



# Let Nomads Move You!

By **RON AHLBRECHT**

**Ron & Kirsten Ahlbrecht:** The Shepherd used nomads to move Ron & Kirsten in Asia for 20 years. Then He moved them to Europe to learn from nomads globally.

**N**omads have moved me. They have moved me toward a more nomadic way of following King Jesus, the Good Shepherd, as revealed in both the Old and New Testaments. During our 20 years of learning from and walking with nomads in the Himalayas, many asked me, “Did you come here to convert us?”

My reply: “No. I came here to be changed by you.”

“What do you mean by that?” they would ask.

“My Sunday School teacher taught us *about* Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. But with you, I feel I am actually *walking with* those great men and women of faith. Our settled people, especially in the North Atlantic cultural context, have to a large extent lost a precious treasure that you, my nomad friends, have

preserved. I want to learn it from you so that others can also experience Jesus in the same way, *as the Good Shepherd.*”

Now, for the past 10 years, I have been tasked with data collection about nomads globally.

**What Is a NOMAD?** Do all nomads have some traits in common? Are migrant laborers, refugees, and digital nomads also included? Is there a clear universally accepted definition? No. But mine is adapted from James Morris, PhD, former Director of the Nomadic Peoples Network (NPN). As James also says, it is not just about mobility. This definition has helped guide countless communications by email, video calls, and field visits talking with nomads and people learning from nomads on every continent.

## NOMADs are...

**Networking**, not individualistic. Relationships (both internally in their communities and externally with others) seem built into their DNA.

Internally, they're...

**Organized** as clans, tribes, and other community structures.

They see...

**Mobility** as a community resource even if they don't appear to use it!

They highly value their group's...

## Autonomy.

And they see themselves as...

**Distinct** from people with a sedentary heritage.

**Nomads conduct themselves as a community.** Individual members may make personal choices and can enjoy personal freedoms. But they are constantly aware of their place in their extended family or community. They value the benefit of mutual responsibility rather than individualism.

**Nomad tribes, clans, or other social structures** are much tighter than settled concepts of family or individualistic communities. For Himalayan Gujjars, there are at least 12 distinct terms that overlap with an English understanding of "family" and "community." Even with rough translations of those terms in English, we must recognize that we cannot understand those concepts like our nomad friends.

**Mobility is a community resource.** Who is moving? When? Where? How will they get there? By what route? By what means of transportation? And of course, why? Most of these questions are assumed by habit or intuition. Any changes to their habits may also involve community discussions at many levels.

NPN leadership also suggested three occupational types of nomads which I have adapted as: **agro-pastoralists, service-traders, and hunter-collectors.**

Each of these observe some other resource or economic activity, which is central to how they see themselves. For agro-pastoralists, they may have farmland available where they have crops in addition to herding, but the animals are their life. Service-traders have a variety of goods and services that they buy and sell. Hunter-collectors hunt, fish, collect forest and sea products, cut and process wood products, etc., often with great craftsmanship. Some travel great distances to collect resources to share in their communities, like funds or even knowledge. Examples of nomads doing these things exist from Genesis to Revelation and on until now.

As settled people, we tend to value land or property. But each of the above types of **nomads value their mobility**. Mobility is what enables them to survive with their animals, trade, or collecting. Nomads might feel that a small piece of property is like a ball and chain or a prison and that the whole countryside should be available for their use. They need freedom to move where there is fresh grass and water for their animals, or fresh opportunities for services, trades, hunting, or collecting. They sustain themselves primarily on their own products and may trade or sell from their surplus to their neighbors along the way for whatever else they want or need.

**Many nomads view outsiders with suspicion.** The Fulbe, a.k.a. Fulani, are the world's largest nomadic people group: 50 million people spread from coast to coast in the Sahel across middle Africa, south of the Sahara. They have a proverb like that of many other nomads: "An outsider is either an enemy to be killed or a cow to be milked." This sounds violent, indeed, but the point is protection and provision for their own people, livestock, and way of life. They have a code of conduct called "pulaaku." This term describes their "Fulani-ness," or what it means to act like a Fulani. I have found that other nomads have similar codes of conduct: the Tuareg and other Berber peoples, north across the Sahara to the Mediterranean Sea, the Bedouin across North Africa and the Middle East, the Turkmen and other Turkic nomads in Central Asia, the Mongol peoples of Mongolia and China, the Qashqai, Pashtun and Baloch nomads of South West Asia, the Gujjars, Gaddi, Lohari, and Raika of South Asia, the Minang and Sama Bajau of South East Asia, etc.

It is rare for nomadic codes of conduct to be written down. But there are three clear exceptions:

- The Hebrew nomad, Moses.
- The followers of the Good Shepherd, another Hebrew nomad.
- The followers of a Bedouin merchant, cousin of the Hebrews, who came along roughly 600 years after the Good Shepherd.

Usually, these codes of conduct are intuitively understood, being taught by the family and the community. They define a certain way of behaving and a way of treating outsiders. They provide a way of relating within your tribe, or clan, or other social structures. Across the islands of South East Asia, the Minang intuitively know what it means to be “hunters of knowledge.” It is built into the social DNA of the Sama Bajau “sea gypsies” to be the world’s best free divers. Across the Middle East and into Europe, the Domari and Roma service nomads have their own certain way of behaving, passed down generation after generation. All nomads know how to treat guests, how to treat enemies, and how to treat insiders.

Nomads were the first to hear the Good News about Jesus. When those shepherds outside Bethlehem heard, they immediately raced to have their own experience with Him! They must have been delighted to see Him lying in a manger just like some of their own children had done. At a crowded wedding, I have also seen as many as five ladies, some with small children, all sleeping in one big feed trough surrounded by a herd of water buffalo. Once those shepherds had experienced “God-with-us” for themselves, Luke tells us that *they spread the word ... and all who heard it were amazed* (Luke 2:17–20). How far did the word spread? As far as Arabia, where Paul went after his conversion? Nomads do get around.



## What difference does it make?

**For nomads, much of “the West” (wrongly understood as “Christianity”) equals...**

- **Alienation from the network of relationships**—Christians are seen as people who value things. But nomads value relationships.
- **Severance from the banner of protection and provision of the community organization**—It results from severed ties with their extended family. It is commonly spoken of as a fate worse than death.
- **Loss of mobility**—Lost freedom and purpose, imprisoned by buildings.
- **Lost group autonomy**—Individual autonomy leaves them feeling lost and confused. Group autonomy involves shared responsibilities, mutual respect and loyal love within the context of their group identity. By contrast, separation from the group can lead to addictive behaviors, drug abuse, alcoholism, etc.
- **Disoriented heritage**—“Who am I?” Their distinctive code of ethics has been built over millennia. It has provided resiliency over a multitude of generations.

## But consider their joy to discover the truth!

The Good Shepherd heals broken relations! He gathers and restores clans and tribes! He wants us to be autonomous from worldliness and any world system that goes against His divine code of conduct! We even share a distinctive heritage in Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and through Jesus, our Shepherd King!

**So come! Let’s put the Church on His camel and bring the Good Shepherd back into nomadic communities.** You, an outsider, can take the message of Good News to a nomadic community keeping watch over their flocks outside the city. Demonstrate the Good News with your words, actions, and relationships. Become comfortable with their code. Let them see for themselves how this Good Shepherd fulfills all the best parts of their “Pulaaku” or other nomadic way of being, that He Himself is the culmination of the long line of God’s nomadic messengers throughout the Scriptures. 🏠