

**MISSION and
CHRISTIAN
SERVICE
in AFRICA**

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EDITORS

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**Essays in Honour of
Dr Daryll Gordon Stanton**

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**THE FOUNDRY
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Becoming a Nomad for the Sake of Nomads

Aweis A. Ali

Abstract

According to the 2014 UN Population Fund report, about 30 percent of Somalis in Somalia are estimated to be nomads.¹ This is a significant number of nomads, given the country's population of seventeen million people. Since there are about ten million ethnic Somalis in Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya, the number of Somali nomads is higher than that. According to some estimates, a dozen known Somali Christian nomads herd camels in the Somali Peninsula.² Most of these believers followed Jesus in the last several years. As the faith community evangelises nomads, we must support and preserve the camel herders' unique way of life. These nomads have lived in harmony with their environment for generations and should be allowed to continue doing so even after many become Christ's disciples. If nomads perceive missionaries and evangelists as threatening their way of life, they could reject the gospel.

A paradigm shift is necessary for camel-herding nomads to hear the gospel in a way they can understand. It is time for local evangelists and

1. Nina Evason, "Somali Culture," Cultural Atlas, 2019, <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/somali-culture/somali-culture-core-concepts#somali-culture-core-concepts>.

2. The Somali Peninsula encompasses Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti, and the Somali-inhabited regions of Ethiopia and Kenya.

expatriate missionaries to become nomads for the sake of nomads so some might be saved. Becoming one with the nomads requires living and eating with them as they move around the Horn of Africa, seeking better pastures and peace for their camels. This strategy is not for the faint-hearted; it requires a Macedonian call to embrace it joyfully.³

Since 1991, the Somali church has experienced growth among sedentary communities, and now this growth is gradually spreading to nomadic communities. Two of the local evangelists who contributed to the expansion of the gospel to Somali nomads were trained under the leadership of Dr Daryll Gordon Stanton during his tenure as a lecturer at Africa Nazarene University.

Introduction

Somali nomads have yet to be reached after 142 years of extensive ministry in the Somali Peninsula. This chapter critiques the fruitless ministry strategy that disadvantages the Somali nomads; it intends to illustrate that church buildings are a colossal immovable liability for any ministry to nomads. This chapter suggests that church buildings and mission stations are impractical since they cannot move with the nomads; it also advocates for versatile ministers who can sleep in the open and live on camel milk and whatever they can forage in the resource-challenged nomadic arid environment. The semi-desert Somali Peninsula and its savannah, known for its acacia trees and hardy, thorny bushes, can sustain any determined nomadic gospel minister. Nomadic evangelists must find ways to put the church on the back of a camel so the church can always be where the nomads are.

Somali nomadic camel herders are the least evangelised in the Somali Peninsula. Their way of life repels traditional evangelism, where the target people group is often sedentary. Since nomads are on the move, the ministers serving them should also be nomadic. While it is expected that expatriate missionaries would struggle in a nomadic existence, local evangelists also do not have a history of becoming nomads so that the

3. The phrase “Macedonian call” pertains to the unambiguous, clear vision from God that guided Paul’s path during his second missionary journey (see Acts 15:39–18:22).

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nomads could hear the gospel. No wonder nomads in this strategic peninsula remain the least evangelised.

Nomads can worship under trees or even in the open air while their camels rest. They do not need manufactured structures to grow in their faith. So why are these noble and fiercely independent people unreached even though modern missionary work in Somalia started in 1881? Sadly, local evangelists reflect the expatriate missionaries who disciplined and equipped them, prioritizing comfort and physical safety. Ease and physical security are the primary idols that prevent nomads from hearing the gospel.

The most prominent expatriate missionary who became a nomad to witness to nomads in the Somali Peninsula is John Ethelstan Cheese (1877–1959). Cheese, better known as “the poor man of God” and “the holiest man in Somalia,” won converts among Somali camel herders in the Somali Peninsula. However, staying in touch with these new believers proved challenging since he simultaneously worked with different groups of camel herders. While Cheese, an Anglican minister, pioneered ministry to nomads, other missionaries preferred what they knew better: building a mission station and ministering to people in a static area. As illustrated by the ministry of Dr Daryll Gordon Stanton, being a sedentary missionary does not preclude one from facilitating ministry to nomads. As a professor at Africa Nazarene University, Stanton trained local Christians to become salt and light to nomads in Sub-Saharan Africa. If the apostle Paul became everything to everyone that some might be saved (1 Cor. 9:19–23), it is time for Christians called by God to become nomads so that some might be saved for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Nomads

Somali camel herders have a unique and captivating way of life centered around relying on their camels for transportation, milk, and meat. These nomadic herders travel across different countries like Somalia, Somaliland,⁴ Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya in search of water and grazing land for their camels. Their culture is steeped in the tradition of hospitality toward guests, making it a fascinating subject for exploration.

4. In 1991, Somaliland declared its independence from Somalia. However, despite its claim to sovereignty, it has not been able to secure international recognition.

Somali camel herders have a rich cultural heritage passed down through generations. They are known for their ability to survive in harsh and arid environments and for their deep understanding of the land and its resources. Camels are an integral part of their way of life, providing transportation, milk, and meat. Camel milk is popular in Somali culture and is often used in traditional ceremonies and celebrations. For example, new traditional clan chiefs are crowned by having fresh camel milk poured over their heads.

Studying the culture and traditions of camel herders is of great importance to evangelise them more effectively. These people have a unique way of life that has been passed down for generations. One can gain insight into their history, beliefs, and values by studying their culture and way of life. This knowledge can help contextualise the message of Christ for them. These nomads have a strong sense of kinship and work together to care for their animals and support one another.

Somalis keep the dromedary camels, also known as one-humped camels. These are the most common breed, making up about 94 percent of all camels in the world. Bactrian, or two-humped camels, make up about 6 percent of all camels. Dromedaries were most likely first domesticated in the Somali Peninsula or southern Arabia about four thousand years ago.⁵ Dromedaries appear in cave paintings in Laas Geel, Somaliland, dating from five to nine thousand years ago.⁶ According to the World Population Review, Somalia had the highest population of camels globally in 2023, with an estimated six million living within its borders. Some estimates put the number of camels within Somalia's borders over seven million.⁷ In 2024, Chad overtook Somalia in the camel population estimates with more than nine million. Sudan, previously in second place

5. South Arabia is a region with a rich history that encompasses the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula in Western Asia. Its central area is located in Yemen but has historically also included Najran, Jizan, Al-Bahah, and Asir, which are now part of modern-day Saudi Arabia, as well as the Dhofar region of present-day Oman.

6. Bryan Hill, "Laas Geel Complex and the Magnificent Ancient Rock Art of Somaliland," *Ancient Origins*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-africa/laas-geel-complex-and-magnificent-ancient-rock-art-somalia-003174>.

7. Abdishukri Haybe and Hamza Mohamed, "Meet Somalia's Trailblazing Female Camel Trader," *Al Jazeera*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/9/16/meet-somalias-trailblazing-female-camel-trader>.

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behind Somalia, now in third, has under five million.⁸ Ethnic Somali nomads in Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya are estimated to own about two million camels.

Most of the Somali Peninsula is either arid or semiarid, making farming impractical. However, the land and climate are suitable for camel herding. Camels can survive without water in desert or semi-desert regions for weeks, and without food even longer.⁹ When they come across water, they can consume as much as 113 litres (or 30 gallons) in a mere fifteen minutes. Camels carry a suitable “pantry” on their backs in their hump. The hump contains unique fat, and other nutrients that camels can absorb into their bodies to sustain them during lean times.

Camel-herding nomads are the least evangelised people group in the Somali Peninsula. Although their way of life often amuses and sometimes irritates expatriate missionaries and local evangelists, there is no evidence that they are more closed to the gospel than their sedentary counterparts. The entire ministry strategy of missionaries and local ministers excludes nomads.¹⁰ Western missionaries from sedentary communities brought the gospel to the Somali people residing in villages, towns, and cities. The local people who came to the Lord did not attempt to witness to nomads. Since missionaries did not evangelise nomads, the local evangelists needed a point of reference to preach to the camel-herding nomads. Local Christians, therefore, imitate missionaries when they ignore nomads and focus on villages, towns, and cities.¹¹

8. “Camel Population by Country 2024,” World Population Review, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/camel-population-by-country>.

9. Chrissy Sexton, “How Do Arabian Camels Survive for Weeks without Water?” *Earth*, <https://www.earth.com/news/how-do-arabian-camels-survive-for-weeks-without-water/>.

10. Aweis A. Ali, “Jesus as the Good Camel Herder: The Somali Nomads as the Final Frontier,” *EMQ (Evangelical Missions Quarterly)* Vol. 58, No. 1 (January–March 2022).

11. When Somalis meet a dad whose son behaves just like him, they recite the adage, “You are indeed the dad whose son I met.” In Somali, “*Wallee wiil aan arkay aabbihiis waad tahay.*” Likewise, local Christians are the spiritual children of missionaries, resembling them so much so that no “DNA test” is needed.

Camels: A Precious Commodity

Camels are powerful creatures nicknamed “desert ships” for their extraordinary ability as beasts of burden. Pack camels can carry up to 408 kilograms (900 pounds) of weight for 25 miles a day. Not only that, but they can also travel up to 40 miles per hour with ease. The following stanzas were taken from a longer poem by Abdi Gaheyr (1889–1958), a prominent Somali poet. These lines were composed to commemorate the intrinsic value of camels in Somali culture:

*Markab buu adduunyada u yahay, macallinoow geele
Magaalada Hargeysiyo Berbera, moodka waxa keena
Ee Adari Maarsey ka dhigay, muranku waa ceebe
Waa muruq-addoonloow ratiga, micida waaweyne*

A he-camel is a global ship, a sumpter animal ferrying goods
The one which supplies the towns of Hargeisa and Berbera¹²
The one which indeed turned Adari town into Marseille¹³
It is the muscular he-camel with frightening canine teeth
The Somali proverb “the death of a man who died without own-
ing any camels is not newsworthy” illustrates how one’s value is tied to
camels.¹⁴ One of the worst Somali curses is, “May your camels perish!”¹⁵
This is arguably the most feared curse even by those who own no cam-
els! Camels occupy a hallowed place in Somali culture, so much so that
one’s eternal destiny is tied to camels. The Somali adage “A man without
camels will not go to paradise” sums up this belief.¹⁶ Dromedaries reach
a height of approximately 2 meters (6.5 feet) at the shoulder and have
a weight range of 400 to 600 kilograms (880 to 1,325 pounds). They
provide milk and meat as well as cash. Bride wealth and blood money are

12. Berbera is a historic port town in former British Somaliland. Hargeisa is the capital city of Somaliland, formerly British Somaliland.

13. Adari is an ancient influential town in eastern Ethiopia better known today as Harar. Marseille is a famous French port city founded around 600 BC, making Marseille the oldest city in France.

14. In Somali, “*Geel nin aan lahayn geeriddii war ma leh.*”

15. In Somali, “*Geel beel.*”

16. In Somali, “*Aakhiro nin aan geel lahayn lama amaanayne.*” A literal translation is, “No praiseworthy news came from the man who died without owning any camels.” In other words, he is languishing in hell.

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paid in camels. According to a Somali proverb, camels are so treasured in Somali culture that you can only buy camels with camels!¹⁷ Selected stanzas from a poem by Sayid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan (1856–1920) elucidate the significance of camels among Somalis:

*Hali waa nin hooya leh, dad ninkii ka haystow,
Awrna waa halbawlaha naftu ka hataq leedahay.*

*A she-camel is a mother to the man who owns it,
But a he-camel is the artery onto which hangs life itself.*

It is common for many Somalis in the diaspora to send regular money home so their relatives in the Somali Peninsula can buy more camels. One of the biggest camel owners in the Somali region of Ethiopia is a Somali American who lives in Minnesota in the United States. Similarly, Somalis who return home from the West own hundreds of camels in Somalia and Somaliland. One such camel owner is a woman named Zamzam Yusuf, who returned to Somalia from London. In a 2019 interview with *Al Jazeera*, Yusuf said, “‘First, I started with 30 camels. But slowly the herd has grown. Now the total is 145 camels and growing,’ she says, as dozens of calves bleat in the background. ‘The target is to have more than 1,000 camels. God willing.’”¹⁸

Ministering to Nomads

There are counterproductive strategies to avoid when reaching nomads. Any attempt to make nomads sedentary is a sure way to dishonor their dignity and way of life. If nomads can flourish on the move without Jesus, they should be able to continue thriving as nomads as followers of Jesus. Although evangelising nomads is complicated because of their way of life and environment, the solution is not for them to adopt a new lifestyle. Infringing upon their freedom of movement and their time-tested method of eking out a life in their inhospitable environment should not be entertained. Malcolm Hunter describes some of the challenges Christians who minister to nomads can face: “It is undeniably exhausting in the heat, dust and flies that accompany the cattle to the watering places all day and at certain times, all night. Few people can appreciate

17. In Somali, “*Geel waa geel wixii gooyaana waa geel.*”

18. Haybe and Mohamed, “Somalia’s Trailblazing Female Camel Trader.”

the isolation and sheer monotony of spending night after night in remote and often noisy camps (the animals regularly stir around, bellowing or bleating with the herdsman jumping up to quiet them or to drive off the hyenas).”¹⁹

Ministers carrying water and food with them is also unreasonable. Those who can eat with nomads will be more effective than those who can only be with nomads as long as their city-sourced food supplies and water last. Currently, security in much of the Horn of Africa is poor, so expatriate ministers should take extra caution when venturing deep into the Somali Peninsula.²⁰ Preachers should identify with nomads and adopt their way of life. The apostle Paul taught the proper strategy of connecting with the target audience:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.

(1 Cor. 9:19–23, NKJV)

The gospel can be introduced to nomads without interrupting their nomadic lifestyle. Suppose one nomadic community in central Somalia follows Jesus. In that case, they can become salt and light to the entire Somali Peninsula as they crisscross through Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, Somaliland, and Ethiopia.

19. Malcolm Hunter, “The Challenge of Reaching Nomadic Pastoralists.” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 14:4 (1997): 188. Quoted in Evelyn Hibbert, Lance Williamson, and Barbara Williamson, “Developing a Missiology for Ministry to Nomads,” *Missiology: An International Review* Vol. 51, Iss. 2 (April 2023): 3.

20. The Horn of Africa (HOA) is a significant landmass and political area situated on the continent’s easternmost point. It is made up of four countries: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. The region inhabited by Somalis is sometimes referred to as the Somali Peninsula. Some HOA definitions include certain parts of Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda. Moreover, the Greater Horn Region (GHR) can encompass additional countries such as Burundi, Rwanda, and Tanzania.

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Missiologists must develop an effective and replicable strategy to put the church on the back of a camel for nomads to have a chance to hear the gospel in a way they can understand. Muslims do not need a building, a bench, or even a mat to pray; Islam's success lies in its simplicity. The Christian faith must be stripped of its cumbersome cultural trappings. The pure gospel equally appeals to all peoples and cultures. Rick Wood rightfully asserts, "Our churches are not reproducing themselves either. We have inherited many traditional church practices, started centuries ago, which are unbiblical and ineffective in making disciples who go on to make more disciples and plant new churches. This must change in order to reach the unreached people."²¹

Rick Wood is not alone in recognizing the applicability of the pure gospel—a gospel not adulterated with cultural customs and traditions. Malcolm Hunter describes a famous interaction he had with a Somali Muslim camel herder in northeast Kenya: "When you can put your Christian church on the back of my camel, I will think Christianity is for us Somalis. As it is, I am a Muslim because all I need is a prayer mat, and I can pray anywhere. We only see you praying once a week in church, where one man says what he thinks, and everyone else sits down with their eyes closed."²² Although a prayer mat is recommended in Islam if one is available, it is not a prerequisite. The church must take the challenge of this Somali nomad seriously by presenting to nomads the untainted gospel of Jesus Christ that does not require buildings and other cultural innovations in order to follow Jesus.

Given the gospel's origin in the Middle East with its historically nomadic communities, the Somali Peninsula appears to be fertile ground for the gospel. The Arab Bedouins were predisposed to the gospel; many became Christian in the fourth century despite local pressures. The church should, therefore, be keen to take the good news to nomads, the least evangelised people group in the Horn of Africa.

21. Rick Wood, "Rediscovering the Biblical Church That Can Reach Every People," *Mission Frontiers* Vol. 39, No. 1 (January/February 2017): 4, https://www.missionfrontiers.org/pdfs/39-1_Issue_1-2.pdf.

22. Hunter, "The Challenge of Reaching Nomadic Pastoralists."

Sending Nomads to Nomads

Ministering to nomads has never been taken seriously since the inception of formal mission work among Somalis in 1881. Though there were a few fact-finding mission trips and limited visitations by some missionaries, formal attempts were never made to build on these initial contacts. One exception is the ministry of John Ethelstan Cheese, the Anglican priest and mystic who traversed the Somali Peninsula for decades to minister to camel-herding nomads. Cheese's ministry was hampered by travel limitations imposed on him by British and Italian authorities at the time who were colonizing the northern and southern regions of Somalia, respectively.²³ These authorities were genuinely concerned for Cheese's security and physical well-being.

Several years ago, a major denomination in the Horn of Africa embarked on the first credible mission work for Somali nomads. Local leaders from this church first equipped two Somali evangelists from camel-herding nomadic backgrounds. The believers were given six church-owned camels to join camel herders from their subclan; the two evangelists rotated as they saw fit. This church has equipped and sent several other evangelists as light and salt to nomads. This groundbreaking ministry is gaining traction, and a few nomads have become Christ's disciples as a result.

A significant benefit of equipping and sending nomads to evangelise nomads is that they are already familiar with the people and the lifestyle; for the evangelists, it is like returning home. Since this ministry strategy appears to be the most viable so far, other churches and mission organizations with a call to evangelise nomads should consider adopting it; after all, only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches. As the security situation in the Horn of Africa improves, intrepid expatriate missionaries might decide to take the plunge by buying some camels and joining camel-herding groups to share the salvific message of Jesus Christ with them. Given the dedication of some young missionaries I met in the last several years, this vision of expatriate missionaries buying camels to live with camel-herding nomads is closer than ever.

23. British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland gained their independence in 1960 after ten years of trusteeship.

The Challenges

The road to nomads is not paved with gold and silver. Nomads epitomise the idea of a moving target. The church is not used to witnessing to people who are always on the move. This is why a fundamental change in approach is imperative. Real challenges abound in this unique ministry; Satan will not sit around while his most powerful fortress in the Horn of Africa is raided by people of God with beautiful feet (see Isa. 52:7). Challenges may include persecution, poor security, nonexistent infrastructure, inhospitable climate, health issues, poor diet, and years before gaining any new Jesus followers. Only obedient, God-called people can undertake this divine task.

Not even local evangelists are exempted from the difficulties should they heed the Great Commission and start making Christlike disciples among nomads. This daunting ministry requires reimagining the church. What will a local church look like among nomads? Nomadic believers are the best positioned to answer this question. However, such a church will not look like churches planted by missionaries or the local sedentary believers they led to the Lord. “Most of those yet to follow Christ will not fit readily into the kinds of churches we now have.”²⁴ First-century believers contextualized their places of worship; they first met in synagogues and, after being pushed out, in the homes of other believers. Larger, more intricate churches started to emerge during the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great, which lasted from 306 to 337.²⁵

Conclusion

Somali nomads could arguably be the least-reached people group in the entire continent of Africa. The nomads’ unique way of life and their environment make traditional evangelism impractical. The global church has no enviable record of evangelising nomads, let alone camel herders in semi-desert lands. However, the church has varying degrees of success among sedentary people groups in the global South. The mission strategy that has historically worked well among settled people is failing to

24. Wood, “Rediscovering the Biblical Church,” 4.

25. Paul Hartog, ed., *The Contemporary Church and the Early Church: Case Studies in Ressourcement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), chapter 3.

make a difference among nomads. A new mission strategy is necessary if nomadic evangelism is to gain traction. The good news is that the work of some prominent advocates for reaching nomads is bearing initial fruit. Ministry to nomads is not an off-limits subject anymore; Christians are talking about it, and some have taken tentative steps to test the waters. Early reports indicate that nomads are more receptive to the gospel than previously thought.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is well suited for nomads. Just like the good news found fertile ground among Arab Bedouins in 324, the message of Jesus can thrive in the Somali arid land. All we need to do is to contextualize the gospel for the nomads. They must see Jesus as the Good Camel Herder; their precious camels can finally have the best Guardian. Identifying with nomads and understanding their worldview can help with evangelism ministry. The challenges this missionary endeavour will face include unforgiving terrain, inhospitable climate, cultural barriers, unfamiliar diet, security issues, and other inconveniences. However, these difficulties are dwarfed by the reward of taking the gospel to a people group who could win millions of others to the Lord. The task is arduous, but it is worth it!

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Love for God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, and love for Africa and its many vibrant and diverse countries and cultures are the two things that stand out most in this academic *Festschrift* honouring the longstanding missionary service of Dr Daryll Gordon Stanton. Church leaders across the African continent have come together to identify unique ministry obstacles, opportunities, and places for improvement, as well as offer suggested solutions for Christian leadership, ministry, and mentorship in Africa. These scholars also celebrate the unique and lasting legacy of a beloved missionary who spent his life serving God and God's church in Africa, and who had a hand in the formation of each contributor to this volume.

Chapters and Contributors Include:

- *Paul as a Mentor* (Gift Mtukwa)
- *The Nexus between Biblical Stewardship and Evangelism and Discipleship* (James O. Ouma)
- *Diaspora Missions* (Kennedy K. Kirui)
- *Making Disciples* (Samuel Otieno Oketch)
- *Putting the Church on the Back of a Camel* (Aweis A. Ali)
- *Missionary Engagement in Evangelism and Church Planting in Zambia* (Rickson Nkhata)
- *Leadership Training Challenges Facing the Church of the Nazarene in Kenya* (Elijah Nderitu King'ori)
- *Passing on the Mantle* (Patrick Mburu Kamau)
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