

**Review of David Sneath,
*The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders,
Kinship Society, and the Misrepresentation
of Nomadic Inner Asia***

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This is a very ambitious and revisionist but far from always convincing book. Sneath strives to prove that all previous and contemporary studies of the pastoral nomads in the Eurasian steppes, including Inner and Central Asia and elsewhere, are blatantly wrong in their main conclusions. First, in his opinion, the kin-tribe model of nomadic societies is but a myth. Second, he insists that state formation in the Steppe was primarily connected not with asymmetrical relations between nomadic and sedentary societies, but with internal factors. Instead, Sneath suggests his own model of nomadic societies in the region. He calls them ‘aristocracies’, ‘headless states’, and ‘a configuration of statelike power formed by the horizontal relations between power holders, rather than as a result of their mutual subordination to a political center’ (p. 2).

These assumptions raise many doubts. The pastoral nomadic societies of the Eurasian steppes were based on idioms of kinship and descent, whether real or fictitious.

Contrary to Sneath's claim, these idioms were not invented by anthropologists but reflected the practices and ideologies of the nomads. These were very flexible and complex notions, not precisely defined by indigenous terminologies; and in different historical societies they were applied to a great variety of socio-political forms. In the Mongol case these notions, which were apparently already significantly weakened in the Chinggisid period (though the extent to what they were weakened remains a matter of schol-

arly debate), were further undermined by Qing colonial rule. Likewise, the Russian colonial and, to an even greater extent, the Soviet rule in Central Asia resulted in drastic changes in the socio-political organization of Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen pastoralists. However, the author is mistaken when he extrapolates this situation on all other nomadic societies in different historical periods and in different parts of the world, from Mongolia to the Middle East and even to Africa. He does not take into account that the traditional notions of kinship and descent, and even tribalism, are not completely dead even today in formerly nomadic parts of post-Soviet Central Asia. For example, Nursultan Nazarbaev, the President of Kazakhstan, insists that every Kazakh should know seven generations of his ancestors. (It is worth to note that Nazarbaev means not the members of past and present ruling elites, but every ordinary Kazakh.)

The author is critical of those who consider nomadic societies 'fluid, rootless, simple, and without fixed points' (p. 37). However, this is but a caricature of the contemporary state of the art. Nowadays, the vast majority of scholars do not hold this view. Much worse is the political labeling that the author sometimes resorts to, such as accusing the scholars with whom he disagrees of essentialism (p. 3); 'conceptual apartheid' (p. 49); a skewed vision of the history of nomadic peoples weighted with pejorative, colonial baggage (p. 52), 'environmental determinism' (p. 53); 'ecological determinism' (p. 121); etc. In the communist countries accusations of political incorrectness were quite a common practice even in scholarly debates, but one might expect a Western scholar to be disdainful of it.

For Sneath, aristocracy is an almost eternal stratum or class, although he does not define it in a precise way. He would argue his position better if he had explained when, why, and how these seemingly immutable and timeless aristocratic orders emerged in the nomadic societies of the Eurasian steppes and the Middle East. However, these issues are completely ignored in his book. Sneath only states that 'mobile pastoralism allows just as many possibilities for the accumulation of wealth and the construction of large-scale systems as agricultural techniques do' (p. 20). Were this true, by the early modern period, pastoral nomadism would not be in retreat almost everywhere in Eurasia. With regard to the nature of

his aristocratic orders, Sneath, although critical of the Soviet Marxist concept of universal feudal formation, returns to the feudal model of nomadic societies (pp. 63–64, 71, 86). His conception of feudalism is very loose; in that by Sneath's definition practically any hierarchical society can be characterized as feudal. In all, Sneath correctly declares that our understanding of the forms that social life took on the Eurasian steppe must be led by historical and ethnographic description (p. 19), but his own approach is essentially ahistorical.

Sneath's concept of 'headless states' also poses many problems. Does it imply that the Mongol Empire and its successor states, or the states of Scythians, Hsiung-nu, early medieval Turks, Uighurs, Khazars, Saljuks, and many other nomads were headless? Or that there was no significant difference between those states and the polities of the Sarmatians, Pechenegs, or Kipchaks; and, therefore, the latter can also be characterized as states? In fact, nomadic states were not headless, and nomadic headless polities, if they ever existed at all, were not states. Sneath simply does not want to admit that the political life of the Eurasian nomads oscillated between state and stateless forms. Thus, he has to suggest his own, very vague and practically meaningless definition of the state as a 'form of social relation' (p. 10). Later, he makes a reservation that 'there is not space here to properly review the anthropological discussion surrounding the definition of the state' (p. 210, n. 9), apparently forgetting that he has already discussed theories of the state in a special subsection of his Introduction (pp. 5–11).

Sneath is a good, although sometimes controversial, scholar of contemporary Mongols. However, this is not enough to deal with crucial theoretical issues. His command of historical, linguistic, and sometimes even anthropological materials deserves to be better. His historical sketch contains many astonishing factual mistakes. (For example, the Khazar state ceased to exist not in the 9th but in the 10th century, and the Saljuks conquered the territory of Iran not in the 10th but in the 11th century.) His usage of relevant publications is very limited and arbitrary; with many important works ignored. Still, this book urges other scholars of pastoral nomads to rethink and to elaborate their own positions. In this regard, it may be useful, and one should be grateful to Sneath for playing so well the role of devil's advocate.