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Illustration: SEB 586 / Uta Schilling

Wanderers in a Settled World

Nomads past and present: The “Brisante Begegnungen” exhibition at Hamburg’s Museum of Ethnology opens windows on a wide variety of lifestyles. This thought-provoking exhibition showcases the findings of a DFG Collaborative Research Centre.

Where’s your yurt?” asks the shepherd on the steppes. He means “Where is your home?” This temporary home is a living space, family hub and storage area in one. These round tents of Central Asia (picture above, taken in western Mongolia) consist of flexible trellis walls, which can be quickly as-

sembled and disassembled. These are then covered with strips of felt. They provide the nomads with a refuge in the dry and hostile steppe and highland landscapes. For settled people, the nomad’s tent has always served as an expression and symbol for a non-settled life – like that of an animal herder – which

revolves around grazing areas, watering holes and marketplaces.

“Berbers”, “travelling people”, “gypsies”: according to research into the stereotypes, they are all viewed as “strange” and “different” by the townspeople and villagers of Central Europe. Despite romantic – and fictitious – 19th century tales of the free

and proud “gypsy life”, travellers and their extended families are still perceived as “threatening”. Their business practices, which include, for example, peddling goods door-to-door, are considered “dirty”, if not downright criminal. For the majority of society, travelling people are on the fringe. In a cultural history of foreignness, negative opinions of nomadic minorities are widespread. The lunacy and racist mania of the Nazis consolidated this resentment with disastrous results: the Sinti and Romani gypsies were deprived of their rights and deported. More than 20,000 lost their lives in concentration camps.

Nomads past and present are the topic of the “Brisante Begegnungen” (Encounters of Significance) exhibition, which is on display at the Hamburg Museum of Ethnology until 20 May 2012. It aims to open our eyes to a variety of nomadic lifestyles, and looks back on 5,000 years of nomadic civilisation in a panorama which extends from Morocco to Egypt, Syria, Iran, Kazakhstan and Tibet to Siberia and Lapland. Organised by Leipzig ethnologists Professor Annegret Nippa and Dr. Andreea Bretan, it sets out to show “nomads in a settled world”, and thus to illustrate the interrelationships between settled and nomadic societies.

The exhibition is based on eleven years of work by the “Difference and Integration” Collaborative Research Centre at the Universities of Leipzig and Halle-Wittenberg,

as well as at other, non-university institutions. Here, researchers from 15 disciplines, including ancient history, Islamic and Oriental studies, geography and ethnology, worked together on over 50 projects. At the opening of the Collaborative Research Centre’s concluding exhibition, which was funded by the DFG at a cost of almost a million euros, Annegret Nippa explained the exhibition’s key points: “The displays have also been designed to reflect the nomadic way of thinking. Visitors therefore wander through the building, experiencing the topic in its flexibility and in its fundamental tenet: mobility.” This concept also has the advantage of allowing 400 objects to be displayed. Half of them come from DFG field studies, a quarter are part of the Hamburg Ethnology Museum’s collection, and the rest are on loan from other collections.

The quantity and variety of the exhibits, which include a few written works, are surprising. Researchers and exhibitors had to deal with the difficulty of obtaining objects and nomads’ inconspicuousness. Whether camel-riding Bedouins in the Sahara or nomads herding Yak (a type of domesticated grunting ox) on the Tibetan high plains, nomadic cultures are almost completely non-literate. Since ancient times, non-nomads have written about them from their settled viewpoints and with differing goals. Their original traces have, however, been literally lost on the steppes and in the desert sands.

The exhibition contains four sections: “Exchange and Trade”, “Leadership and Control”, “Nature and Animals – Work and Product”, and “Difference and Integration”. Nomadic societies arise where uncultivable deserts, steppe landscapes and



Right: Nomadic grazing lands in the Nagqu prefecture of the Tibet Autonomous Region: Motorcycles bring new forms of mobility and take the place of horses and other mounts.

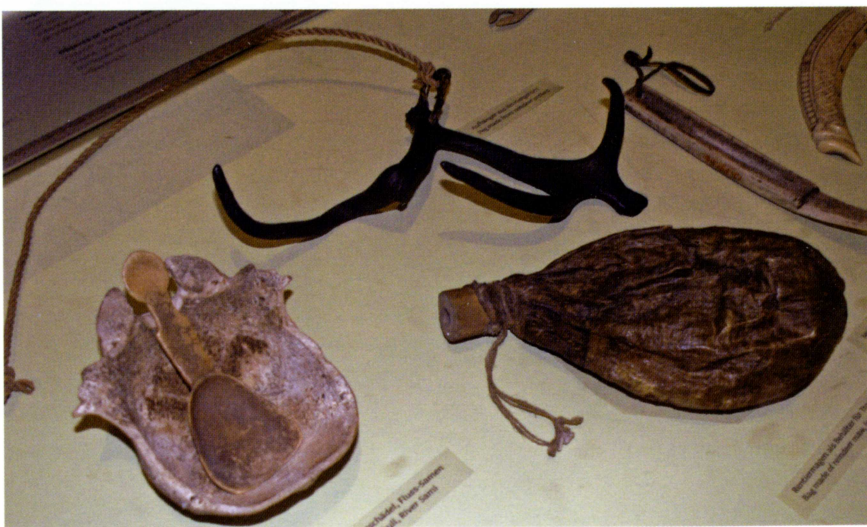
high karst plains permit only a peripatetic existence. Nomads (literally: “people who move with herds”) live with and from their livestock, with goats, sheep and yaks providing the basic materials for food, clothing and trade. (Wild) horses and camels serve as pack and riding animals, ensuring the nomads’ mobility. It is no surprise that the stirrup was invented by the Turkic peoples.

Since ancient times, trade and change have created the traditional interface between the nomadic and settled worlds. In the marketplaces and caravanserais, the nomads bartered with wool products, milk products and meat for grain, sugar and tea, as well as metal and wooden items. They also offered goods which bore testimony to their specialist knowledge (handed down through oral traditions) and their familiarity with regional flora and fauna. These included, for example, the finely curled karakul fleece of the Persian lamb for coats and hats, marmot fat to protect against cold,

or Armenian healing earth for skin conditions. Even more specialised are “healing” tortoise dung or the resin of white vermouth. The displays place items that seem exotic at first glance in an everyday context. Rather than attempting to sensationalise the adventurous aspects of nomadic life, the exhibition focusses on everyday life for the nomad. This is one of its strengths.

It is, however, also a weakness. While the exhibition does cover the nomads’ attitudes to power structures and their boundaries, to changes in leadership and control, it focusses mainly on their coexistence and cooperation with these concepts, describing their conflicts with them only as a side note. Such meetings really would have been “charged encounters”. In her guided tour, Andreea Bretan likes to talk of “similarities in the differences”. This includes the (possibly unique) second-century custom of giving nomads in the Roman province of North Africa Roman citizenship rights. This is borne out by the

Masters of a sustainable economy (top): Nomads learned early on how to dye wool using natural substances. Everything is used (below): Half a reindeer skull becomes a salt container; a reindeer’s stomach is used to store dried milk.



“Tabula Banasitana”, a bronze tablet found in Banasa, Morocco, which contains three emperor’s letters on the matter to the province’s governor. Integration through citizenship! Drawing a contemporary parallel, a naturalisation certificate from today and German citizenship rights are displayed beside the historical documents in a display of socio-political finger-pointing. Conflict and confrontation, and, in particular, war-like skirmishes – the Bedouin wars spring to mind – take a back seat. Andreea Bretan emphasises “the high potential for peaceful coexistence”. In the eye of the beholder, however, “possibility” can trump “reality”.

The exhibition traces the route taken by the centre’s work. A corner of the first exhibition room contains a world map showing all the places

and regions examined. A display case describes the sources of the research: finds from grave sites, documents from archives, an exemplary field studies notebook, and empirical data records. This high and wide multidisciplinary umbrella also enables researchers to discover new nomadic settings and phenomena.

One multimedia station, for example, showcases Romani palaces. These have been found increasingly in Eastern Europe since the 1990s, most notably in Romanian suburbs and villages. These “castellos” have no running water, heating, cellars or garages. They are designed not for living in, but to demonstrate the wealth and pride of their builders, and are used only on feast days. The façades – and particularly the cupolas – are crucially important for the family involved: the more ornate, higher and more artistically ornamented they are, the more prestigious. The concept of settlement is given form as a fantasy.

The Romani, too, are masters of mobile life. The exhibition supports the concept that nomadic communities represent a separate and independent way of living, rather than the remnants of an archaic precursor to settlement. “For millennia, nomads have been part and parcel of civilisation in the Old World dry belt which extends from Morocco in the west to northern China in the east,” explains Arabist and Islamic scholar Professor Stefan Leder, the first coordinator of the Collaborative Research Centre. In the modern world, nomadic cultures – which have long since adopted the mobile phone, motorbike and campervan – are a current, if repressed, way of life. In a culture shaped by urbanisation, the nomadic lifestyle receives little support: metaphori-



A vacant “gypsy palace” in the village of Huedin, in the district of Cluj, Romania. The Romani mainly work as “service nomads”, travelling from job to job instead of from pasture to pasture. They work as gutter makers, tin-platers and smiths.

cal slurs like “renter nomads”, job nomads and “relationship nomads” speak for themselves.

But what can we learn from nomadic lifestyles? If we perceive the nomad as “a vanguard of globalisation” as the Leipzig-based SFB coordinator Professor Jörg Gertel, an expert on the economy and social geography of the Near East, does, it becomes clear that mobility and flexibility can overcome hostile living conditions and existential uncertainties, that scarce resources can be creatively used and that people can live sustainably in harmony with nature and the environment.

The “Brisante Begegnungen” exhibition presents visitors – of which there have, so far, been more than 25,000 – with a new and multifaceted image of the nomadic lifestyle. It also shows that “refining” this image requires intensive

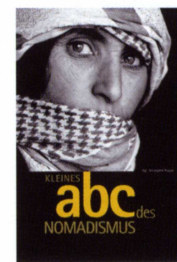
research. The alphabet of nomadism is one in which it is worth becoming literate.

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“Brisante Begegnungen” will be on display at the Hamburg Museum of Ethnology until 20 May 2012. Since February, it has been expanded to include the special exhibition “Wahlverwandtschaften. Imaginationen des Nomadischen in der Gegenwartskunst” (Elective Affinities. Portrayals of Nomadic Life in Contemporary Art).

www.voelkerkundemuseum.com/306-0-Brisante-Begegnungen-Nomaden-in-einer-sesshaften-Welt.html



A companion volume to the exhibition is available. The “Kleines abc des Nomadismus” (Nomadic Primer) by Annegret Nippa is published by the Verlag Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg 2012, ISBN: 978-3-9812566-5-9.