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PERIPATETIC COMMUNITIES: AN INTRODUCTION

by Joseph C. Berland and Matt T. Salo

The papers included in this volume are submitted with the intention of expanding our understanding of nomadic adaptations beyond the traditional domains of pastoral herding and hunter-gathering strategies. Because we now have a sound, though still rudimentary, body of research on other nomadic populations an international conference was called for 1985 to discuss and organize this evidence. Drawing on individuals with research based on first-hand, participant observation, the editors, in cooperation with the Commission on Nomadic Peoples, organized the first International Symposium on Peripatetic Societies: An Overlooked Adaptation to coincide with the 1985 American Anthropological Association annual meeting in Washington, D.C. Nineteen international scholars attended and presented formal papers on their current research among peripatetic communities ranging from nomadic artisans and traders to specialized entertainers. Several of the presentations relied heavily on research still in progress and are not yet ready for publication. The papers selected for this collection exemplify the broad goals of the symposium and are offered with two major objectives in mind. First, they extrapolate, define and illustrate some of the parameters of peripatetic adaptations throughout the world. Second, they are submitted as a modest first cooperative effort toward both broadening and refining the notion of "nomadism" and the role of peripatetics among other communities in space and time.

Peripatetics' Niche: A New Paradigm In Perspective

Both the prehistorical and classical records indicate that countless generations of rural, urban and many pastoral populations have experienced brief, but usually recurrent, contacts with spatially mobile groups such as basket-makers, tinkers and weavers; mimes, magicians and musicians; horse dealers and nostrum peddlers; caravaneers and other members of peripatetic communities of craftsmen, entertainers, traders and transporters. Today, as in millenia past, children look forward to the periodic visits of carnivals, puppet shows, jugglers and storytellers. In turn, their parents count on the recurrent visits of various craftsmen and peddlers for replacement or repair of personal possessions, household utensils and farm implements. While these groups of peripatetics are the most widely dispersed and pervasive of all subsistence strategies involving spatial mobility, we have had, until recently, little substantive knowledge about these ubiquitous nomads, their culture, social structure and organization.

Across the centuries descriptions and explanations regarding the nature of diverse peripatetic communities have amounted to little more than pseudo-scientific reiterations of common misinterpretations and hoary stereotypes prevalent among sedentary societies. Unfortunately these spurious perceptions and interpretations have been perpetuated by the social scientists' reliance on second-hand reports and cursory observations. While looming large in romantic literature, peripatetics have been overlooked in the mainstream social sciences by historians, sociologists and especially anthropologists specializing in the study of small-scale societies. By-in-large, they have been either ignored or simply dismissed as social anomalies. From an ethnographic perspective the dearth of information on such groups represents a

conspicuous void in the massive and often meticulously documented record explicating the structure and organization of human communities. By the same token, it would seem at the ethnological level that many generalizations about economic organization, stratification and culture change may be even more coarse and incomplete than hitherto thought. We find this particularly remarkable given the pervasive distribution of peripatetic specialists throughout the social fabric of Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas - wherever complex social systems exist. In fact, in most of South and Southwest Asia, from as few as three to as many as thirty distinct, endogamous groups of peripatetic specialists annually visit practically every village and metropolitan setting. Much the same is true for most European and American communities. Recent documentation has shown that every major North American city has been host for anywhere from six to a dozen peripatetic groups on a regular basis for at least a century or more.

Undoubtedly there are numerous reasons underlying the apparent lack of interest in peripatetic populations among professional anthropologists - not least of which may be the all too frequent refusal of funding resources to support research on what their review boards perceive as marginal, itinerant ne'er-do-wells. Although it is true that peripatetics generally enjoy a very low social status in the eyes of more permanently settled populations, this does not de facto place them as economically insignificant relative to urban, rural or pastoral communities. We suspect that their often perceived status as marginal beggars, pariahs and vagabonds has inhibited the willingness of professionals to ask the impertinent question: "... what is their role in society?" Since they are so ancient and pervasive throughout the communities comprising complex social systems, could it be they occupy a distinct niche and that their lifestyle and subsistence pursuits are systematic responses to a ubiquitous resource base?

Over the past two decades, a small, but growing number of widely dispersed field studies, have begun to indicate positive responses to each of these questions. Drawing on the available ethnographic literature and based on nearly fifteen years research experience among nomadic artisans and entertainers in Southwest Asia, Berland (1979, 1982, 1983, 1986) has offered the notion of a distinct peripatetics' niche - the regular demand for specialized goods and/or services that more sedentary or pastoral communities cannot, or will not support on a permanent basis. The choice of "peripatetic" as a construct was selected primarily because Berland felt that this term is semantically more neutral and in keeping with its Sanskrit equivalent pārvātān, emphasizing planned and systematic, rather than hap-hazard movement. From another perspective, Salo, drawing on nearly twenty years field research coupled with an exhaustive examination of historical records dealing with American and European peripatetics has emphasized the diachronic and synchronic variation and flexibility among a variety of Western Gypsy and Traveler groups. Working independently, Salo has been developing and refining the notion of a socioeconomic niche stressing the exploitation of social rather than natural resources in larger ecocultural systems (1975, 1976, 1979, 1982a,b, 1986). Other related and equally constructive concepts have been offered such as service nomads (Hayden 1979); commercial nomads (Acton 1981); non-food-producing nomads (Rao 1982); and symbiotic nomads (Misra 1982). Each of these approaches emphasizes that flexible skills and knowledge about resources in the larger social systems they exploit are key elements towards understanding peripatetic adaptations. Comprehensively searching the social science research record, Rao (1986) has recently summarized the history of peripatetic research and Gmelch (1986) has tackled the job of reviewing this literature for the Annual Review of Anthropology.

Since ours was the first international symposium primarily devoted to field studies among peripatetics the conference provided an opportunity for investigators, many unknown to one another as well as to those specializing in nomadic strategies, to meet and share common concerns. The symposium also offered both formal and informal opportunities for discussions among participants. Of particular concern was the difficulty of attracting "students" to follow-up on current research or replicate previous investigations towards enhancing both the reliability and validity of our knowledge claims. This is especially distressing because most peripatetic communities are "closed systems" and it often takes years to establish and maintain the necessary levels of rapport to obtain candid and valid information. While readily discernible in the individual papers, several common denominators evolved through our interactions that merit brief summary.

Peripatetics: Common Denominators and Problems for Research

Whatever called or wherever found, peripatetic artisans, entertainers and other specialized nomads have several characteristics in common besides varying levels of spatial mobility associated with their diverse subsistence pursuits. Undoubtedly the most striking feature of their social organization and individual activities is flexibility and sensitivity to the elements comprising the social and ecocultural environments of those communities among which they maintain themselves. They are especially attuned to changes in social and economic circumstances as well as a broad spectrum of other factors that may influence patterns of human needs and desires in each region, community and even specific households they exploit. In fact, it is often their advance knowledge and astute predictions about ecological, political, economic and other factors among regions that motivate their patterns of mobility and activate the choice of particular skills, goods and/or services that are incorporated into their peripatetic repertoires. To this extent they are both individually and corporately personifications of Salzman's (1972) notion of multi-resource nomadism.

Among the many and diverse populations of peripatetics, each, with few exceptions, is highly endogamous and attaches great value to cultural traditions. This commitment to great traditional values is coupled with a strong sense of ethnic identity and exclusiveness. Where kinship is always a structural and organizing principle among these communities, their group composition and tenure is closely linked to practical considerations related to the overall distribution of individual skills and resources available to exploit conditions in the communities of their peregrinations. Though economic considerations are always mediating factors, it would be a mistake to infer that all patterns of mobility are economically determined. As Gulliver (1975) has illustrated for pastoral herders, movement may also be closely linked to a host of internal as well as external social and cultural factors such as political conditions, disputes, avoidance of conflicting parties and other variables influencing patterns of cooperation, fission and fusion both within and among groups. For some, a move may be simply related to curiosity or a desire to explore a new region.

Interestingly, for most populations, relative levels of mobility and/or sedentarization are not viewed as opposites - as either desirable or undesirable conditions. Rather states of being relatively mobile or static are perceived as particular strategies to be utilized as opportunities warrant. In most cases elements from within a population will utilize a broad range of strategies involving mobility depending on specific conditions. Similarly, ostensibly sedentary activities such as

accumulation of real property such as land, houses or business establishments does not rule out mobility. Where settling down for a time is always considered a possibility, most families continue to maintain a readiness for mobility as a viable alternative. Closely related to skill and resource flexibility, it appears that peripatetics strive to maintain or maximize as wide a range of options as possible. To this extent symposium participants would concur with the generalization that most peripatetics perceive that homogenization of skills and resources are avenues toward extinction of their valued lifestyles and traditions. Conversely, flexibility, patterns of fission and fusion through space and time promote heterogeneity, resiliency and viability within their multi-resource niche. Thus what may be perceived as disdain toward peasants and more sedentary urban dwellers is likely a desire to avoid routinization and possible incorporation into more static subsistence strategies associated with settled society. This is nicely illustrated by their desire for literacy but the avoidance of formal education for their children. The interplay of economic exploitation of the outside social environment with the strong sense of ethnic identity, traditional values, especially flexibility and exclusive private domains, contributes to their perception of themselves as members of closed systems, within and integral to, but separate from the larger social systems that make up their universe. They share much in common with Simmel's (1950) "professional strangers" and enjoy much of what Spradley and McCurdy (1972) have termed stranger value.

Universally, peripatetics rank low on the social scale and it seems that the more complex the social hierarchy the greater the number and diversity of distinct peripatetic populations. Caste India provides an extreme example where Misra (1969) has noted in excess of two hundred distinct, endogamous communities. Nemeth, in this volume, and others have noted that in ancient Korea, Japan and many European countries there is a close correlation between social hierarchy and both the role and pervasiveness of peripatetics. In South Asia most peripatetics are considered sufficiently low in status to be separate from the larger society and fall outside the governing regulations of caste to the extent that they may be the only social elements with ready and perhaps equal access to all strata within this complex civilization. Within Europe and the Americas peripatetics have long cultivated relations with nobility and other persons in power through formal patronage relationships. Throughout history the record indicates that nomadic artisans and entertainers have had access to both princes and paupers. Frequently it is the traveling bards, jesters and impersonators who have the privilege of criticizing, comparing and even ridiculing different classes and government regimes with impunity. While this "outcaste" status may permit mobility throughout the larger social system, peripatetics also represent a category that may be looked-down upon by members of even the lowest caste or class. From this perspective we would offer for consideration that peripatetic communities function as middlemen or bridging elements linking the diverse strata of complex social systems into elliptical rather than vertical social hierarchies.

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