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# Jesus as the Good Camel Herder: The Somali Nomads as the Final Frontier

Aweis A. Ali

A Somali camel herder once put out a challenge to Dr. Malcolm Hunter, an SIM missionary at the time, “when you can put your church on the back of a camel, then I will believe that Christianity is for us Somalis.” Intrepid missionaries arrived in the Somali peninsula in the nineteenth century, making Christ-like disciples right away, albeit a slow start. The ministry focus of the two most successful mission organizations at the time, the Catholics and Lutherans, was the sedentary Somalis in Berbera and Kismayo. Both pioneering missions settling in coastal port towns is akin to missionaries today living next to an international airport, which is the last place one would expect to find nomads!

The two pioneering mission organizations of the twentieth century also settled in a seaside city with the biggest seaport and the best international airport in Somalia. The reason the Mennonite Mission (MM) and SIM chose to set their mission compounds a few miles away from the international airport, and several miles from international seaport has by default excluded nomads from their ministry. Both mission organizations later expanded their mission work to villages and towns within southern and central Somalia while still focusing on the sedentary Muslim communities. However, the nomadic Somalis consisted of 59% of the population according to the 1975 census. The nomadic population was even higher twenty years earlier when the MM and SIM established bases in the Somali capital.

Until quite recently, there had never been any mission organization in Somalia that established a permanent ministry among the nomads. The Somali nomads mainly keep dromedary camels while also keeping small herds of cattle, sheep, and goats for the benefit of women, children, and the elderly who cannot travel with the camels. The mission organizations often find nomads fierce and too autonomous. The training missionaries receive in their home country is primarily for the settled people. Nomads do not have the luxury of a permanent address. While missionaries can tell where they live, nomads cannot. The Somali government requires any organization registering in Somalia to have a permanent office to serve as a fixed address. The problem arises when the office becomes the centre of the ministry. It is hard to convince any nomad to visit an office where he would feel like a fish out of water. A nomad is

in his elements under a tree, and ministers of the gospel should meet him there.

## The Nomads are the Least Evangelized

The least likely people to hear the gospel in Somalia are the nomads who crisscross the Somali peninsula in Somalia, northeast Kenya, Djibouti and eastern Ethiopia in search of pasture for their camels. One reason that the ministry to the Somali nomads seems prohibitive is by confusing the church with buildings. The building-centered historical church tradition neglects outreach to the nomads. The whole concept of meeting for worship at a specific location at a particular day and a particular time is a foreign concept to the nomads. The customary emphasis on literacy in the church is also another hindrance since the vast majority of the Somali nomads are preliterate.

Any evangelist who ministers to the nomads must own several camels and adapt to the nomadic lifestyle that does not recognize any political borders. Expatriate missionaries will struggle in such a ministry. While the urban Somali Christians also have not shown any fortitude to be nomads to win the nomads to Christ, becoming a nomad for the sake of the nomads is the only viable ministry strategy. The ministry to the Somali nomads requires a paradigm shift. To continue doing this ministry as it has been done since the nineteenth century will continue yielding the same outcome, minimal Christ-like disciples among the nomads.

I once asked a Somali nomad and relative of mine to describe what he knew about Christians. He hesitated then stated that Christians are required to pray once a week

in a beautiful building. His view highlights that nomads could remain unreached until the association of Christianity with buildings is eliminated. After all, the buildings are not the church; the people are! While there are few stumbling blocks in reaching the nomads, fixed buildings tend to be the biggest hurdle. Other obstacles include the extreme terrain, forbidding temperatures and the harsh living conditions. Ministers need a Macedonian-type call to broach the topic of reaching nomads. The reason Somali nomads remain unreached is not that God is not calling anyone to them, but those who have been called are hesitant to obey.

## Understanding the Nomads

As a Somali from a nomadic background, I can confirm that the outside world always seemed alien to us. My parents built me a cozy shelter on the back of a camel when we moved to the Somali capital as a child. My parents viewed the city people and their form of government as a threat to their way of life. The government demanded taxes without providing any visible services. The city people often asked my parents how many camels or cattle we had. Somali nomads believe telling others how many animals or kids they have would attract evil spirits who could harm them. My parents' response to such intrusive questions was, “we are blessed,” “we are not complaining” or, “we are thankful to Allah.” City people did not consider these responses as sufficient answers. Nomads often fascinate the settled people who find the nomads as expendable and cite dismissive proverbs like, “it is fine if someone you do not know or a camel-herding nomad dies.”

Islam came to Somalia through its



coastal towns where Arab preachers arrived in dhows (traditional sailing vessels). Islam gradually spread to the interior of the country where nomads roamed with their camels. The nomads were, therefore, the last group of people to convert to Islam.

While the nomads have been the last to embrace Islam, they should not be the last to follow Jesus. The good news better fits in a nomadic community than urban sprawl. Nomads form small and closely-knit groups where everyone knows everyone else. There is no anonymity in this community. The culture and the lifestyle of the nomads is a fertile ground for the gospel. Nevertheless, the ministers of the gospel have always found this ministry challenging. Workers remain few while the harvest is plentiful.

The most essential possession Somali nomads have is their camels. A nomad's worldview is shaped by this precious possession, which serves as a currency, food, and drink. Somali camels are dromedary, and their hump weighs about eighty pounds at its heaviest. This hump is filled with fat and

serves as a reserve food pantry. The camel accesses this energy storage when there is not enough food. The hump would eventually shrink and fall to one side when its contents decline. However, it will grow back to average size once the mighty beast eats well again. The camel can drink thirty gallons of water in fifteen minutes. The one-thousand-pound camel can carry five hundred pounds of load and travel one hundred miles without food or water. The camel is genuinely a desert ship.

I met Somali clan elders in Mogadishu in 2000 with a missionary friend from the United States. The clan elders asked the missionary three questions that are essential to them:

1. How many camels do you own?
2. How many sons do you have?
3. How many wives do you have?

The missionary told them he had no camels and that he had only two daughters. He

also added he had only one wife. The men offered him a young wife to bear him sons, but he declined, saying, "I do not think my wife would be happy with this arrangement." The elders said, "what kind of a man would consult with his wife?"

There is a Somali poetic verse that is used as a proverb, "a man without camels will not go to heaven." The camel is the most essential being after the head of the house as the popular camel herders' work song illustrates, "when my wife dies, I will fix my hair and get a new one; but there would be wailing and hopelessness when I die. Nonetheless, we would all starve to death when you, my camel, die." There is also an Islamic tradition that Allah has one hundred names, but people know only ninety-nine of them. However, says the legend, only the camel knows the one hundredth name. The majestic and exaggerated gait of the camel is attributed to the divine secret he holds.

### **Nomads Hear the Gospel**

An international denomination from the

holiness tradition embraced ministering to the Somali camel herding nomads in 2014. This ministry showed signs of initial success within the first two years. All the camel herding converts were given proper discipleship training but only the qualified converts were granted an additional training as camel herding evangelists to reach their people. Each of the commissioned camel herding evangelists received six church-owned camels (five females and one male) to use them for the glory of God. The evangelists know they do not own the camels, but any income they generate from the camels (like selling the milk) is exclusively used for ministry purposes. The camels are a reliable source of income for the ministry since they produce plenty of milk that can be sold when the camels are near towns, villages, or settlements. Camel herders can live on the milk alone for months because of its precious nutritional values. Camel herders also forage wild fruits to supplement their iron-rich diet. Baby camels produced are also used to send new evangelistic teams once they grow to maturity.

The camel herding evangelists join Muslim camel herders who are always from the same extended family to harness sufficient safety from their numbers. The average size of any camel group roaming in the Somali peninsula is about one hundred heads with about five camel herders. The camel herding evangelists have not been persecuted because of their faith since the launching of this ministry in 2014. Muslim camel herding nomads will not harm anyone from their extended family for religious reasons. These Muslims would also protect their Christian relatives should anyone threaten them for any reason. The Somalis' legendary clan loyalty provides much-needed protection to these nomadic evangelists.

The vision and the mission of launching the camel herders' ministry came from Somali Christians from a nomadic background. These visionary Christians oversee this ministry, and the expatriate missionaries play a minimal role in this fascinating and fruitful evangelistic effort. As the old English


expression puts it, "only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches." The Somali Christians who pioneered this ministry knew that reaching the nomads was possible with the right strategy. Expatriate missionaries cannot be on the frontlines of this ministry, but they can play essential roles from behind the scenes. This ministry is already self-sustaining even if no new camels are purchased. Future teams can be equipped with enough camels by using the camels reproduced from the existing church-owned camels.

## Conclusion

The viability of ministering to Somali camel herders has puzzled missionaries since the start of the formal Somali missionary work in the nineteenth century. The hawkish and proud nomads think they are better than any sedentary person, including the missionaries. Nomads despise fishing, farming and trade. There is plenty of nomadic poetry where any profession other than camel herding is denigrated. The nomadic culture only recognizes two manly offices – the camel herder and the warrior. The camel is indistinguishable from the Somali identity since the majority of Somali clans hail from the nomadic background; these are always the dominant clans in the country. The names of some Somali clans demonstrate their affinity with camels like Gaal Je'el (lover of camels) and Abgaal (father of camels). The Gaal Je'el clan is best known for their saying, "I would rather groan in hell than see my camels groaning in discomfort."

Understanding the integral role camels play in the lives of the nomads is the key to any fruitful ministry among these fiercely independent people. Women and children tend goats and sheep in Somalia, whereas men herd cattle and camels. The camel herders enjoy the highest prestige among livestock herders. Most nomads are preliterate, but their capacity to memorize contents is legendary.

Four of the camel herding evangelists are hafizul Qur'an (memorizers of the Qur'an),

a prestigious title to which many Muslims aspire. The Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, is about the size of the New Testament and is written in Arabic, which most Somalis do not speak. A national moniker for the Somali nation is Maandeeq which literally means "you have pleased my heart." Maandeeq is, therefore, the name given to the best of she-camels. This name is also a popular traditional name for Somali girls. I have recently asked a Somali camel herder why he decided to follow Jesus; his response was, "maankayguu deeqay" (he has pleased my heart). I asked him again how he would describe Jesus, and he responded with a big smile, "the Good Camel Herder." 

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## Notes

1. The French Catholic Mission arrived in Berbera in 1891. The Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church (*Evangelisk Fosterlands-Stiftelsen*, EF-S) entered Kismayo in 1896.
2. The Mennonite Mission arrived in Mogadishu in 1953 and the SIM in 1954.
3. Helen Chapin Metz, *Somalia: A Country Study*, 4th ed. (Baton Rouge: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1993), 68.
4. The proverb in Somalis is, "Geeriyi nimaadan garanayn iyo geel jirey ku wacan tahay."
5. The proverb says in Somali, "aakhiro nin aan geel lahayn lama amaanayne." A literal translation would be, "no praiseworthy report came from the afterlife of the man who died without camels."
6. The work son says in Somali, "Geerida haween duud la fidho iyo guursi laga qaad. Geeridaydana, guryo ba'ay iyo gablan laga qaad, geeridaadana gaawe madhan iyo gaajo laga qaad."
7. The adage says in Somali, "intuu geelaygu geed ka hoos cabaadi lahaay aan anigu naarta ka cabaado."

## Resources

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- Fahlbusch, Erwin and Geoffrey William Bromiley. *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, volume 1 (Leiden: Brill Academic Publisher, 1991).