

EDITORIAL

As social anthropologists specialising in nomadism we are, essentially, studying endangered cultures. Much time and ink has been expended in trying to determine why nomadism is collapsing in many regions; the proximal answers are, usually, changes in the outer world, most often associated with expanding intensive agriculture, government policies (for whatever reason) and the ever encroaching globalisation.

As for pastoral nomadism, it might be useful to broaden our perspective and consider livestock farming as a whole, with nomadic animal husbandry being an especially vulnerable example. From this perspective we can see that the collapse of nomadic pastoralism is just a foretaste of what appears to be happening to livestock farmers worldwide.

These reflections are prompted by the current situation in Europe, especially in relation to the BSE crisis and, most recently, the widespread outbreak of foot-and-mouth in Britain. The root cause of both these epidemics is the frantic pursuit of cost-cutting which has led to the development of cheaper animal feed and the concentration of livestock markets and abattoir facilities in fewer and fewer localities.

What, it might be asked, is the connection between the decay of nomadism and an outbreak of animal diseases in Europe? The short answer is that both are part of the same continuing, even accelerating, process; the process whereby short-term profits take precedence over social responsibility. What has happened to nomadic pastoralists in many parts of the world is now happening to family farms and will, if no change of emphasis is forthcoming, happen to the livestock industry as a whole. It is no longer a case of a remote nomadic tribe disappearing, it is now a question of a whole section of European tradition vanishing: the chickens (vultures?) are coming home to roost with a vengeance.

Fortunately, there are some faint signs of change. The environmental movement is, at last, being taken seriously, especially the new economics whereby social and environmental costs are taken into account as well as financial ones. Even the IMF has recently announced that it proposes to look at development projects from the bottom up, i.e., the effect on the local population will become a prime consideration. So, perhaps, anthropologists will not be voices crying in the wilderness for too much longer and the desirability of cultural diversity will be taken as seriously as the need for biodiversity. Bigger may be better in purely economic terms, but the social costs are proving to be horrendous. So are the economic ones in clearing up the mess. Who knows, perhaps the next development will be to promote small-scale nomadic pastoralism as the least damaging and socially the most cost effective way to provide dairy and meat products for local populations? It could give us specialists a whole new lease of life as well, a development which, from a selfish point of view, could only be welcomed!

As always, we would like to end on a positive note. Not only does this issue carry an article which demonstrates that modern technologies do not necessarily hamper nomadic herd management – they can actually even encourage it, but also we can report that there has been a marked increase over the last year in the number of visitors to the web-site of our journal (50 in 1999 and 212 in 2000). This seems to indicate that more and more people are interested in the topics covered by this journal, and we hope that there number keeps on increasing.

The Editors