

## **Thomas Barfield, *The Nomadic Alternative* (Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993)**

In his book, *The Nomadic Alternative*, Thomas Barfield uses anthropological methods to examine the realities of life among different groups of pastoral nomads. He discusses the myths surrounding such peoples and places them within their broader context. He maintains that while nomads live apart from sedentary society, there are bonds of association to the latter that affect the nomads. Their geography and the types of animal they raise also affect these people. He argues that despite the apparent simplicity of their lives, their reality is much more complex.

Barfield begins with an overview of what constitutes a pastoral nomad. The animals of these peoples are of central importance to them. Barfield discusses the different animals and their relation to the land, explaining why some animals are more suitable for the nomadic life than are others. He then introduces the different areas in which pastoral nomads live. They inhabit arid and semi-arid lands across the globe, with different areas associated with different 'core' animals and different methods of subsistence. He will later discuss these groupings in detail, but in this section, gives a broad outline of the groups in which he is interested. He does not look at Arctic nomads or American nomads as they have very different traditions from those found in the belt stretch from Africa to Mongolia. He introduces the ideas he will be examining in later chapters and discusses generalities about these themes. What is the ecological base for nomads? How do nomadic pastoralists organize economically? How do they form and maintain their political and social structures? He also notes that he will look at each group within both a modern and a historical context.

The following five chapters discuss the five different types of pastoral nomad that Barfield has chosen to study. The first group is the cattle nomads of Eastern Africa. These groups have some unique features. They are only semi-nomadic, in that they built huts and move on a seasonal basis; they organize socially and politically

through age-set systems and they have no permanent leaders. Much of the features of such pastoralism arise out of the demands of the arid and semi-arid savanna land on which the groups herd their animals as well as the particular requirements of cattle. For instance, he argues that the social importance of having many cattle is a defense mechanism to protect against the ever-present possibility of drought and sickness, rather than an irrational "cattle complex" some other scholars have suggested. He also suggests there is a clear effect of surrounding sedentary societies upon these nomads. Until colonialism, there were no sedentary states in the region, but rather tribes frequently at war. The nomads thus did not have to organize into larger, more formalized political units to counter the sedentary societies. They also had no opportunity for trade and so had to rely upon themselves far more than other groups had to. Instead of external contact, the different East African tribes competed among themselves for cattle and pasture. With colonialism, however, came attempts to make pastoral nomads sedentary amid the expansion of agriculture. This continued with the formation of independent states and in addition, nomads found it increasingly difficult to move to fresh pasture as once they had, and this in turn caused over-grazing and famine. Today, the pastoral nomads of Eastern Africa must struggle to maintain their way of life in the face of hostile sedentary neighbors.

The next group Barfield considers the camel nomads of the deserts of Arabia, North Africa and the Levant. These groups exist in areas that no-one else can inhabit but they are inextricably linked to the large, sedentary societies that surrounded them. Unlike the East African nomads who found little opportunity for trade, the camel nomads relied upon trade with their neighbors. Barfield discusses the development of these groups from their earliest beginnings and examines the historical context in which they came to form an integral part of the region's economy and political structures. Trade alone

could not sustain the camel nomads through the difficulties of drought and slow growth of their herds. Thus, they turned to military raids to supplement this income. As sedentary states grew, their rulers often turned to the Bedouin to form the backbone of their military. The social organization of Bedouin society, however, meant that they were often fiercely independent. They lived in autonomous small family groups in the traditional black tent, associated closely with their tribe and chose their leaders from those best suited to the task. These factors, and the importance of honor and specific sets of behavior, do much to illuminate the role of the Bedouin in the formation of early Muslim society. Barfield examines their effect upon the sedentary societies around them, and *vice versa* asserting that the relationship was symbiotic, with both groups influencing the other amid the changing background.

If the camel nomads were of great importance in the early Muslim world, the sheep raising nomads of Persia, Anatolia and Afghanistan were to become equally important in later centuries. Barfield turns his attention east to these people next. Like the camel herders, the shepherds formed a symbiotic relationship with their sedentary neighbors. Indeed, their association with the sedentary peoples is most close, their economy most embedded into the greater economy of the region since the beginnings of agriculture. These nomads move through the lands of Central Asia in extremely complex patterns. They remain for the most part in small family groups, but retain membership in wider tribes. As larger political entities, the tribes can secure the best grazing land and maintain a political voice in the sedentary society. The latter was the most important impetus to forming larger political entities, the tribal confederacy, to confront the potential threat of the border states. The political power of these large groups affected the entire region and tribal loyalties continue to have an impact on politics to this day even while many pastoralists have turned to less mobile forms of subsistence.

As the camel nomads lived apart from their neighbors but continued to interact with them through trade, the horse nomads of East Asia had a similar

relationship to their surroundings. Raising horses in the inhospitable climes of Mongolia, the horse nomads relied upon trade with neighbors for successful subsistence. Once again, Barfield emphasizes the interactions between the nomads and the sedentary societies around them, arguing that these relationships form much of the basis of the way of life of these people. Groups such as the Mongols exploited five main animals, but their focus was the horse. Barfield argues that the mobility of the horse allowed the military organization and rapid movement that allowed them to dominate their neighbors. Horse nomads, unlike other slower nomadic groups, could form imperial confederacies that could protect the nomads from neighbors such as the Chinese. He maintains that the more organized the surrounding sedentary society, the more need for nomadic organization. China especially had developed into complex sedentary state that the nomads could only take on with a commensurate degree of central control. They would raid the sedentary states for tribute to supplement their meager living from their animals. Barfield illustrates this tactic with a detailed history of the Mongol invasions of China and the West. He concludes with an examination of the situation of these nomads today, especially in the former Soviet Union and China, where authorities often forced them into collectivization projects. Nevertheless, strong tribal identities remain and cause the nomads to be a potential political force even after becoming sedentary.

The last group of nomads is also the least studied. The Yak herders of the Tibet plateau live at high altitudes, isolated from much of the rest of the world. Although they herd other animals, including sheep and goats, the yak forms the basis of their subsistence, as it is particularly well adapted for the harsh conditions of the region. It provides much of what the nomads need, but for the rest they trade with their sedentary neighbors. Unlike the horse nomads, however, they do not raid, lacking the mobility of the horses and facing defenses that are more formidable. Although the invasion of Tibet by Communist China now affects them, the yak nomads have always had ties politically to sedentary Tibet. They were traditionally

‘serfs,’ owing labor to the Buddhist monasteries and grazing their animals on land that theoretically belonged to the monasteries. Barfield argues that this led to a decrease in importance of the normal political systems of other nomadic groups. The state usurped the tribe for dispute resolution. Nevertheless, the family remained an important social unit in nomadic society.

Having considered these separate groups with an anthropological approach, Barfield concludes with an examination of the attitudes of sedentary society towards nomads. Often, ‘civilized’ authors considered them barbarians, a primitive throwback. To them, the nomads were nothing but a danger to advanced society. However, while some nomadic groups were violent, Barfield points out that few groups attempted to destroy their conquests. They remained in conquered lands only when the sedentary political state collapsed. At the same time, others romanticized the nomads as homeless free-spirits. Again, Barfield contends that the nomads were never completely free of the ties to sedentary society, but were rather joined to their neighbors by economic and politics bonds. He concludes with a summary of the situation for nomads in the modern world. Nomads increasingly find it difficult to survive in a world divided into states where they are accused of destroying the environment and being economically unviable. Barfield concludes that while some nomads may manage to maintain their way of life, circumstances will force others to adopt a sedentary life.

*The Nomadic Alternative* is an interesting work, written in a lucid and readable style. Barfield has clearly argued his case. He convincingly debunks the traditional view of nomads either as barbarians or romantic wanderers. Instead, they are diverse groups who have adapted to their harsh environments and who have symbiotic relationships with their sedentary neighbors. Just as they affect sedentary societies, they too are affected. Political, social and economic systems are all complex systems developed from the environment and internal and external forces.

Barfield provides a great number of sources to support his arguments. Much of the evidence is

anthropological, and Barfield makes much use of ethnographies of individual tribes. These certainly provide an interesting insight into these societies. He also uses a number of secondary sources, including anthropological and historical scholarly articles and books. He makes little use of primary data from the nomads themselves. Perhaps this is because these records do not exist. However, it does seem an unfortunate omission for him to make and not comment upon. Nevertheless, these sources are not necessary *per se*, and the book remains credible.

While this work is persuasive as it stands, it remains somewhat general for a dedicated cultural anthropologist. Most similar scholarly works focus instead upon one of the groups Barfield considered or upon a particular region such as Persia<sup>1</sup>. However, bringing this information together and comparing these societies is valuable in itself. This book has more information on pastoral nomads than beginning anthropology textbooks and so will be a helpful resource for undergraduate students of cultural anthropology. It is also accessible and interesting enough to be a suitable for other undergraduate and more advanced students, especially in the social sciences. For historians, it may enable students of the regions discussed to understand better the complex interactions between nomadic and sedentary groups and their place in history. It is not a traditional history text and scholars may use it as a supplemental rather than core work for the study of the Middle East.

*The Nomadic Alternative* is a note-worthy work that provides a useful insight into the pastoral nomadic peoples of Africa and Eurasia. Thomas Barfield provides a well-written and entertaining alternative to traditional view of the nomads, emphasizing the interactions between the nomads and the sedentary peoples of their regions and the complex and varying nature of these societies.

---

<sup>1</sup> Works that consider single groups or regions include William Charles Young, *The Rashaayda Bedouin : Arab pastoralists of eastern Sudan* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1996) and Barfield’s own book, Thomas Barfield, *The Central Asian Arabs of Afghanistan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).