable	specified and repetitive
adaptive orientation	micro-environmental variations of rain- fall and pasturage	major altitude and seasonal variation (highland/ lowland migration)
ECONOMY		
primary livestock	camels	sheep
orientation	subsistence consumption	market exchange
source of consumption goods	own production	commercial and barter exchange
SOCIAL ORGANIZATION	corporate group framework	fragmented household and bilaterality
principle tribal organization	patrilineal descent segmentary lineage system	kinship and alliance political allegiance to chief
political structure	contingent polity based upon alliances of corporate groups egalitarian, social control by lineages	ongoing political offices based upon chiefship hierarchical, social control by chiefs
ENVIRONMENT	desert	plains/mountains/ plateau
rainfall	scanty, erratic	moderate, dependable
pasturage and water sources	scanty, unpredictable	generous, widely available
other population	otherwise unoccupied	agricultural peasants, town and urban centers, state

environment, for agriculture, population density and effective government intervention all require a significant resource base, a base such as was present in south Persia but not in northern Somaliland.

Reflecting upon the differences between the Somali and Basserri nomads, as well as among other nomadic peoples encountered in the anthropological literature, and attempting to discern patterned relationships, relationships between sets of social and environmental factors, I became persuaded that egalitarian tribal structure and contingent political alliances such as those characteristic of the Somali were consistent with and even dependent upon wide ranging and opportunistic nomadism and upon the sparse and erratic environment which seems to require this form of nomadism. Likewise, a hierarchial tribal structure with ongoing authority roles and permanent boundaries, such as that of the Basserri, is consistent with, dependent upon, and supportive of highly organized and orderly long range nomadism, which itself requires a fairly high density and dependibility of environmental resources. A good number of intervening variables – such as ease or difficulty of administrative control and sanctioning, availability of non-pastoral economic, especially agricultural resources, and possibility and value of centralization and coordination – connect the nature of the environment and the form of nomadism or feed into these relations so as to reinforce them. The upshot of these reflections was that nomadic peoples differ greatly from one another even in those characteristics directly related to nomadism, and that these differences are tied in a systematic fashion to profound social features such as tribal and political structure. These views I set out in my M.A. thesis at the University of Chicago and shortly thereafter published under the title "Political Organization among No-

madic Peoples" (*Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 111: 115-131, 1967; later reprinted in Yehudi Cohen's *Man in Adaptation*). The perspective provided was the one with which I approached fieldwork for my Ph.D.

This perspective and formulation did not go without benefit of response or without being informed by criticism. Robert Paine gently expressed reservations about the general thesis by referring to the case of the Nuer, pointing out that a regular, predictable and spatially linear migration pattern was here associated with an – indeed, the classic – egalitarian, decentralized, contingent polity. My response, adequate on the ethnographic level, but less so on a theoretical level, was that the Nuer were pastoralists who were deeply involved in other forms of extraction and production, and whose major migration was between areas of cultivation and areas of fishing and which was thus not a pastoral migration, and therefore the case was not relevant to my thesis, which specifically dealt with pastoral migrations among predominantly pastoral peoples. But Paine's criticism was trenchant at the theoretical level, for it indicated that in a formulation such as mine, migration pattern was an empirical index, and a relatively crude one at that, of other environmental, social and economic variables, such as resource density, population density, and resource control, and also indicated that characterizing a population by a single feature, such as pastoralism, can greatly oversimplify ethnographic complexity and mislead the observer and analyst. The former point is critical in any social analysis and theoretical formulation, and helped me in differentiating factors at different levels of abstraction. The latter point proved to be particularly significant in understanding what I observed during my fieldwork.

A similar exchange took place with Clifford Geertz, who was at pains to point out, as I prepared to go off to Iran for fieldwork, that my theoretical framework emphasized environmental impact upon social institutions and neglected the underlying cultural component, for adaptations such as pastoral nomadism are cultural constructions brought to an environment rather than behavior patterns generated by the environment. Once again, my ethnographic response was sound, that is, that I was taking pastoral nomadism as given and examining its variations and the variations in social organization in relation to environmental variations in order that I might establish the concomitant variations upon which any sound, substantive, general knowledge is built. But once again, the criticism could not be ignored at a deeper theoretical level, for there was a naive materialist bias in my arguments, and this was made possible, as Geertz saw, by my taking as given precisely what, in a more profound inquiry, must be the object of inquiry, *viz.* the commitment, in a world of alternatives, to pastoral nomadism as a particular mode of adaptation. This wider question expanded my horizons in ways that influenced my research in Baluchistan and subsequent thinking, and continues to haunt me, and, I fancy, anthropology to the present day.

The Baluch say that after God made the world, he took what was left over and made Baluchistan. How is it I chose to work in Baluchistan; what perverse cultural commitment was at work, driving me to such a place? Well, there were several cultural commitments playing a part: One was language, for I judged that an Iranian language, being Indo-European rather than Semitic or Turkic, would be easier to work with, and this militated in favor of Iran, Afghanistan or Pakistan and against Turkey and Arab countries, the other possibilities for

studying nomads in the Middle East. The other cultural commitment was anthropological, in that I believed that a study within the same cultural area as Barth's Basseri, but of a nomadic people in a geographical area much more difficult than the relatively lush Zagros range, would shed light upon the differences between nomadic peoples and the environmental features associated with those differences. And what area could be at once more different and less favorable than the Zagros, but Baluchistan?

There were also non-cultural, circumstantial reasons for choosing Iran as the site for field research, and these were access and stability. In many Middle Eastern countries at that time, it was impossible to get permission to carry out research, or even to venture into the countryside; this was particularly true of the Arab countries, which were very skeptical about foreigners in general and about Westerners in particular, not to mention official policies and unofficial attitudes toward individuals of Jewish extraction. Iran was a country where foreigners were welcomed and where anthropological research was accepted and tolerated if not understood or encouraged. And there was every prospect that, with increasing modernization and development in the country at large, and with expansion of Iranian institutions of higher education and their social science components, more understanding and encouragement of anthropological research would develop and permission to do research would become routinized. Thus the stability of Iran under the modernizing regime of the Shah boded well for ongoing research; the populations in the cities and countryside were relatively quiet with few signs of disorder, and the regime was well entrenched and seemed unlikely to fall or even to shift policies. This was a fair and desirable contrast with the round robin of coups and riots

so prevalent elsewhere, which were so likely to throw in jeopardy residence, research, and safety.

Upon arrival in Tehran for my first period of field research in 1967-68 (later to be supplemented by further stints, 14 months in 1972-73 and 3 months in 1976), I was in my Baluchistan interest encouraged and advised by Brian Spooner who was residing in Iran as Assistant Director for the British Institute of Persian Studies and who was engaged in research on southern Baluchistan. In accord with my interests in pastoral peoples, and a coincidental happy division of ethnographic territory, I was directed toward the Sarhad of Baluchistan, the northern highland region, home of the warrior tribesmen unstudied in modern times but immortalized in General R.E.H. Dyer's *Raiders of the Sarhad*. With letters of introduction in hand, I finally made my way to that most famous, or infamous, of Sarhadi tribes, the Yarahmadzai, who by then had taken the name Shah Nawazi. It was the Shah Nawazi that was to provide my home base, my primary subject of study, my friends, and my teachers for the time I lived in Baluchistan, and it was to provide the ethnographic foundation and reference point for my subsequent anthropological work.

I was received by the respected Shah Nawazi chief, Sardar Han Mahmud, a powerful man of active disposition, and his more contemplative brother, Nezar Mahmud, who undertook to place me in a herding camp with those who became my hosts, the Dadolzai, a well regarded lineage with whom I came to be identified by Shah Nawazi tribesmen.

Even while living in a herding camp of black goat hair tents surrounded by vast desert wastes, amidst very authentic seeming tribesmen with beards and turbans, long shirts and baggy trousers, and tribeswomen with dresses adorned

by traditional Baluchi embroidery and head-to-toe veils, and herds of sheep, goats and camels, I became increasingly alarmed during those first weeks by the extent to which the Dadolzai, and presumably the Shah Nawazi at large, did not fit my stereotype of pastoral nomads, for it became quickly apparent that these tribesmen were engaged in a great variety of productive and economic activities, and thus were by no means 'pure' pastoral nomads. In addition to herding sheep, goats and camels, they cultivated date palms, grew grain, hunted and gathered, engaged in trade and smuggling, and labored for pay, all nonpastoral activities. Even their nomadism, the *sine qua non* of authenticity, proved to be problematical, for the main migration of the year went the wrong way, from the cooler summer highlands to the ghastly torrid lowlands, and left the flocks of sheep and goats behind in the care of shepherds! The tribesmen were, of all things, going "to eat dates" at their groves.

What I was observing, it slowly dawned on me, was not a system of specialized pastoral production, but rather a generalized system of exploitation and production, a multi-resource economy. Nomadism, here, was not only a tool of pastoral production, but made possible the exploitation of a variety of resources spatially separated. This was obviously important for understanding Shah Nawazi social and political organization. Which brings me back to Paine's comments mentioned above. The reason that the case he cited, the Nuer, did not fit with my earlier theoretical formulation was that the main migration pattern was not a pastoral one but rather a multi-resource one – from grain cultivating areas to fishing areas – and so did not reflect the same kind of climatic, demographic, and social features that a pastoral migration of the same pattern would have had. The moral is that the formal

aspects of a 'main' migration pattern is not as good an index of demographic and social characteristics relevant for understanding social and political organization as is adaptation and productive patterns in general and the part that nomadism plays in them. The theoretical importance of this point is reinforced by the substantive ethnographic fact that most 'pastoral' societies are by no means exclusively pastoral, but are to some significant degree involved in other forms of extraction and production, as the Baluch and Nuer are. It thus became obvious to me that it was necessary to set aside ideal typical notions of pure nomadic pastoralists and to attend to empirical ethnographic variation in degrees of specialization/generalization. This must be the starting point in trying to relate adaptation to social and political organization.

But at least one could relate environmental characteristics to patterns of adaptation. Surely the generalized, multi-resource subsistence economy of the Shah Nawazi, and the need for nomadism, was a function of the sparsity and unavailability of resources in Baluchistan. The multi-resource extraction, the variety of products and the nomadism that allowed people to move between resources, were necessary – were they not? – for existence and survival in this marginal environment, this land of stone and sand, this land of the occasional, reluctant rainshower and rivulet. Can we not, in short, explain the Shah Nawazi adaptation by the environmental circumstances in which it is found? The answer, of course, is "no". Any human occupation of the area depends upon an adaptation which takes account of the environmental conditions, but there are many kinds of adaptations and at least several appropriate for the Sarhad of Baluchistan. For example, since pacification of the area by Reza

Shah, Persian agriculturalists from central Iran have come to the Sarhad of Baluchistan and established villages, making their living from cultivation based upon irrigation by *qanat* (underground irrigation tunnels drawing on the water table at higher altitudes). Even more persuasive is the extensive irrigation cultivation that characterized the area before the Shah Nawazi tribe arrived some two hundred years ago, as evidenced by the multitude of *qanat* ruins from an earlier period. The arrival and expansion and occupation by the tribes signaled a nomadization and pastoralization of the region. The environmental conditions of the Sarhad did not force pastoral nomadism on the tribes; it was the tribes that forced pastoral nomadism on the Sarhad. The tribesmen brought nomadism and pastoralism with them, and their adaptation in the Sarhad can only be regarded as a synthesis of their technology, organization, and values, on the one hand, and the environmental conditions of the region, on the other. Various forms of adaptation were possible, but the cultural commitments – cognitive, in the form of knowledge, such as technology; and affective, as in value, such as independence – brought by the tribesmen guided them to select certain forms of adaptation and reject others. Thus Geertz was correct in pointing to the cultural element in adaptation, to the independent impact that cultural commitments have in influencing, in conjunction with other factors, patterns of human action such as adaptation. Such observations led me to a theoretical position which emphasizes the multiple independent influences in any particular chain of causality and lying behind any particular outcome. This view, which sees the world in a pluralist perspective, stresses multi-causality, focuses upon the interaction of cognitive, affective, technological, demographic, organizational and environmental fac-

tors as the processes generating the patterns of human custom and action we wish to understand. It seems to me that it is in understanding these processes of interaction that we shall further systematic knowledge of human life and its varieties.

Multiplicity is not, however, limited to different kinds of influences in human life, but is evident within each of the kinds of influence. Just as there are many habitats that can be selected from a particular environment, so too there is multiplicity in any particular culture, particular society, and particular personality pattern. Each contains a variety of elements, sometimes only uneasily compatible, which in effect provides, within each culture, society, or personality pattern, a set of alternatives. At any given time, some of the alternatives will deemphasized, or recessive, while others are acted upon. But at other times, elements previously deemphasized can be activated, and those previously operative can fall into disuse. There are various ways in which elements not in use or not manifested strongly can be maintained in the repertoire, as through verbal assertion, literary record, ritual manifestation, occasional use, or minority commitment. The result is that actors have a range of possibilities to draw upon, and that in times of change, whether cyclical or developmental, alternative patterns are available and accessible within the given repertoire.

This multiplicity can be seen among the Shah Nawazi in several sectors. There is multiformity in political organization through the co-existence of principles and institutions of both segmentary and hierarchical nature: descent, manifested in a lineage system, militates in favor of independence, equality, and decentralization; seniority, manifested in a chieftainship, militates in favor of dependence and interdependence, status dif-

ferentiation, and centralization. From the dialectic of these organizational alternatives comes a structural openness which is, in practice, flexibility. Similarly, the multi-resource economy incorporates many types of extraction and production, each type providing an alternative to others, each type holding the potential to expand and replace others, given appropriate conditions. The extractive and productive complex thus contains a range of elements which can be shifted and re-arranged into a multiplicity of combinations and patterns. In identity and self-identification too, there is an impressive plurality: One facet is the warrior tribesman, recklessly raiding abroad or tenaciously defending at home, attached unhesitatingly and irrevocably to his tribe, tribal section, maximal lineage, or minimal lineage according to structural relevance. Another facet is the hardy nomad, dwelling in black goat-hair tents, moving easily across the rugged terrain, drawing a living from the harsh and reluctant environment by shrewdly husbanding livestock, date palms, and small patches of annual cultivation. A third facet is submission to God, the committed Muslim, ritually clean, devoted to the Word, acting according to the prescriptions and proscriptions of Islam. These facets, which can be maintained as complementary aspects of identity, also provide alternatives to be drawn upon and emphasized in particular situations or a longer term developmental process.

So what I discovered in this simple society based upon a form of kinship organization, built of small and scattered communities characterized by face to face relations, deriving subsistence from generalized primary production of rather meagre dimensions, in which people are little insulated from environmental features and climatic conditions, was that the multiplicity of folk models and plurality of behavioral patterns threw doubt

on analytic characterizations emphasizing a unitary cultural configuration, an integrated and consistent symbol system, a single skeletal social structure, a solely dominant infrastructure, a coherent deep structure, a typical personality, or any other formulation which ignored the polymorphism found among, as it seems, any human population, and which attempts to reduce the complexity of any human collectivity to one or another conveniently formulated characteristic. Perhaps we have sometimes been a bit too concerned with analytic elegance and theoretical power to take into account the complexities we must if we are to succeed in understanding how people are social and how they are cultural and how they are now one thing and now another.

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Résumé

Au début de mes recherches sur les nomades je me suis consacré à l'étude des différences entre les tribus dont le degré est variable – elles peuvent être par exemple relativement démocrates, égalitaires et décentralisées, comme les Somali ou bien au contraire hiérarchiques, stratifiées et centralisées comme les Basseri. Pendant mes travaux sur le terrain au Balouchistan j'ai constaté la variété extraordinaire qui existe à l'intérieur de chaque tribu, la multiplicité de leurs arrangements sociaux, la manière selon laquelle les orientations dans la production, dans l'organisation et dans l'identité se succèdent d'une façon diachronique selon le contexte.

Resumen

Me inicié en los estudios nómades enfocando las diferencias entre tribus; tanto el contraste entre grupos tribales relativamente democráticos, egalitarios y descentralizados como por ej. los Somali y grupos más jerárquicos, estratificados y centralizados como los Basseri. Durante los trabajos de campo en Baluchistán me he percatado de la considerable diferenciación interna en cada tribu, de la multiplicidad en sus arreglos sociales y de la manera en la cual la orientación y el énfasis en la producción, en la organización y la identidad alternan y se transforman en relación con las condiciones cambiantes.

Philip Carl Salzman, a professor of anthropology at McGill University, was in 1978 responsible for founding the *Commission on Nomadic Peoples* and served as chairman until 1993; in 1980 he founded the journal *Nomadic Peoples* and served as editor until 1990.