

HOLGER HOFFMANN

TEXT BY SYLVIA FURRER

ON THE MOVE WITH ARAB NOMADS IN CHAD

THE NOMADIC ARAB TRIBES

The Chadian Arabs, related to the Baggara of Sudan, constitute about 12-14% of the population of Chad. They migrate north-south between the 12th and 15th parallel and vice versa.

Their way of life does not correspond to the 'modern' concept of a controllable citizen. As we learn, nomads pay an annual head tax of CFA 1000, which is less than 2 Euros. Many nomads have family members who live in villages and spend part of the year farming. This allows them to supply their nomadic relatives with grain and vegetables.

There are three tribes: the Juhayna, Hassuna, and the Awlad Sulayman. These are, in turn, divided into clans. All are Muslims. Bigamy is the rule; it is always the woman who leaves her family to join her husband's family. The women are circumcised. The literacy rate is less than 1%. Health care for the nomads is also lacking in the most elementary ways. Vaccinations against childhood diseases are not given. Thus, desperate parents turned to us with children suffering from the consequences of polio or measles encephalitis.

Early in the morning, the caravan starts to move: First the camel herd, followed by the donkeys with the baskets, then the camels with the palanquins called "gors" and finally the goats and sheep.
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After the river crossing, the landscape changes. For hours the caravan walks between picturesque doum palms towards the south.

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We drive with Mahmat and his cousin Moussa through the Chadian savannah about 200km southeast of N'Djamena. We are looking for Arab nomads on their way to new pastures with their animals. Actually, we wanted to accompany the clan of the "Vieux" on their migration. We had met this 80-year-old Arab nomad on our trip five

years ago. However, he has already arrived prematurely at the winter camp. Because of the drought, his animals had found too little food on the way. Our companions enquire about nomads at every well or water pond, still moving on without success. But then we meet a young shepherd on the way. After the usual, where from and where to, he

introduces himself as Ali and reports that his family is camped nearby and plans to move on tomorrow together with two other families and all their camels, goats, and sheep.

With the help of Ali's directions, we find the camp of the three families. They agree that we will pitch our tents near them and accompany

When the "gor" is loaded, the legs are untied, and the camel gets up. Holger Hoffmann © All rights reserved.



Tent poles, tarpaulins, pots, supplies, water canisters, everything is tied down on wooden constructions and then hoisted by four men and women up onto the camel crouching on the ground. Holger Hoffmann © All rights reserved.

them for the next few days. A sheep is slaughtered, and the ribs and thighs are put into the ground on a stick near the fire. There is a lot of talking and laughing and again and again: *Vraiment?* *Hamdulillah!* We sit thickly wrapped in our fiber fur jackets with the men around the fire for a long time until the cold definitely forces us into the sleeping bag.

During the night, I hear now and then the loud gurgling of the ruminating camels.

The next morning already at 6 o'clock, movement comes into the camp. Breakfast consists of rice, meat from the night before, and milk tea with chili. Tent poles, tarpaulins, pots, supplies, and water canisters are tied down on wooden constructions and then hoisted by four men and women up onto the camel crouching on the ground. The same is done with the palanquins called "gor," in which the women travel with their infants. Then the legs are untied, and the camel gets up.



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The "gor" (for the Arab nomads' typical palanquins) is adorned with skins, cooking pots, and meter-long cowrie shell blankets. The canopy-like stretched fabric protects the women with their kids in their laps from the scorching sun. Not without pride, the women look down on us.

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Two men help the woman climb into the "gor" by lowering the neck of the camel; thus, the woman can crawl up on the neck. Then the small children are handed up to her. The older children ride on donkeys, which are loaded with baskets on both sides.

At 8 o'clock, the caravan starts to move: First, the camel herd, followed by the donkeys with the baskets, then the camels with the "gors," then the goats and sheep, and finally Ali with a young horse on the bridle. All three families are now on the move, one after the other, with their herd.

We are fascinated by the "gors," which are typical of the Arab nomads. They are enthroned on the camels' backs - adorned with skins, cooking pots, and meter-long cowrie shell blankets - and sway to the gentle pace of the animals. The canopy-like stretched fabric protects the women with their kids in their laps from the scorching sun. Not without pride, the women look down on us. What had already announced itself the day before now becomes more intense: a sandstorm. For us a dramatic spectacle, but the nomads take it with ease.



Nomadic life requires brave and tough women.
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After an hour or so, the whole troop reaches the bank of the Chari. First, the camels drink themselves full again, then stamp into the water, reaching up to their bellies. Only one infant camel gets in danger of drowning. Ali is quickly on the spot, hoists it up, and carries it across the river. A baby camel has already been wrapped in a blanket in the morning as a precaution and packed onto another camel, while its mother watches anxiously next to the crying baby what the people are doing to it. She calms down and trots from now on next to the pack camel.

After the river crossing, the landscape changes. For hours the caravan walks between picturesque doum palms towards the south. In the early afternoon, the day's destination is reached in the middle of a beautiful palm and acacia forest. Everything is unloaded and the makeshift tents erected; as the more stable tunnel, tent structures made of woven mats will not be erected until the final destination is reached. The families rest here for a day and move on only the day after next.

The girls are milking the camels even before the sun comes over the horizon and turns the bush into a warm light. A short stick and a scrap of cloth are used to wrap the teats of the camel mothers so that the camel babies cannot drink all the milk. Immediately after milking, we are offered the frothy camel milk in a calabash to drink. We quickly put aside our awe of uncooked milk and drink the creamy me, hardly different in taste from cow's milk, without ever regretting it.

Our destination today is a fertile area with many bushes and trees so that the camels with the "gors" hardly get through. Due to the nearby water, many gardens have been planted by sedentary farmers at their ancestral campsites, much to the chagrin of the nomads. Already on arrival, there are intense negotiations between the two lagers. The nomads agree not to let the animals come too close to the fields that have not yet been harvested, and the farmers let them graze on the fallow land.

Top: Young and old, all are on the move.
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Right: Even before the sun comes over the horizon and turns the bush into a warm light, the girls are milking the camels. A short stick and a scrap of cloth are used to wrap the teats of the camel mothers so that the camel babies cannot drink all the milk.
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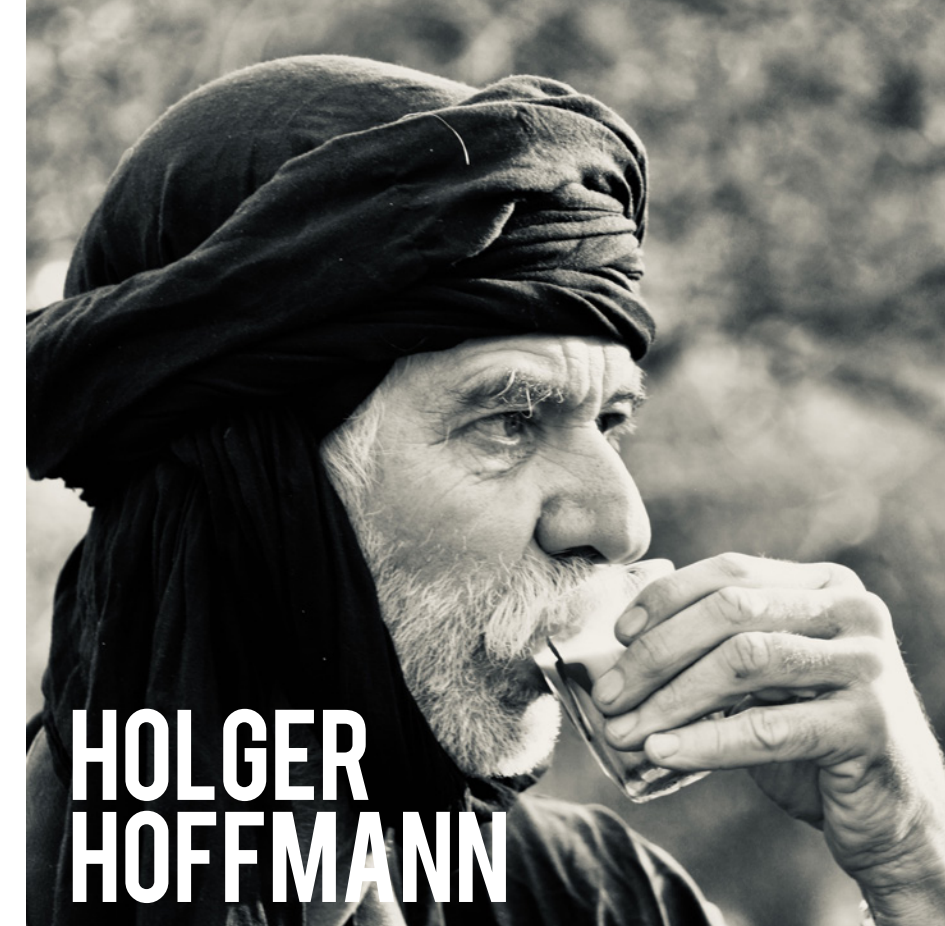
What had already announced itself the day before now becomes more intense: a sandstorm, but the nomads take it with ease.
Holger Hoffmann © All rights reserved.

In most cases, the conflicts are resolved amicably because the nomads provide welcome fertilizer with their animals and make them available as draft and pack animals for transporting vegetables and grain. In addition, they supply the villages with milk and butter, which are always welcome everywhere. However, population growth and

climate change are increasingly endangering peaceful coexistence.

Our three families will stay here until the beginning of the rainy season and then head north again. We say goodbye with heavy hearts, not without encouraging them to continue on their way.

Right Bottom: After an hour or so, the whole troop reaches the bank of the Chari. First, the camels drink themselves full again, then they stamp into the water, which reaches up to their bellies.
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Holger Hoffmann is a Swiss travel photographer. So far, he has visited more than 100 countries. The longer he travels, the more he is fascinated by the customs and the daily life of indigenous peoples who have preserved their traditional culture. In his photo essays, he tries to capture that.





When the "gor" is loaded, the legs are untied, and the camel gets up.
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