
Pastoral nomads between desert and high mountains: ethnoarchaeological research on the Ait Atta in Morocco

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Résumé

Over the millennia, different forms of mobile livestock breeding have developed in many mountainous regions of the world. One of the best-known forms of this is nomadism. The main characteristic of this way of farming is non-sedentariness: their families and property strapped onto pack animals, the herds' owners move with their livestock, following mostly fixed routes from pasture to pasture governed by seasonal changes in the climate and vegetation. Mobility patterns arise from the nomads' detailed knowledge of the physical and cultural features of the landscape and the needs of their animals. Over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, many nomads have transitioned to a semi or post-nomadic form of pastoralism where only a small section of the community follows the seasonal movements of the herds, whilst the larger part of the community remains sedentary and carries out other tasks and jobs in permanent settlements. This transformation has had far-reaching consequences with regard to traditional land use, the economy, vegetation, mobility and interactions. It has also resulted in a dramatic loss of knowledge gathered over the centuries, very little of which has ever been recorded in writing.

This was the starting point for the "Arhal" project, which aims to study one of the last nomadic families from the Ait Atta tribe in Morocco to held on to their "traditional" lifestyle. Originating from various ethnic groups in the northern Sahara Desert, the Ait Atta are known to have lived in the Jebel Saghro mountain range since the 15th and 16th centuries. From there, they spread far north into various oases, eventually inhabiting large territories. Since 2017, an international team has been documenting the lives of a contemporary family of nomads moving between their winter and spring camps in the pre-Saharan Jebel Saghro and the rich mountainous pastures in the central High Atlas to the north. The paper will offer an insight into the project's concept and will also outline preliminary results of the investigations carried out in recent years, primarily from an (ethno-)archaeological/anthropological perspective: nomadic mobility patterns, material culture and structures of the mountain nomads as well as their archaeological (in-)visibility, economic practices and organisation, networks, exchange systems and markets. The area exploited by the Ait Atta nomads between the two mountain ranges not only forms a "natural" basis for grazing and subsistence, it also contains different elements of a "sacred" or ritual cultural landscape with cemeteries, sacrificial sites/sacred mountains and rock art sites.

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