

2

Research and Nomads in the Age of Globalization

Anja Fischer

Suda wears a digital watch from Japan. She drinks green tea from China and owns shoes from Italy. She is 30 years old, has three children and successfully manages a goat herd in the Algerian Sahara. She is a Kel Ahaggar nomad in the age of globalization.

What is the current state of research on nomads? Does the anthropological globalization debate include nomads? Or does research continue to view them in an isolated way? In this chapter¹ I shortly discuss contemporary research streams in relation to nomads, in particular those in the Sahara. A geographic-economic interpretation dominates theories of nomadism and ‘decline theories’ deal with the ‘last nomads’. Postmodern nomadology discourse focuses exclusively on privileged urban nomads. Rural nomads in the Sahara are thus marginalized and pushed to the edge of a globalized space. Nonetheless, nomads play a role in the world economy, for global commodities move in and out of the Sahara. Current research on rural and urban nomads shows a trend towards a holistic approach.

RURAL AND URBAN NOMADS

A nomad is a member of a people who move from place to place to find pasture; a person who leads a roaming or wandering life. From Latin *nomades* (plural) *nomas* (singular), from Greek *nomad*, *nomas* roaming about, especially for pasture, from base of *nemein* to pasture.²

The origin of the word ‘nomad’ refers to three components – a mobile lifestyle, a certain territory or pasture, and pastoralism. Regarding the origin of the word, the term ‘nomad’ differs from terms such as vagabonds or migrants because a nomad operates in a fixed area or pasture and works as a pastoralist. A nomad is thus defined as a mobile

stockbreeder whose entire social group corporately participates in the movement within a fixed territory.

The philosopher Vilém Flusser³ defines a nomad as a person who can be described in neither space nor time, by contrast with a person living a sedentary existence who can be defined in space and time. This corresponds to the postmodern definition in the debate at the end of the twentieth century. The components of a fixed territory and of pastoralism are omitted from the modern interpretation of the nomad, and the aspect of a mobile lifestyle is stressed. Here the term 'nomad' opens up to become a metaphor for a person acting in a mobile way. However, the postmodernist definition is used exclusively to refer to privileged Western people, such as leisure nomads, business nomads, luxury nomads or science nomads. They are also called big-city nomads or new/modern nomads.

The so-called 'traditional' nomads in rural environments, such as Suda, are no less modern. Also, nomads have existed in urban environments for a lot longer than the last few decades. In fact, the English city ethnographer Henry Mayhew was already investigating them in the mid-nineteenth century and included them in his monograph on the costermongers (mobile vegetable, fruit and fish dealers) in London.⁴ Consequently, I shall differentiate nomads according to the geographic focus of their mobility and distinguish between rural and urban nomads.

THE STATE OF RESEARCH ON NOMADISM

First, we need to distinguish between the terms pastoralism and nomadism. Pastoralism refers to raising livestock on natural pasture and nomadism refers to moving from place to place.⁵ Salzman confirms this definition of nomadism: 'To recapitulate, I would define nomadism as the regular and frequent movement of the home base and household.'⁶ This definition focuses on the 'mobility' aspect of nomadism research. In the English literature in particular, the current convention is the combination of 'nomadic pastoralist'.⁷ In this way the economic component of pastoralism is included, thus separating the term from 'nomadic hunters' or 'nomadic traders'. In the German literature the term is used exclusively to refer to mobile pastoralists' economic system.⁸

According to Khazanov,⁹ the main characteristics of nomadism are:

- Pastoralism is the predominant form of economic activity.
- Its extensive character is connected with the maintenance of herds all year round on a system of free-range grazing without stables.
- Periodic mobility in accordance with the demands of pastoral economy within the boundaries of specific grazing territories, or between these territories (as opposed to migrations).
- The participation in pastoral mobility of all or the majority of the population.
- The orientation of production towards the requirements of subsistence.

There is a clear preference in the nomadism debate for a geographic and economic characterization. The economic system is put before the way of life. Even Salzman¹⁰ warns of oversimplification by characterizing people's complex lives and culture by just one feature.

Statements to the effect that nomadism as a pattern of life and economy is declining everywhere or has already disappeared, fit in with the 'decline theories' (*Niedergangsthesen*)¹¹ prevailing in nomadism discourse, suggesting that if there is a change in basic conditions, nomadism can only decline or nomads assimilate, but never develop or transform further. Furthermore, Scholz¹² thought that we should potentially act on the assumption that nomadism would definitely disappear. These theories were mostly the result of the isolated way in which nomadic groups have been viewed, often without taking the context of surrounding societies into consideration.¹³

Recent studies¹⁴ on the tremendous vitality and flexibility in the economy of nomads and a high adaptation potential in nomadic life, now contradict the apocalyptic sentiment at the forefront of nomadism discourses in recent decades. It seems to be precisely their willingness to embrace change and their flexibility that typify today's nomadic groups and that will enable them to survive in the future.¹⁵

Suda belongs to the Kel Ahaggar, a group of nomads in the Algerian Sahara who do not correspond to the 'decline theory'. Suda does profitable stockbreeding. She has been married for five years and her younger brother and younger sister were married this year. The bridegrooms are familiar with life in cities like Tamanrasset and In Salah, but they deliberately chose to live as nomads in the Sahara. They are aware of the threat of unemployment in urban environments and of the assured profitability of stockbreeding; in fact, five new tent units have been built

in the last six years, joining the small kingroup of about 200 nomads.¹⁶ Over the same period, one tent unit was abandoned because the family moved to the city, but this year the same family returned to the Sahara to resume its nomadic life. Jeremy Keenan¹⁷ also sees an increasing willingness to return to mobile stockbreeding in the Algerian Sahara. Some women who have become sedentary and who have been divorced return to their familiar work in the desert. The nomads' vitality and great potential to adapt are being recognized more and more.

Relationships with sedentary people are also more and more being taken into consideration, so that nomadism is presently defined by Leder¹⁸ as:

- mobility that is permanent, cyclical and realized in groups (such as families), so therefore shapes their way of life;
- the development of a livelihood through extensive pasture management or other means of living gained by mobility; and
- interaction with sedentary people.

With the mobility characteristics mentioned above, a distinction is made between other similar forms of livelihood in which there is also mobility, such as migrants or itinerant workers. The exclusiveness of pasture management is no longer central, and not only mobile stockbreeders are called nomads, even though that does not correspond to the origin of the term 'nomad'. That pasture management is organized within a fixed territory is omitted and, now, interaction with sedentary people serves as a characteristic. No specification of the interaction is indicated. Whether the interaction is economic or political, for example, is left open. The main emphasis in the definition of nomadism, however, continues to be on its geographical (mobility) and economic (pasture management) components, thus excluding urban nomads.

Nomadism experts have been analysing the economy of nomads for a long time. However, the analysis of economic processes is still incomplete. Taking the *Imubar* nomads in the Sahara as an example, one can see that the work of men is recorded in detail, whereas women's work is barely examined. Male anthropologists have long analysed the work of men in breeding dromedaries. Thus, one can find detailed descriptions of how dromedaries are castrated or herded.¹⁹ But what about the work of female nomads? As preparation for my first field-work trip to the

Algerian Sahara in the winter of 2002 I read several specialist books on the subject. Only Spittler²⁰ described in detail the work of women and girls among *Imubar* nomads in Niger, but not among full nomads. Thus, I got the impression that nomad women's work is not very extensive. However, during my field work I realized that the women work extremely hard. Consequently, to fill this gap in nomadism research, I decided to analyse all the economic activities of men, women and children in central Sahara and tried to conduct this analysis in a holistic way.²¹ In doing so, I examined the work environment from six dimensions ranging from *elem* (skin/body), that is the body as a work tool, to *esuf* (loneliness/universe), the overall universe.

Besides a detailed ethnography of the labour, I also examined work-related themes like collective work, career opportunities, motivation and remuneration. This finally resulted in a nomadic activity convention, which consists of continuity, flexibility, solidarity, hierarchy, morality, mobility and rationality. In the analysis, the creation of identity through work is viewed as more important than the creation of a livelihood.

Apart from the incompleteness of the economic analysis in the nomadism discourse, the interpretation of mobility is strongly based on cultural-ecological aspects. The concept of service ethics,²² for example, includes the pastoralist's subordination to the needs of his herd. The pastoralist's attitude towards the animals and the work is primary, forming part of his lifestyle and his specific world-view, thus having a cultural orientation. Service, not work, becomes the central requirement. However, stockbreeding is not the essential reason for the nomad's mobility. Primarily, it gives the nomad a chance to move. It offers her and him social flexibility. Economic activities are always embedded in social principles. The mobility of the nomad is not only an economic practice; it is also a philosophy of movement. 'Nomadism is not only an itinerant way of life, associated with a particular economic activity, pastoralism, which is an extensive management of resources adapted to the arid environment. It would appear also to represent a philosophy, a manner of interpreting reality and acting upon it.'²³

THE NOMADS OF POSTMODERN NOMADOLOGY

Research on nomads should be referred to as nomadology, a term that Deleuze and Guattari introduced to philosophy.²⁴ At the beginning of the 1980s, with nomadology, they developed for the first time a nomadic way

of thinking in philosophy that characterized nomadic life as anti-traditional and anti-conformist. A nomadic way of thinking was presented that, 'in a defensive way', consciously turned against a centralized national model. The subsequent postmodern debate romanticized the nomad as a geographic metaphor *par excellence*.²⁵ Laptops, cell phones and credit cards are the preferred objects of a postmodern nomadic existence.²⁶ In this discourse, nomads belong to the economic, political and cultural elite: luxury, leisure, science and business nomads fall into this category. Here, not only does nomadic thinking serve as a metaphor, but a postmodern vision draws on a nomadic lifestyle – it is a collective emblem of cosmopolitan existence.²⁷

Deleuze and Guattari's nomads are creative and innovative. Their thinking opposes national thinking. Philosophical nomadology glorifies the nomads' deterritorializing forces. The geographical metaphor of postmodern nomads is not just deeply masculine and individualistic, it is also Eurocentric. Postmodern nomadology appropriates a non-Western experience for the benefit of developing a European theory.²⁸ Modernity and globalization are associated only with privileged Western nomads. Mobility is a metaphor for new postmodern urban nomads.

Actually, one could presume that the nomadology discourse should also show some interest in rural 'traditional' strategies of mobility and their recent developments. But rural nomads are marginalized, and their habitat is pushed into the periphery of the globalized space or perceived as transit space at best.²⁹

Until now only Claudot-Hawad³⁰ has analysed the movements of rural nomads in the Sahara in a nomadological way:

This way of looking at the limits, viewing them as reversible (as places of friction or of contact), fits into a management of space that is open to the exterior, that is able to spread horizontally like a 'rhizome', to use Deleuze and Guattari's image (2005), gathering other members to the existing body without changing the overall structure.

Urban nomads in the Sahara like the *ishumar*³¹ are excluded from post-modern nomadology. Rural and urban nomads of the Sahara are marginalized in an 'elitist' postmodern nomadology and excluded from the globalization process.

NOMADS AND GLOBALIZATION IN THE SAHARA

Nomads of the Sahara are certainly not victims but instead play a role in the globalization process. Some 100 years ago the Sahara region was a centre of globalization in which the *Imubar* obtained information about world affairs at strategically important points and made use of it,³² and today the *Imubar* are considered politically and economically marginalized.³³ Urban nomads of the Sahara like the *ishumar*, in particular, are well integrated into worldwide events.³⁴ The old trade routes the *Imubar* created are still used today for a subversive international economy. On the other hand, African migrant streams move through the Sahara, using the routes frequented and completed by the *Imubar*. Thus, the Sahara is still a hub in globalized space.

The analysis of nomadic life and its inherent adaptation can no longer be restricted to small territorially limited areas; instead, worldwide cause and effect chains should also be analysed.³⁵ For example, the *Imubar* are known worldwide under the foreign designation 'Tuareg'. This word has now become a 'brand' in globalized space. You can buy party tents, off-road vehicles, air conditioners and even motorcycle trousers with the designation 'Tuareg' all over the world. The brand name has already lost its proper meaning and in Europe 'Tuareg' is more likely to be associated with an off-road vehicle than with an African society.³⁶ The positive image of the brand 'Tuareg' is also used in worldwide tourism. Guided tours across the Sahara in off-road vehicles are offered on all continents and are very popular. Thus, numerous 'leisure nomads' frequent the North African desert in the winter months.

In the same way that tourists inappropriately call the *Imubar* 'Tuareg', an improper designation for all tourists exists among the *Imubar*. They call a tourist *akafar* (from the Arabic: non-believer). When *Imubar* are asked for an explanation of the word *akafar*, they usually mention 'white person'.³⁷ However, by now this has gone so far that the children of *Imubar* nomads also call Arab people who visit an Algerian nomad camp *ikufar*. Here, the original meaning of the word, which refers to religious belief, is also removed, and children call every stranger *akafar*, even though they are Arabs who have the same religion. Similarly, global commodities are appropriated and provided with new meanings much like these designations.

Suda, a modern rural nomad woman

Suda is the manager of a goat herd in the Algerian Sahara. Her clothes are produced in various parts of the world. The traditional headdress,

the *alesbu*, made of woven panels, comes from Kura in Nigeria. The material of her wraparound garment, *tesirnest*, is manufactured either in Europe or India. Her plastic sandals are 'made in Italy'. Suda's little son wears a 'Pokemon' T-shirt and her daughter a T-shirt with the label 'I love Paris'. She owns a watch from Japan, an electric torch from Korea and a radio from Taiwan. Suda bakes her bread with Algerian flour and flavours her sauce with a 'Maggie' stock cube. In summer, when her goats give little milk, she mixes powdered milk from Argentina for her children. During her work breaks she drinks green tea from China with her female friends. Her favourite brand is '*A tee de sable*' (the tea of the sand), which shows on its package a traditionally dressed *Amahar* sitting in the sand and filling a glass of tea. Suda is unaware of the colonial demarcation in the Sahara and the subsequent nation-state building. That her territory is located in a country named Algeria is of no significance to her.

Rural nomads use global commodities. Thus, women regard a digital watch from Japan as a desirable object, even though they are unable to read it and time measurements in minutes have no relevance to their everyday lives. However, the watch grants its wearer respectability and prestige. *Imubar* selectively imbue certain global commodities with local cultural meaning.³⁸ Appropriation, taking something into one's possession, means that others previously possessed the commodity. Hence, appropriation always implies an interaction with another person and is not limited to the reinterpretation of things.³⁹ This affects not only the commodity, but also its designation. The manufacture of the traditional bowl, *tamennast*, which the men use during trips for baking bread or for drinking, requires the use of complicated techniques. Lately, poorly made bowls have been called *tamennast Taiwan* and recently the *Imubar* began to call all shoddily-made goods 'Taiwan'. They do not know that Taiwan is a country in Asia. They give all commodities they regard as cheap this designation, including traditional products like the *tamennast*.

Commodity preferences are very selective. Children often wear European clothes, whereas nomad women and nomad men continue to wear 'traditional' clothes, although they can buy European clothes from local markets. However, particularly with respect to clothes, local links become apparent. For instance, female rural *Imubar* nomads in the southern part of the Sahara have begun to wear the colourful wraparound skirts of the Hausa women.⁴⁰

Tourism also leaves its traces. Down jackets or sturdy mountain boots that Sahara travellers from Europe left as gifts can be found among nomads. For example, a bright yellow, thick down jacket is used as a baby pad in a nomad tent because neither a male nor female nomad wanted to wear such a European jacket, despite the frosty temperatures.

Pharmaceuticals from European tourists leave a more dangerous legacy. In one case a mother wanted to give her four-year-old daughter, who had a slight cough, prescription medicine for serious pneumonia. She received the medicine from a relative who works as a driver on tourist trips. When I told her that the medicine was inappropriate for children, the mother told me that the problem was that she could not read the package insert.

Nomads are specialists at recycling and every type of commodity is reused. Old clothes are cut into strips and processed with a special technique into ropes for tying up goats. Broken manufactured goods are dismantled for their spare parts. Empty cans serve as storage containers or children's toys. Thus, global commodities receive both a new meaning and a new use.

Nomads not only use commodities from global sources, but they also give incentives to local and supralocal manufacturers. For example, they buy cheap Italian plastic sandals at the local markets, but since these quickly fall apart they have developed a special technique for sewing the upper sole onto the lower sole to make them more robust. For this procedure they use solid threads from flour sacks. Sedentary men from the cities have recently adopted this technique, so now one can purchase these plastic sandals on the local market with the additional seams already in place. However, the process continues. Now nomads prefer stronger leather sandals, which they reinforce in the same manner. The sedentary traders in the cities will surely soon follow their example, so that in years to come the leather sandals with the sewing technique the nomads developed will become available at the local markets.

Bakai, a modern urban nomad man of the Sahara

Bakai, aged 47, is sitting in a Viennese café drinking a 'Melange' (coffee with frothy milk) and talking on the phone with his relative in Niger. He wears jeans with a Lacoste shirt and commutes during the year between Africa and Europe. He grew up as a 'real' nomad child in the Niger Sahara. At the age of eight he moved with his parents to the city of

Agadez. He never had the opportunity to go to school and as a teenager started to work in tourism.

Initially, as a cook, he accompanied adventure-seeking European tourists on two-week round trips across the Sahara. Today he owns a travel agency and organizes a range of trips across the Niger desert in the winter months. In the summer months he comes to Europe and visits various European tour operators. He speaks five languages fluently. His office consists of the internet and his state-of-the-art mobile phone, with which he travels to Europe over the summer months in search of new clients. He keeps in touch with former clients and, in doing so, always has a place to stay. He uses a wide array of global commodities and frequents multicultural restaurants all over Europe. In summer he sells 'traditional' *Imubar'* jewellery to his clients and at various Africa festivals. He operates in the milieu of European leisure nomads and now belongs to the group of privileged people in his home country. He meets the description of a postmodern nomad for whom international airports rather than wells or local markets serve as the junction for nomadic movements. Unlike European urban nomads, he remains integrated into a close family network in Niger and constantly keeps in touch with his relatives there.

Silver necklaces with the *Imubar'* 'cross' are very popular among European women. Blacksmiths in the Sahara manufacture them especially for tourists because domestic sales are low. Bakai is not the only person to bring these necklaces to the European market. Several *Imubar'* who work in tourism make a partial living out of selling them in Europe in the summer months. *Imubar'* jewellery is now also available on the internet from homepages mostly set up by *Imubar'* people with the help of their European friends. While Berber blankets and water pipes are in especially high demand as souvenirs among tourists along the North African Mediterranean coast, in the Sahara the 'typical' silver jewellery of the *Imubar'* is the bestseller. Now one can even find *Imubar'* sales booths in the middle of the Sahara desert at locations tourist groups visit, such as the Mandara lakes. There the *Imubar'* try to sell their jewellery to tourists on site. *Imubar'* earnings in Europe are mostly invested in European commodities, from which relatives and friends in the Sahara benefit. The latest mobile phones, computers and televisions are transported back to the Sahara at the end of the summer months.

Global commodities are commodities that are not produced for a regionally limited clientele, but rather for the whole world.⁴¹ The *Imubar'*s

silver jewellery has in the meantime become a global commodity. The *Imubar* operate in globalized networks. Global commodities are used and imbued with local cultural meaning, but on the other hand global commodities are produced for the international market. Thus, the *Imubar* play an active role in the globalization process.

NEW APPROACHES IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE NOMADS

Current research rejects the perception that nomadic and sedentary ways of life are opposed to and in latent conflict with one another. It is not the confrontation, but the linkage of nomadic and sedentary systems with their different forms of political organization, social orders, understanding of space and moral values that historically had a lasting effect and helped to shape the face of vast regions and their societies. The supposed unity of space, place, culture and language turned out to be a fallacy. Culture is moveable and can move over long distances even without the movement of people, for example via communication. On the other hand, people in movement carry culture in their luggage as well.⁴²

Anthropologists turn more and more to these interconnected links. Nomads are integrated into a worldwide network and can no longer be regarded as isolated groups. Even the rural nomads of the Sahara can no longer be regarded as 'pure' stockbreeders. They also work as traders or nowadays sometimes as tourist guides.⁴³ They interact, particularly economically, with sedentary relatives and friends in the villages, which results in dense networks between sedentary and mobile Saharan residents.

Today, the term nomad is no longer used exclusively for people who manage pastures; one can also define people operating in an urban environment as nomads. It is therefore important to develop a definition of 'nomad' in anthropology that is not just reduced to its economic and geographical aspects.

In the nomadism discourse, however, the nomad's activity as a pastoralist is predominantly considered, and his mobility viewed mainly from the cultural-cum-economic perspective. Rural nomads, by contrast, are excluded and marginalized in the postmodern discourse. Thus, one can neither characterize the mobility of urban nomads as nomadism, nor count rural nomads among the privileged nomads who are the exclusive subjects of postmodern nomadology.

The study of nomads must be translated as nomadology. Detaching

postmodern nomadology from its inherent Eurocentrism and integrating rural nomads opens up the possibility of a holistic study of nomads that looks beyond geographical and economic boundaries.

Thus, anthropological studies like most in this volume cannot be defined as nomadism research. We could, however, define them as anthropological nomadology. In such an anthropological nomadology we could easily integrate rural and urban nomads in Asia, America and Australia. Thus, the conference 'Tuareg Moving Global', which claimed to present new concepts in Sahara research, did not result in a single contribution that can be classified as nomadism research. Nowadays, nomads have to be viewed in complex dimensions. In the era of globalization, holistic analyses within an anthropological nomadology are appropriate.