

Charles Stépanoff, Carole Ferret, Gaëlle Lacaze et  
Julien Thorez eds., *Nomadismes d'Asie centrale et  
septentrionale*

Paris, Armand Colin, 2013, 288 p.

Sophie Roche

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- 1 This unique book brings together studies on nomads and the nomadic way of life in Siberia and Central Asia that have been conducted over the last 150 years. In so doing, the authors have created a masterpiece of academic work suitable for a wider audience. Throughout the five sections of the book the authors adhere to academic rules of presenting research made comprehensive and clear with maps, boxes that explain specific terms, items, rituals or other important issues, along with high quality pictures.
- 2 The book is ordered in a way that presents different scales of analysis ranging from history to the ecosystem, all the way to the lives and the individual relationships between herders and their animals. By avoiding more conventional chapters like religion, history, material culture etc., the authors have opted for descriptive titles that capture the core of nomadism, which is mobility and space.
- 3 The authors therefore avoid linking a nomadic way of life to specific societies or ethnicities or to any kind of mobility. Nomadism is a “way of life” marked by mobility that affects and includes the whole family and depends on the needs of the animals they rear. This lifestyle can be chosen temporarily, along with or in opposition to cities

or a sedentary life, and the nomadic perception is mediated by specificities of special orientation and organization (p. 8). With these criteria the authors have offered a precise definition that is both theoretically and practically useful for studies in other regions as well.

- 4 Theoretical subjects like space, time, territory, humans and animal relationships as well as concrete examples guide the reader throughout the book. These examples cover several herder communities from the Tundra, the Taiga and the Central Asian steppes, including the Nenets, the Evenk, the Khalkh (Mongols), as well as Kazakh and Kyrgyz.
- 5 The book covers Northern and Central Asia, today referred to as Siberia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, a space that has been considerably shaped by the nomadic way of life. In the Tundra and Taiga, reindeer are the primary animals of the nomads, while in the Mongolian as well as Kazakh and Kyrgyz steppes and mountains, the “five snouts” are represented in different proportions: sheep, goats, cows or yaks, horses and camels.
- 6 The first section explores “Context and mobility” and introduces the ecosystem that has favoured a mobile lifestyle in which animals' needs guide the family's way of life. The distances that some herders need to cover can total 1000 kilometres and 1000 meters of altitude difference (p. 22), though anything between a few kilometres and 1000 kilometres can be found, depending on the ecological conditions, the seasons, the group and the animals (kind(s), size of herd etc.). The chapter is enriched by detailed maps of routes used by nomads, including the altitude differences, the seasons and other regional specificities. The maps throughout the book that display the techniques for measuring space and movement are especially valuable.
- 7 The relationship between the animals and the ecosystem demands a high degree of flexibility and adaptation – this “art of adaptation” (p. 26) requires the combination of different resources. Thus, while hunting was long seen as an evolutionary stage preceding nomadism, it actually shares many techniques with nomadism and hence many nomads spend parts of their times hunting; for some groups meat from hunted animals makes up a considerable portion of their diet. Nomadism and hunting must therefore be seen as complementary rather than oppositional in the region (p. 214).
- 8 In the first chapter of this initial section, the reader is introduced to the different groups of nomads, which are not compared systematically, but rather as comprehensive case studies used to work out modes of navigating space, ways of orientating in the Tundra or the forests of the Taiga or the endless steppes. The Nenets, for instance, use the stars, the wind and the speed of the reindeer to estimate distances and directions (p. 70). The authors have included historical sources in order to trace changes and adaptation to different political systems, most importantly under the Soviet Union and since its end, which is dealt with in each chapter where appropriate.
- 9 Whether on the move or at camp, the social organization of the nomadic tribe and family reflects their way of life. For example, kinship relationships play a role in the organization of the caravan among the Evenk and Evene tribes.
- 10 The nomads' housing is organized by both gender and age in the Central Asian steppes just as much as it is among the Siberian nomads. This subject is further explored in the second section, titled “Inhabiting the territory”. Moreover, the women have their duties inside the yurt and the camp, while the men care for the animals outside and bear the cold, rain and other hardships while managing the animals that the family so

depends on – thus, women and men are thought of as complementary rather than equal.

- 11 Hospitality is a core value to all the nomadic groups, which is more than just putting a guest at ease independent of where he or she comes from and without expecting anything in return – it is a social insurance, a human value and an important redistribution system (p. 115).
- 12 In addition to the everyday practices of herding and raising children, the authors also explore exceptional events like feasts and life cycle rituals. Life cycle events and socializing children into a nomadic family and modern society are subjects dealt with in section three, “Space and time of the body”. Birth is not an event that is celebrated at large; rather, the new-born is given a descriptive name in order to protect it from evil and will receive its real name upon a celebration (e.g., haircutting among the Khalkh). Children in rural families in Mongolia are trained to control their emotions in order to be prepared for the break that comes when they enter a boarding school, which takes them away from their parents for many months. Mongolian people have embraced the modern system of education which takes children from nomadic families for schooling.
- 13 This and many other changes that took place during the Soviet period – collectivization perhaps being the most important – have led to new adaptation of the herders, some of whom have given up animal husbandry.
- 14 The yurt reflects not only the conception of gender and hierarchy, but also world views and religious. These different influences also affect the nomads' conception of the world and the body. Body and space also include artistic expression in dances and music, as well as handcrafts produced mainly by women which reflects their sense of beauty and taste. Music, however, is not only an art for entertainment. Rather, all of nature holds sounds that are specific to the seasons and the herders use specific melodies to communicate with individual animals, for instance when a female animal refuses to give milk to her offspring.
- 15 Though nomadic populations are often considered to overconsume meat, research has shown that even though they have a very developed taste for meat, they do not necessarily consume much, at least not more than Europeans. Whereas reindeer nomads do consume some parts of their meat raw, in the Central Asian steppes this is not the case. The conception of food as “white” or “brown” (in Mongolia) or “hot” and “cold” (in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) are used in everyday life, not only for food but also for temperaments and medical treatments.
- 16 Important details like the way the elderly greet children by taking their smell are paid careful attention to, which considerably enriches the study. However, classic subjects like the shamans are also reconsidered and contextualized within the nomadic way of life.
- 17 Shamans usually operate on two levels when performing for a collective: on the one hand they communicate with the spirits, which happens outside the spectators' view. On the other hand, his or her experience with the spirit is expressed bodily for the audience. The shaman and other important cultural authorities are included in the book but are dealt with only to the extent that it helps understand nomadism.
- 18 Any interested reader will however find enough references to engage in studies on shamanism. In relation to other relevant individuals like the herder for instance, the

authors have redressed the skewed view that specialized academic work sometimes produces by giving more attention to exceptional events (e.g., life cycle rituals) than to everyday life strategies.

- 19 Section four, titled “Humans and animals on the move” explores the techniques of breeding and the adaptation of races and types of animals to various ecological conditions. Each kind of animal can be exploited differently depending on whether the herder opts for multi-species or mono-species herds. Reindeer nomads usually breed one specie, while the nomads of the steppes vary between two to five kinds, that is, multi-species. While in Mongolia goats have become the favourite and most lucrative animal since independence because of its cashmere wool, in Kyrgyzstan rich people opt for cows and meat production and the most rentable way of animal husbandry.
- 20 The animals of the nomads do not only exist as herds; the relationship between humans and their animals is also unique, especially for those animals that are chosen to serve humans in their everyday tasks. This intimate relationship between selected domestic animals and the nomadic family forms an interesting aspect of nomadic life overlooked in previous studies. However, not all animals need to be domesticated to become part of the nomad's world. Indeed, among these nomads the wolf holds an ambivalent role – being at the same time a mythological animal and a real one that is both feared and hunted.
- 21 Section five, “Nomads and sedentary populations” engages with the unease of modernity, at least as an aspect that is either cut out of nomadic studies or seen as destructive. The studies presented here explore nomadism according to the way they use space and practice mobility. At times this is complementary or even hostile to a sedentary way of life, but today nomadism is fluid, with some people moving among both forms of living. The large majority of the people in Northern and Central Asia have adopted a sedentary way of life, but keep nomadism as a symbol in national narratives. A set of practices and representations are also used to fix “nomadic traditions” that are then exploited as touristic attractions.
- 22 The origin of nomadic life is debated from Bronze Age until today. Many documents exist suggesting that the Russian empire, which extended to Siberia and Central Asia, led to spontaneous sedentarization beginning in the 17th and 18th centuries. Indeed, through its introduction of railways, the Russian colonial system considerably affected nomadic trade routes and agricultural planning. However, the Bolsheviks transformed North and Central Asia most heavily using reforms that impacted herders as private entrepreneurs and made them dependent on sedentary farmers.
- 23 The Soviet Union also influenced the population's composition, turning nomadic groups into minorities in their own territories. Urbanization and industrialization further transformed the use of resources and ways of life. For example, reindeer herders have little power to fight large industries, which continue to pollute the environment that the herders depend on for their survival. However, the authors also show that many biographies of nomads have several sections that alternate between a life in the Tundra and a life in the village and city (p. 260).
- 24 In conclusion, the book goes far beyond previous studies by bringing together 39 experts (e.g., geographers, historians, social anthropologists, climatologists, archaeologists), including researchers at all stages (students, doctoral students, postdocs and professors).

- 25 The book stands out from the countless studies on the cultural practices of nomadism (often romanticized) by its completeness and focus on space and mobility, on the relationship between animals and humans, on techniques of the body and on the transformative effects of history from expanding empires to traumatized sedentarization. The book's academic language, together with many graphs, maps and pictures, depict the area of North and Central Asia and its nomadic population in a clear and comprehensive manner. Further, the book demonstrates that interdisciplinary and comparative work can be very productive if done properly and systematically. The result of decades of highly specialized research is portrayed in this comprehensive academic title. This book can be recommended for university courses as well as for the interested public.