

Nomadism: Glimpses

They are nomads. They move around, rear animals.

For centuries they have pitched their tents throughout the year under the sky, the sun, the rain.

In a country composed mainly of arid and semi-arid terrain, the nomads migrate with their livestock to make use of the scattered resources. A technique acquired through refining the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. By taming animals they could carry their livelihood and their household with them, so their journeys became cyclical and their return trips planned.

Their peoples are organized: tribes, sub-tribes, clans, etc, with a name for each. Each of them knows their place in the tribal hierarchy, allowing them to be recognized by fellow tribesmen. You might call them free, wandering without restraints, but these ties can be quite restrictive, a strong set of traditions and unbreakable social codes devised to ensure their survival.

Lately their way is changing: their lifestyle once adjusted to the rhythm of nature is being eroded. Their livelihood, full of hardships but once the most productive of the land, can no longer compete with the demands of the market economy. Their children receiving modern education want to become doctors and engineers. Lured by the bright lights, many have yielded to sedentarization forces, changed their way of life, become settled and semi-settled, even to become [urban] parasites¹. During the past century these forces have reduced their numbers from one third of the overall population to less than 2 percent today. Today, they are trying to survive.

The tent is their home, their flexible, mobile home. An architectural masterpiece perfected through the test of time. Its fabric and shape adapts to the seasons, the weather and the size of their families. The tent is a shelter to them, their animals and their future. The finest layer of fabric between them and the sky, the frailest shelter to recreate a universe. Tents are habitations that spring up spontaneously, creating homes in the blink of an eye. Tents as havens of security, as a warning to the outside world that a limit cannot be trespassed. Tents as ephemeral human presence, strokes on the landscape,

¹ Perhaps the main reason for the nomads to look down upon gypsies was their feeling of higher stature due to their productiveness and the resultant independence and pride.

drawn then erased. They pitch them not too close, not too far from each other. They need the air, they need the space. They are their only homes within the open rangelands, vast areas once their territory being trimmed down today. The settled life keeps expanding, urbanization keeps moving toward them. Cement buildings are replacing their woven tents. They are nomads, still trying to be.

He is a nomad. An urban nomad. He lives in a city. City or urban sprawl, settlement gone out of control? He is new to this place. Like so many other millions. In a short while the village has become a metropolis. An overgrown head to a malnourished body. In this country, a third of the population is under 30. He has experienced revolution, war and bombardment. He leads a double life –in the public and private spheres– in this ugly, overpopulated, polluted city. He has learned to adapt to the situations and enjoy life. He has even developed a liking for the dynamic and colorful spirit of the city. Anyway, isn't it a mirror of the heterogeneous mix of people, characters and identities of which he is part?

Unlike his peers he doesn't hate the place, although sometimes he does feel that he has had enough of it, the traffic, the pollution, the frenzy of people, styles...

He came to life in this melting pot after his parents moved here. His family, friends and the people he grew up with constitute his 'tribe'. This tribe defines his identity for the most part, regardless of geography, territory, states contained by boundaries. This is his nomadism. His home here is temporary. It houses only a small piece of his heart. During his childhood he had to get used to the pain of losing them one by one when they left Iran for better prospects abroad. At any moment, he might also leave to join them.

Most of the new buildings that have mushroomed in the city appear empty. Real-estate speculators have bought so many of these city apartments and are now just waiting to sell at a better price. The feeling of it is of people in transit, humanity passing through.

He is an urban nomad. He lives in a city. He works for it, sleeps beside it, makes it grow. He is a construction worker, he pitches his tent on open urban spaces. Is he reclaiming a bit of freedom amidst the inferno of stone and steel? No, probably not. His tent is only a very far-removed sister of the nomads' tent, a tool necessary to his work. Is

he a nomad? He does move from site to site and his belongings are few. He lives on the ground, far away from the apartment heights he helps to build. He does not migrate with the seasons, he is not part of an environmentally sustainable lifestyle. He is an ad-hoc, mobile appendage to a system that yearns for sedentarism with eyes teary of the freedom it is giving up. His city is a nomad too, somehow. An unsettled settlement. His city is millions of concrete tents, huddled close together, looking for space, searching for fresh air. Civilization here has put aside the rules of nature, and the symbiosis it should adopt always and however large its settlement becomes. Nature reminds us sometimes.

He is a nomad. An earthquake made him so. He is a Bami, his city razed by 90% by an earthquake measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale. 40,000 of his fellow citizens were taken away, and the historical clay citadel, a monument of world heritage protected by UNESCO and their major tourist attraction, destroyed. The houses which once lined avenues, streets and alleys have changed into tents, distributed by humanitarian agencies and pitched on the dirt. Only the date palms remain standing. The people of Bam have been brought the closest possible to the ground. For thousands of them, the temporary housing of the tent has become a home, and has brought into being a most precarious style of life. Their tents are a fine line between desperation and hope.

She is a nomad. A global nomad. She is not a tourist, not an immigrant, not a refugee. She has been on the move before she came to know herself, first following her parents and then in search of something missing.... experience? belonging? identity? happiness? She cannot say where her home is; perhaps a few places are home to her at the same time.

As a child she didn't like being dragged from place to place, but now that she looks back she cannot think of it in another way.

She lives in a shifting present tense, not being able to predict or plan much further ahead. She sometimes thinks that if she wants to start a family, have a child, etc, she'd better hurry. But even that is not a must, too many options and no clear road map.

She is one of the growing numbers of people in the world who cross borders in search of a better life². She left the motherland. Like her ancestors, what is vital for her sustenance is dispersed in different areas, causing her to migrate frequently. Driven by opportunism, she grazes in one place before moving on, forced to go or lured by a more attractive prospect. Nor can she abandon her birthplace altogether. She needs that space, she needs that air. She is the 21st century nomad, the e-nomad of the post-industrial era. She hops from place to place, keeping in touch through different means of communication: email, e-communities, phones³. Perhaps her home is where her friends, relatives, co-workers are, relationships she creates wherever she goes. Her environments are heterogeneous mixes of different people and cultures. She is eclectic and herself a piece of a multicolor collage.

² Over the past 15 years, the number of people crossing borders in search of a better life has been rising steadily. At the start of the 21st century, one in every 35 people is an international immigrant. If they all lived in the same place, it would be the world's fifth-largest country. (BBC NEWS, migration factfile, June 2004).

³ Iranians are among the most visible nationalities in e-communities and internet friends networks (i.e. third in 'Orkut' and growing in 'Gazzag')