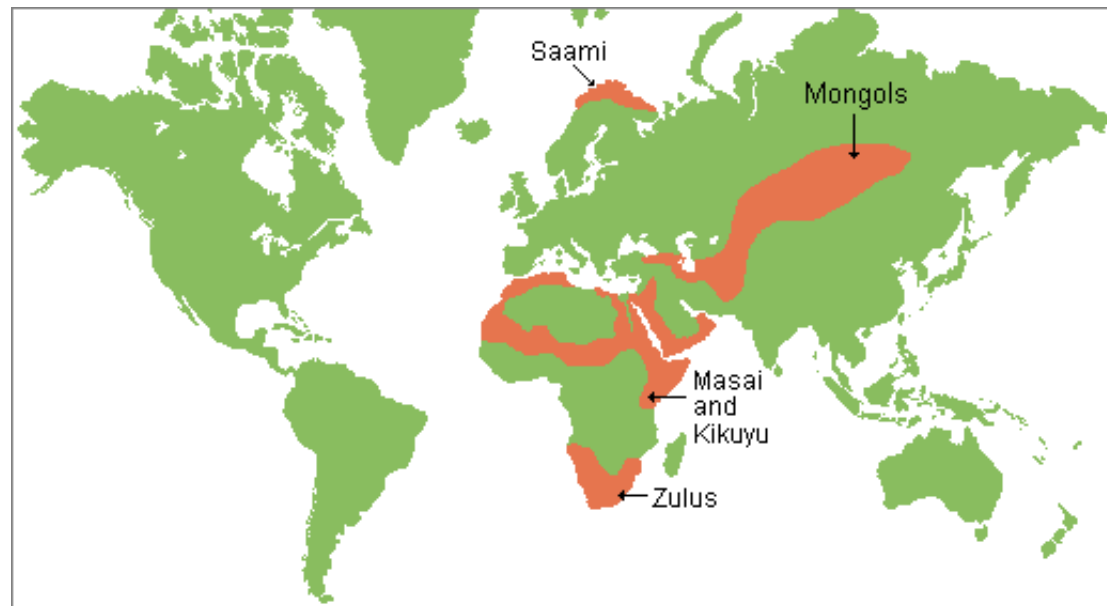


Pastoralism

Pastoralism is a subsistence pattern in which people make their living by tending herds of large animals. The species of animals vary with the region of the world, but they are all domesticated [herbivores](#) that normally live in herds and eat grasses or other abundant plant foods. Horses are the preferred species by most pastoralists in Mongolia and elsewhere in Central Asia. In East Africa, it is primarily cattle. In the mountainous regions of Southwest Asia, it is mainly sheep and goats. It is often camels in the more arid lowland areas of the Southwest Asia and North and East Africa. Among the Saami people (or Lapps) of northern Scandinavia, it is reindeer. Some pastoralists in northern Mongolia also herd reindeer. While the Saami mostly use their reindeer as a source of meat, the Dukha people (or Tsaatan) of northern Mongolia milk and ride their reindeer much as other Mongolians do with horses.

Traditional pastoralist regions during the late 19th and early 20th centuries



[The Reindeer People](#)--life of the Dukha reindeer pastoralists of Northern Mongolia
To return here, you must click the "back" button on your browser program.

(length = 53 mins, 51 secs)



Mongolian horse pastoralist camp

There are essentially two forms of pastoralism. They are known as nomadism and transhumance. **Pastoral nomads** 🐾 follow a seasonal migratory pattern that can vary from year to year. The timing and destinations of migrations are determined primarily by the needs of the herd animals for water and fodder. These nomadic societies do not create permanent settlements, but rather they live in tents or other relatively easily constructed dwellings the year round. Pastoral nomads are usually self-sufficient in terms of food and most other necessities.



Near Eastern transhumance nomads moving their herd of sheep and goats to highlands in the spring

Transhumance pastoralists 🐾 follow a cyclical 🐾 pattern of migrations that usually take them to cool highland valleys in the summer and warmer lowland valleys in the winter. This is seasonal migration between the same two locations in which they have regular encampments or stable villages often with permanent houses. Transhumance pastoralists usually depend somewhat less on their animals for food than do nomadic ones. They often do small scale vegetable farming at their summer encampments. They also are more likely to trade their animals in town markets for grain and other things that they do not produce themselves.

Not all pastoralist societies can be accurately described as following a nomadic or transhumance way of life. As conditions change, pastoralists usually adjust. This can result in a traditionally nomadic society or some families within it becoming more or less transhumance in their migratory patterns if the opportunity arises. Likewise, a society that prefers a transhumance way of life may be forced by circumstances to change to a nomadic pattern for some or all of its livestock.

Pastoralism is most often an adaptation to semi-arid open country in which farming can not be easily sustained without importing irrigation water from great distances. Pastoralism is usually the optimal subsistence pattern in these areas because it allows considerable independence from any particular local environment. When there is a drought, pastoralists disperse their herds or move them to new areas. Farmers rarely have these options. They suffer crop failure and starvation in the same situation. A pastoral subsistence pattern reduces the risk when there is an irregular climatic pattern. This is especially true of nomadic pastoralism.

The animals herded by pastoralists are rarely killed for family use alone. Fresh meat is distributed throughout the community. This is the most efficient use of their animals because they usually do not have the capability of adequately preserving meat. Not only does it ensure that no spoilage takes place, but it also sets up numerous obligations to [reciprocate](#) 🗣️ within the community. It promotes cooperation and solidarity. Often the slaughter of an animal is for a ritual occasion so that its death serves multiple purposes. It feeds both the gods and the people. Most pastoralists also get food from their animals without killing them. Horses, goats, sheep, cattle, and camels are milked. In East Africa, cattle herding societies also bleed their animals. The blood is mixed with fresh milk to make a protein rich drink.

Pastoralist societies most often have [patrilineal descent](#) 🗣️ patterns and are male dominated. Men usually make the important decisions and own the animals, while women primarily care for children and perform domestic chores. Compared to pedestrian foraging societies, the economic and political power of most pastoralist women is very low. However, the [division of labor](#) is based primarily on gender and age in both foraging and pastoralist societies.

Pastoralist Personality Traits

Pastoralists often have the same distinct qualities of personality regardless of the region of the world in which they live. Specifically, men in a local group tend to be cooperative with each other and aggressive towards outsiders. They usually can make important economic decisions quickly and act on them independently. They have a profound emotional attachment to their animals. A pastoralist leader needs to be a man who can direct the movements of his herds and decide on an optimum strategy for using scarce resources without having to first consult others. He needs to make decisions easily and to act on them without hesitation. He needs to be able to take the initiative and to be a leader in aggressively defending his herd by expanding territory at the expense of others. He must always be realistic in his appraisal of the world. To do these things, he needs to have an attitude of self-containment, personal control, and bravery. These typical pastoralist personality traits are related to subsistence success. As a consequence, boys are encouraged to emulate them as they grow up.



East African pastoralist men with their spears

Men in pastoralist societies usually acquire prestige and power by being brave and successful in predatory raids as well as by accumulating large herds of animals. Teenagers and young men often are the community's bachelor warriors. This is especially the case among the Masai 🗣️, Kikuyu 🗣️, and other cattle herders of East Africa. They usually do not begin to acquire their own herds until they become elders. As a result, there are often great status differences between young and old men. It is the older men who marry the young women. [Polygyny](#) 🗣️ is a common pastoralist marriage pattern.

Pastoralist Military Conquests

Pastoralists have often been successful conquerors of agricultural societies. This has been especially true of the Mongol horse pastoralists and the cattle herders of East and South Africa. The Mongol 🐎 light cavalry-based armies with their powerful short bows rapidly conquered China and Central Asia in the 13th century A.D. During the 14th century, they also seized control of Persia, Iraq, much of Russia, and the northern parts of South Asia. Beyond this vast area, the threat of their invasion caused many nations to pay the Mongols large tribute payments. In East Africa, pastoralists established important kingdoms from Uganda and Rwanda to South Africa. Perhaps, the most famous African pastoralist conquerors were the Zulus 🐎. During the 1830's, they began an intermittent war with the Dutch settlers of South Africa (i.e., the Boers 🐎) after defeating several African farming peoples. The Zulus were finally subdued with great difficulty by the British army in 1879.



Mongol men riding their sturdy small horses

The pastoralist success in war has been due to several things. They usually have the ability to operate in a large social context and to accept the absolute authority of their leaders. They value extreme bravery and train their children accordingly. Pastoralist armies can easily wage prolonged wars because they are independent of lines of supply from home bases. The Mongols took their herds of horses to war with them. In fact, they rode their horses into battle. Pack horses carried their tents and provided much of their food (in the form of mare's milk). This meant that the Mongols had highly mobile cavalry units. They also let their herds loose to feed in the farm fields of the people they conquered. Not only did this fatten up their horses, but it also economically weakened their enemies.

Pastoralism Today

It is likely that pastoralists will not have the same fate as foraging societies. Pastoralism will continue for the near future in poor nations, especially in Central Asia, because it is generally an efficient, low energy requiring subsistence base for semi-arid regions. During the 20th century, however, most national governments tried to force pastoralists to stop their migrations and to reduce the size of their herds in order to prevent over-grazing. These efforts at controlling them were consistently resisted by pastoralists. Large herds were usually seen by them as symbols of wealth and as security against unpredictable climates and periodic epidemics among their animals. Conservation has not been traditionally important for pastoralists because they migrated over vast areas and could easily move on when grasses and water were depleted.

Postscript



Modern cattleman in Western America

A modern form of pastoralism is practiced by cattle and sheep ranchers in Western North America, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, and a few other areas of the world. However, these ranchers are not subsistence pastoralists. They are businessmen who produce a commodity for national and international markets. They also use mechanized equipment such as trucks and even airplanes and helicopters in their work. Despite the differences, there are major similarities in the way of life and personality between modern and traditional pastoralists. Both approach the world as high risk takers. Their livelihoods can quickly be lost to theft, diseases, or other natural disasters. On the other hand, their herds can double in a few years making them rich. Modern pastoralists also admire men who

are confident, self-reliant, and brave. There has been a striking similarity as well between 19th and early 20th century American cowboys and traditional subsistence pastoralists elsewhere around the world in their disdainful attitudes about farmers and fences. Hollywood has immortalized this story of strained relations between "sodbusters" and "cattlemen" in many western genre films.

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