

BOOK REVIEWS



The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia. David Sneath. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 272 pp. \$50.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-231-14054-6

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More than two decades ago, I wrote the first book dealing with the debates of Russian scholars concerning nomadic feudalism (Kradin 1987). The peculiarities of nomadic societies have been of interest to me for many years. Because of this, I opened the first page of *The Headless State* by David Sneath with great excitement and stopped reading only when the book was finished.

The book consists of seven chapters. In the introduction, Sneath starts with an intriguing critique of early theories explaining the evolution and structure of societies characterized by nomadic feudalism. He rejects sequential evolutionism, structural functionalism, egalitarian interpretations of nomadic societies, and Marxist approaches. In the seventh chapter, he addresses the major problem of forming identity in the great polities of nomads. That final chapter is an exposition on his own position using the example of modern Mongols.

The book left a dual impression. On the one hand, I read it as a detective novel. The author brings us progressively to a new answer to an old puzzle that I also wanted to solve and even proposed an answer to in the early 1990s (Kradin 1992). On the other hand, I could not help feeling that his approach imitates that of Edward Said (1978), who offered a post-modernist critique against all previous approaches and would only accept a new synthetic theory. Post-modernism is a convenient instrument for criticism be-

cause it can be used against everyone. One can accuse every anthropologist of colonialism and essentialism and any theory of unfounded constructivism. Charging the majority of Western and Russian nomadologists with colonialism, Sneath's analysis nevertheless exemplifies colonialist anthropology. For example, he uses only publications written in English (mainly authors from Great Britain and the United States) as if all other scholarly works on this issue published in other countries (even those published in English) or other languages are on the periphery of research on nomadism.

This approach is even more egregious when addressing the nomadic societies of Central and Inner Asia. Russia, for example, has a long tradition of research and publication on these societies, but Sneath does not seem to be acquainted with modern scholarship on nomadism in the post-communist world. He summarizes the Soviet debates about nomadic feudalism based on one chapter from Gellner's 1988 book (see Kradin 2003 concerning Gellner). Several decades have passed since Gellner's treatment of the subject; many articles by Russian authors have been published in English that should have been accessible to Sneath.

Sneath also seems to have only a vague impression of current discussions about state origins. His references end with classic books by Service (1975) and Fried (1967), although over the past 35 years many good books have

been published concerning this issue, including books written in English. I want to mention only two very important works that would have contributed to Sneath's analysis: *How Chiefs Come to Power* by Timothy Earle (1997) and *Myths of the Archaic State* by Norman Yoffee (2005). Sneath should have consulted these and the considerable number of other books with cross-cultural and theoretically relevant investigations of the political structures of states that have been published recently.

Sneath's arguments concerning the absence of clan organization seem strange. He indicates there is no clan organization in contemporary Mongolia based on his field experience. It is indeed the case that Mongols and Buryats have no clans at present. However, I have often noted that the attitude of Buryats to kinship differs from that of Russians, for example. Among Buryats, the rule is to maintain relations and render services to cousins; Russians do not maintain such relationships in practice. Is this not evidence that even now the relations of Buryats with their alliance networks are not the same as in Russian and European cultures? In the contemporary life and politics of Central Asia, clans and kinship are still of great importance; this is especially true of those descended from the ancient nomads of the Turkic world. Therefore, it is strange to deny that these forms of kinship existed among medieval Mongols. Tatyana Skrynnikova (1997) provides a detailed account of the genealogy of Mongolian khans and their claims to status in accordance with their genealogy in *Secret History of the Mongols*. It is strange that Sneath omits mention of Skrynnikova's other two books, wherein she reports on her in-depth studies of a number of significant social terms first mentioned in *Secret History of the Mongols* (Skrynnikova 1997; Kradin and Skrynnikova 2006).

Sneath argues that the idea of the nomadic tribe is a construct of anthropologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He assigns to Lewis Henry Morgan a specific role in the construction of this rejected system of kinship and tribe. These terms were, however, used by scientists and scholarly practitioners in many countries long before Morgan (1877). Denying all predecessors, Sneath

forces open a door. I don't think the idea of nomadic aristocratism without kinship is an improvement over concepts of nomadic tribes or chiefdoms. He is incorrect in implying that all earlier researchers denied the roles of aristocratic families and their households in pastoral societies. Sneath's central idea resembles the concept of nomadic patriarchal feudalism put forth by Soviet anthropologists in the first half of the 1930s. Soviet researchers identified the rich households of the grand steppe peoples with the feuds of European seigniors and distinguished this mature feudalism from the early centralized feudalism of Chinggis Khan. The Russian nomadologist Markov (1976, 1978), whom Sneath mentions, sometimes has denied the former existence of a nomadic "state," but he never denied aristocracy and rank. Another problem with Sneath's approach is that aristocracy can be found everywhere in theories of state and empire development when discussing archaic China, ancient Greece and Rome, and medieval Europe. We might ask what is new in his idea for understanding the nomadic world proper?

One can tell much about Sneath's conceptual framework from this book, but it ultimately points to another important shortcoming. What Sneath and other post-modernists fail to emphasize is that all theoretical conceptions are constructs: Sneath's own version of nomadic empires of the region is also a construct. Moreover, this construct is based on secondary reading of works of early researchers rather than on examining original texts or field studies. Introducing a new theory is only meaningful if it provides a better explanation of the social world. Sneath suggests another explanation, but not the best one.

Finally, a poorer term for nomadic empires as "headless states" would be difficult to invent. One can possibly argue for the relatively weak central power implied in this label if it were referring to a stateless complex polity or super-complex chiefdom (as I describe them). However, the nomadic empires have never been without heads. The founders of steppe empires (e.g., Maotin, Attila, or Chinggis Khan) would have been very surprised to see their undivided authority denied. Most likely,

Sneath's approach is an attempt to follow the old British functionalism; even Evans-Pritchard (1940) called the Nuer "acephalous." However, the imperial confederations of nomads in Inner Asia are not Nuer. Their internal organization differed from systems characteristic of both early nomads and pastoral societies of modern times and they brought considerable threat to great agrarian civilizations. Sneath's work illustrates that there have been significant achievements and progress in the investigation of nomadic peoples in Inner Asia. However, many difficult issues and unsolved problems remain.

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Korean Cuisine: An Illustrated History. Michael J. Pettid. London: Reaktion Books, 2008. 223 pp. + color photos, index, bibliography, references, recipes. UK £22.50. US \$39.95. ISBN 978-1-86189-348-2.

Reviewed by ELLEN F. STEINBERG, author of *Learning to Cook in 1898: A Chicago Culinary Memoir*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007.

Compared to the vast number of books treating Chinese or Japanese foods and culinary histories, few have been written about Korea. This dearth became quite apparent recently during an admittedly non-scientific survey of two large urban bookstores, which produced not a single tome devoted to Korean food-

ways, and only a single recipe titled *Bool Kogi* (translated in-text as "Spicy Fire Meat") in a cookbook devoted to pan-Asian dishes. The author of *Korean Cuisine: An Illustrated History*, Michael J. Pettid, aims to remedy this deficiency with his slim volume exploring Korean food, its history, and connection