

## Beyond the Minefields

**M**inefields are a haunting modern reality. I recall staring across a minefield on the edge of the Sahara desert a few years ago and being prohibited from venturing forth in our Land Rover. A disputed political borderland had shut down the nomadic routes which had historically crisscrossed this arid tundra. I was there to assist the research of Malcolm Hunter, an expert on the world's nomads, and his disappointment was evident as we were forced to surrender our plans to this modern weaponry. Our predicament that day made the nomads seem even more remote and inconsequential to our developed world. The problem of access certainly complicates mission to these least-reached peoples.

History tells quite a tale of these nomads and their influence on the margins of civilization. Through the centuries, hordes of them swept in from the Eurasian steppes to shape, define and transform Europe, Russia and China. The Christian conversion of Celtic nomads sent the first wave of evangelizing monks across barbarian Europe. And from the Bedouins of Arabia an Islamic monotheism exploded west across North Africa and eastward into South East Asia. Yes, the nomad's place is far more consequential in the history of our globe than modern notions might admit. They ruled those vast interstitial regions which linked major civilizations, and were capable of leveling empires. Like the Great Wall of China, the minefield I encountered was just the latest technology to control these nomadic regions.

Geographers suggest there was no more room for global expansion by AD 1900 when the great Age of Discovery ended.<sup>1</sup> Since then, globalization and technological advance have intensified the connectivity of our civilization so that we simply expect the inevitable assimilation of nomads to a settled existence. But the authors in this issue of the *IJFM* point out the tenacity of nomadic peoples' freedom and the value they place on liberty of movement which flows like "capital" through their economy of life. It's a value I recognize from my years living adjacent to *transhumant* Berber shepherds who would frequent North African markets. Those "freemen" (*amazighan*) gave no hint of wanting to settle down unless forced to do so. Throughout history, nomads have had to maintain a delicate symbiosis with sedentary civilization, and their interaction and conflict with this modern juggernaut has caused an erosion in their numbers. (Estimates differ on the global population of nomads).<sup>2</sup> But don't confuse nomadic peoples with any modern

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diaspora or the many refugees who migrate under duress from one settled place to another. The nomad's movement is voluntary and constant, and for this reason presents an exceptional test for cross-cultural mission.

God is not unfamiliar with this nomadic challenge, and Malcolm Hunter makes that ever so clear in his highlighting of the biblical narrative (p. 123). Neither are mission agencies unfamiliar with this challenge, as Rowland Bingham's historic piece from 1916 suggests (p. 136). But after a century of nomadic mission, Caleb Rome observes persistent realities which test our mettle as a mission movement (p. 113). There's something elusive for us moderns when it comes to the nomadic *zeitgeist*, and S. Clement captures the rhythms of that life in a vivid page out of his diary (p. 133). Together these articles make one wonder what it will take for any metropolitan church to effectively train up and equip those able to meet this challenge.

Two other articles strategically intersect this nomadic theme. L. D. Waterman introduces the LIFE scale as a new

synthesis of the present missiological debate over the various identities of Muslims who turn to Christ (p. 149). Many nomadic populations are Islamic and any movement to Christ among them will require nuanced discernment. Just how do we imagine a wandering nomad might follow Christ? What do we expect for a nomadic church? I've heard Malcolm Hunter frequently say that if a church can't fit on the back of a camel, it won't work among nomads. (Might we get any hints from the Celtic nomads in Patrick's day?) We hope Waterman's LIFE scale will help stimulate a broader discernment in these radically different contexts.

We've also included Tom Steffen's quick history on how the orality movement was birthed and refined across many tribal contexts (p. 139). It runs in tandem with the new access nomads have to the *visual* "storying" of the gospel—an access derived largely from the leap forward in mobile phone technology (see p. 161).<sup>3</sup> In a day of increasing urban focus, let's remember that mission within the constraints of smaller and seemingly inconsequential tribal worlds has generated some very

strategic approaches in mission. I recall when the insight of Don Richardson's *Peace Child* alerted us to the redemptive analogies which God has placed in different cultures. Nomads are just one more tribal challenge which might yield to these perceptive approaches.

It's time for a new generation to get around the minefields and into these least-reached nomads.

In Him,



Brad Gill  
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Robert Kaplan's *The Revenge of Geography* (Random House, 2012), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> See the report of the UN Commission of Nomadic Peoples.

<sup>3</sup> On this technology see "The Little Phone that Could," in *IJFM* 27:3 Fall 2010, p. 139, and more recently, see *Mission Frontiers* 36:3, May/June 2014 at [www.missionfrontiers.org](http://www.missionfrontiers.org).

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- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the *IJFM* (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the *IJFM* for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.