

2 THE NOMADIC LIFE

Before the Neolithic Revolution, people lived as nomads, wandering from place to place in search of food. But what was nomadic life like? In the excerpt below from The Ascent of Man, scientist and broadcaster Jacob Bronowski provides an answer by describing the life of the Bakhtiari, a group of modern-day nomads who herd sheep and goats in the Zagros Mountains of Iran. As you read the excerpt, ask yourself why civilization could not develop while people lived as nomads.

Everything in nomad life is immemorial. The Bakhtiari have always travelled alone, quite unseen. Like other nomads, they think of themselves as a family, the sons of a single founding-father. . . . The Bakhtiari take their name from a legendary herdsman . . . Bakhtyar. The legend of their own origin that they tell of him begins,

And the father of our people, the hill-man, Bakhtyar, came out of the fastness of the southern mountains in ancient times. His seed were as numerous as the rocks on the mountains, and his people prospered.

. . . Before 10,000 B.C. nomad peoples used to follow the natural migration of wild herds. But sheep and goats have no natural migrations. They were domesticated about ten thousand years ago. . . . And when man domesticated them, he took on the responsibility of nature; the nomad must lead the helpless herd.

The role of women in nomad tribes is narrowly defined. Above all, the function of women is to produce men-children. . . . Apart from that, their duties lie in preparing food and clothes. For example, the women among the Bakhtiari bake bread—in the biblical manner, in unleavened cakes on hot stones. But the girls and the women wait to eat until the men have eaten. Like the men, the lives of the women centre on the flock. They milk the herd, and they make a clotted yoghurt from the milk by churning it in a goatskin bag on a primitive wooden frame. They have only the simple technology that can be carried on daily journeys from place to place. The simplicity is not romantic; it is a matter of survival. Everything must be light enough to be carried, to be set up every evening and to be packed away again every morning. When the women spin wool with their simple, ancient devices, it is for immediate use, to make the repairs that are essential on the journey—no more.

It is not possible in the nomad life to make things that will not be needed for several weeks. They could not be carried. And in fact the Bakhtiari do not know how to make them. If they need metal pots, they barter them from settled peoples. . . . A nail, a stirrup, a toy, or a child's bell is something that is traded from outside the tribe. The Bakhtiari life is too narrow to have time or skill for specialisation. There is no room for innovation, because there is not time, on the move, between evening and morning, coming and going all their lives, to develop a new device or a new thought—not even a new tune. The only habits that survive are the old habits. The only ambition of the son is to be like the father.

It is a life without features. Every night is the end of a day like the last, and every morning will be the beginning of a journey like the day before. When the day breaks, there is one question in everyone's mind: Can the flock be got over the next high pass? . . . For the tribe must move on, the herdsman must find new pastures every day. . . .

Every year the Bakhtiari cross six ranges of mountains on the outward journey (and cross them again to come back). They march through snow and the spring flood water. And in only one respect has their life advanced beyond that of ten thousand years ago. The nomads of that time had to travel on foot and carry their own packs. The Bakhtiari have pack-animals—horses, donkeys, mules—which have only been domesticated since that time. Nothing else in their lives is new. And nothing is memorable. Nomads have no memorials, even to the dead. (Where is Bakhtyar . . . buried?) The only mounds that they build are to mark the way.

READING REVIEW

1. What is the role of women in nomadic tribes?
2. What is the one change that has taken place in the nomadic life of the Bakhtiari in the last 10,000 years?
3. In the introduction to his discussion of the Bakhtiari, Bronowski contends that "civilization can never grow up on the move." How does information in the excerpt support this contention?