



Tibetan Nomads

by Daniel J. Miller

Nomadic pastoralism represents one of the great advances in the evolution of human civilization. Originating about 9,000 years ago, with the domestication of sheep and goats in what is now northern Iran, it is a specialized type of agricultural production in rangeland areas where extensive animal husbandry is more supportive of human culture than cultivated crops. People who specialize in raising livestock requiring frequent movements are known as nomadic pastoralists, or nomads.

The Tibetan Plateau and Himalayas, encompassing parts of China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan, constitute a vast rangeland area where nomadic pastoralism is still widely practiced. Here, in what is undoubtedly the harshest pastoral area on earth — the Tibetan steppe — nomads still thrive, maintaining a pastoral legacy that is thousands of years old. The survival of Tibetan nomads in this high-elevation landscape provides examples of nomadic practices that were once widespread throughout the pastoral world, but are now increasingly hard to find. Tibetan nomads thus offer an exceptional opportunity to learn more about a way of life that is quickly vanishing from the face of the earth.

A DISTINCT NOMADIC CULTURE

Tibetan nomadic pastoralism is distinct ecologically from pastoralism in most other regions where nomads are found. The key factors that distinguish Tibetan nomadic pastoral areas from cultivated agricultural areas are altitude and

temperature, in contrast to most other pastoral areas of the world where the key factor is usually the lack of water. Tibetan nomads prosper at altitudes of 11,000 to 17,000 feet in environments too cold for crop cultivation. Yet at these high elevations there is still extensive and productive grazing land that provides nutritious forage for nomads' herds. Tibetan nomadic pastoralism is also characterized by a unique animal, the yak (*Bos grunniens*), which is superbly adapted to the high-altitude, cold environment. The wild yak is the progenitor of all domestic yak populations. The domestication of the wild yak, about 4,000 years ago, was an important factor in the evolution of Tibetan civilization.

Tibetan nomads raise yaks, yak-cattle hybrids, sheep, goats, and horses. Yaks provide nomads with milk, meat, hair, wool, and hides. Yaks are also used as pack animals and for riding. Dried yak dung is an important source of fuel in a land where firewood is not available. The yak makes life possible for people across much of the Tibetan steppe. Tibetans place so much value on the yak that the Tibetan term for a family's group of yaks, *nor*, can be translated as "wealth." Yaks also play an important part in many pastoral rituals and religious festivals. Events such as yak dances and yak races signify the vital role that yaks have in Tibetan society, not only as a means of daily sustenance, but also for their cultural and spiritual value.





Sheep and goats are also important animals, especially in western Tibet where it is more arid, and provide nomads with wool, milk, meat, and hides. The wool from Tibetan sheep ranks among the best carpet wool in the world, and Tibetan goat hair produces one of the finest cashmeres. Tibetan nomads use horses for riding and for transporting supplies, but horses are not milked, nor is their meat eaten.

Tibetan nomads' herds usually contain a mix of animal species. Each one has its own specific characteristics and adaptations to the environment, and the multi-species grazing system enables more efficient use of rangeland vegetation. Maintaining diverse herd compositions also minimizes the risk of total livestock loss from disease or snowstorms.

In addition to taking care of animals, Tibetan nomads have specialized skills in spinning and weaving. Nomads fashion highly functional tents, clothing, blankets, ropes, pack bags, and saddle blankets from the wool and hair of their animals.

Trade and links with agricultural communities have always been important features of nomadic societies in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan Plateau. Trade represents an essential element in the pastoral economy of most areas, as nomads depend on bartering their livestock products for grain and other supplies they cannot produce themselves. In recent decades, patterns of resettlement and border closings have altered the nomadic economy; however, trade remains critical to their livelihood.

HERDS ON THE MOVE

Mobility is a central characteristic of Tibetan nomadic pastoralism, but nomads do not wander freely across the steppe. Rather, their movements are usually well prescribed by a complex social organization. Rotation of livestock between different pastures maintains animal productivity and helps to conserve the grass. Herd movements also take advantage of topography and climatic factors to make the best use of pastures at different seasons.

The Tibetan steppe is distinguished by highly unpredictable environmental disturbances such as periods of drought that wither the grass and severe snowstorms that can devastate nomads' herds. The organizational flexibility of traditional Tibetan nomadic pastoralism, which emphasizes mobility of the multi-species herds, developed as a rational response to the unpredictability of the ecosystem. In terms of the livestock species' mix and herd structure, the Tibetan pastoral system shows sophisticated adaptive responses by the nomads to the environment in which they live and the resources available to them and their animals.

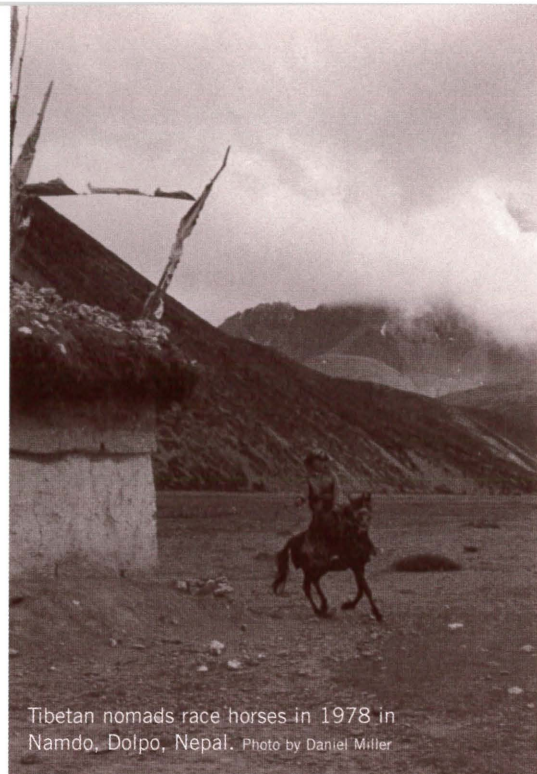
Yak-hair tents are a prime example of Tibetans' skill in adapting to a nomadic life on the Tibetan steppe. Made from the long, coarse hair of the yak, the tents can be easily taken down and packed on yaks when moving camp. Staked out with yak-hair ropes, the tents have been perfected to stand up in the fierce winds that whip across the Tibetan plains in the winter.

Almost all nomads have a home base, usually the traditional winter area, and make established moves with their livestock from there to distant pastures throughout the year. The traditional yak-hair tent is still in common use, although many nomads spend an increasing amount of time, especially in the winter, in their more comfortable houses, which have been constructed in the last couple of decades across most of the Tibetan Plateau.

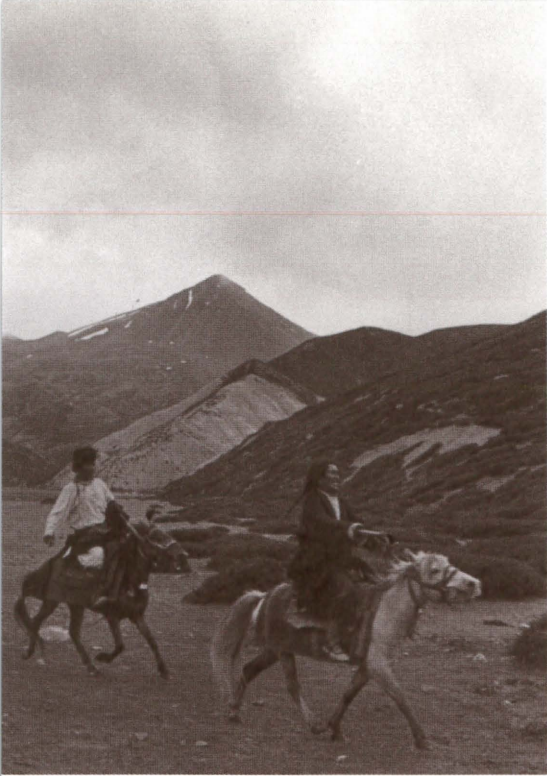
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SURVIVAL OF A NOMADIC WAY OF LIFE

An estimated two million Tibetan nomads now inhabit the Tibetan steppe in Tibet, China, Nepal,



Tibetan nomads race horses in 1978 in Namdo, Dolpo, Nepal. Photo by Daniel Miller



and India. And nearby, in Ladakh, India, where the nomad participants in this year's Festival live, generations of nomads continue to move their animals through the valleys and mountains of the Himalayas. One

reason why Tibetan pastoralism has flourished to this day on the Tibetan steppe as well as the border areas such as Ladakh is that there has been little encroachment into the nomadic areas by farmers trying to plow up the grass and plant crops. In addition, the indigenous nomadic pastoral systems developed by Tibetans were a successful evolutionary adaptation to life in one of the most inhospitable places on earth. Over centuries, Tibetan nomads have acquired complex knowledge about the environment in which they lived and upon which their lives depended, enabling them to develop a vibrant nomadic culture, of which, unfortunately, so little has been known to outsiders.

In recent years, the complexity and ecological and economic efficacy of many aspects of Tibetan nomadic pastoralism have begun to be recognized. While this is encouraging, current Chinese state programs to settle nomads forceably and to privatize and fence the grasslands jeopardize many worthy aspects of Tibetan nomadic culture. The increased tendency towards year-round grazing of livestock around settlements could also lead to further rangeland degradation. Because of the nomads' vast wealth of indigenous knowledge about their animals and the environment they live in, it is hoped they will be better consulted in the planning and implementation of more appropriate

development interventions for Tibetan pastoral areas in the future.

Tibetan nomads face many challenges adjusting to the modernization process that is sweeping across the steppes now. However, they have prevailed under forbidding circumstances ever since they first ventured onto the steppes with their animals and, despite new pressures in the last 50 years, their pastoral system has proven to be surprisingly stable. Since much of the Tibetan Plateau is only suitable for grazing, nomadic pastoralism should continue to thrive in the future, even as increased numbers of nomads settle and pursue other opportunities. As long as there are grass and yaks, Tibetan nomads should maintain their nomadic culture, and the world will be healthier for it.

Suggested Reading

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Daniel Miller is a range ecologist and first worked with Tibetan-speaking nomads in Nepal as a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1970s. For the last 17 years he has been involved in pastoral development and wildlife conservation programs with nomads in Bhutan, Nepal, and throughout the Tibetan areas of present-day China, Mongolia, and Pakistan. He has published numerous articles and books about Tibetan pastoralism and currently resides in Washington, D.C.