

Tibetan Culture Beyond the Land of Snows



by Richard Kennedy

Tibetan Culture Beyond the Land of Snows uses a translation of the Tibetan term for Tibet, *Bhöd Gangchen-Jong*, or “land of snows,” to describe a community of people who are Tibetan in origin but are now living outside the historical and ethnographic boundaries of Tibet. These Tibetans began to leave Tibet in 1959 after His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal leader of the people of Tibet, fled to India. The Dalai Lama fled Tibet after a decade of negotiations with the Chinese government for peaceful co-existence had failed. He eventually established a government-in-exile in the Himalayan town of Dharamsala. Over the subsequent 40





years many other Tibetans have escaped from Chinese-occupied Tibet and settled throughout India and Nepal, and smaller numbers have emigrated to North America and Europe. Now approximately 140,000 Tibetans live outside of Tibet. Another 6 million Tibetans remain in the Tibetan areas of present-day China. This Festival program focuses on the culture of the Tibetan refugee community, beyond the land of snows.

The Festival often has featured the cultures of immigrant groups; these programs have explored the transformations that take place in cultures uprooted and reestablished in new settings. In the case of Tibetans, those who settled in India have adopted elements of Indian culture, many of which have long been familiar to them. These Tibetans have learned Hindi, altered their diet to suit the Indian sub-continent, and established Indian bureaucratic systems. Similarly, Tibetans in North America have learned English, formed rock bands, and eaten hamburgers at McDonalds. But although the immigration of Tibetans to India, Europe, and the United States is similar to the migrations of many peoples who have fled war, destitution, and/or political chaos, the degree to which Tibetans immediately seized on culture as a focus for their new identities is striking.

The destruction of Tibetan monasteries and cultural institutions over the past four decades, but particularly during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–78, left many in the Tibetan community fearing the total annihilation of the centuries-old religious and secular traditions of the country. Cultural preservation often is important to immigrant identity; however, the Tibetans have made it a central goal not only of their new society but also of their new government. The establishment of cultural institutions that would revitalize and strengthen traditional Tibetan culture was among the first considerations of the government-in-exile. TIPA (the Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts), Men-tse Khang (The Tibetan Medical and Astro Institute), and the Library of Tibetan Works and



Tibetans and Indians live together in Dharamsala in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas. Dharamsala is home of the Tibetan government-in-exile and the Dalai Lama.

Photo © Alison Wright

Previous page: Tibetans young and old, monks and lay people in Kathmandu, Nepal, celebrate Tibetan New year by tossing tsampa (roasted barley flour) in the air, an expression of positive intentions for one's own and others' happiness.

Photo © Alison Wright



Archives are but three of numerous institutions that are integral to the policies of that government.



In spite of the Tibetan government-in-exile's efforts at cultural preservation, people in the West know little of Tibetan culture. The few available images of Tibet are often highly romanticized. The West has pictured Tibet only as an isolated land of pious Buddhists who have developed highly sophisticated religious practices removed from the currents of modern life. From 19th- and early 20th-century reports of travelers to Tibet, such as Alexandra David-Neel, and from translations of Tibetan religious texts to more recent New Age interpreters of Tibetan culture, Tibet, to many observers, has remained primarily a beacon of religious enlightenment. Certainly the international role played by the Dalai Lama to some degree reinforces this view. Some books by Western writers and early films such as the 1937 Frank Capra classic *Lost Horizon* have created a particularly compelling impression of a very foreign and spiritual "land of snows." Although portrayals such as that of Shangri-La in the Capra film are patently false and misleading, there is much truth in some of the images established by earlier writers. Nevertheless, together they are only part of the story.

Because Tibet was never colonized by a Western power and remained particularly isolated during the period of Western expansion, it did, in fact, appear to have been perennially cut off from European history. In reality Tibet during much of its history was in close commercial and cultural contact with its neighbors and, throughout its history, has played a role in regional affairs. Tibet was a land of merchants, nomads, fighters, and great scholars as well as monks. Little about this side of the country's history ever reached the West. However, after the Dalai Lama's escape in 1959 and particularly again in the 1990s after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, a more complete image of Tibet has been available. This time, rather than Buddhist texts or travelers' reports, Tibetans themselves have come to tell the tale.



Tibetan Culture Beyond the Land of Snows provides a platform for a number of Tibetans to speak and hopefully, in turn, paints a more complete picture of the culture. Festival participants may tell of the horrors of torture and cultural destruction by the Chinese, while others will speak about the Buddhist insights developed by Tibetan masters over centuries into highly sophisticated intellectual reflections and meditation practices. Some of these narratives will reinforce what Westerners have always thought about the spiritual preeminence of Tibet, while others may test preconceptions and question the feudal traditions and inequities historically found in the country's social order. Young Tibetans born in India or the West have less grounding in the spiritual Tibet of memory and text, and some are quick to look for new sources of inspiration in secular Tibetan and Western cultures. This Festival program will allow a broader number of Tibetan voices to be heard in the West.

Tibetan Culture Beyond the Land of Snows affords a rare opportunity for the public to hear directly from monks, nuns, and religious leaders from India and the United States, and from the very finest of traditional artists now living outside Tibet, and to speak with musicians from Canada, crafts-

men from Dharamsala, cooks from the United States, and weavers from Nepal. From these discussions we should gain a clearer understanding of the status of Tibetan culture in the 21st century. I hope the picture that comes into focus will be a complex one that includes images of Tibet as a contemporary living ethnic community, as well as a historical ideal. Certainly visitors will gain a deeper understanding of how critical a role culture does play in shaping the identities of both a refugee community and a nation.

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Conservancy for Tibetan Art & Culture
<www.tibetanculture.org>.

Richard Kennedy is Deputy Director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and co-curator of the Festival program on Tibetan culture. He has curated Festival programs on Hawai'i, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, and Russian music. Before coming to the Smithsonian he was Associate Director of the National Council for the Traditional Arts and Chair of South Asian Area Studies at the U.S. State Department's Foreign Service Institute. He earned his Ph.D. in South and Southeast Asian studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

THIS PROGRAM IS PRODUCED IN COLLABORATION WITH THE CONSERVANCY FOR TIBETAN ART & CULTURE AND WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF HIS HOLINESS THE 14TH DALAI LAMA OF TIBET AND THE TIBETAN GOVERNMENT-IN-EXILE. MAJOR SUPPORT IS PROVIDED BY THE INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET, TIBET FUND, TIBET HOUSE NEW YORK, THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION, THE GERE FOUNDATION, INNER HARMONY WELLNESS CENTER/PETER AMATO, STEVEN AND BARBARA ROCKEFELLER, EDWARD F. NAZARKO, THE KRUGLAK FAMILY, HSU-SUN CHEN, TIBETAN ALLIANCE OF CHICAGO, INC., THE SHELLEY AND DONALD RUBIN FOUNDATION, INC., UTAH TIBET SUPPORT GROUP, AND KAZUKO TATSUMURA HILLYER.



Tibetan officials pose in Lhasa, Tibet, during Losar (Tibetan New Year). The Potala Palace is shown in the background. This photo was published in a book by Alexandra David-Neel in the 1930s, and was one among only a few images available to Westerners before the 1950s.

Photographer and year unknown, courtesy The Newark Museum/Art Resource, NY



Tibetan Culture in the 21st Century

by Bhuchung K. Tsering

When tracing our cultural heritage, we Tibetans talk about three main sources of influence: for our spiritual tradition we looked towards our neighbor to the south, India; for our culinary tradition towards our neighbor to the east, China; and, for our style of dress we looked towards our neighbor to the northeast, Mongolia. We amalgamated these borrowings with our existing traditions to come out with a distinctly Tibetan culture. His Holiness the Dalai Lama points to the *khata*, the Tibetan greeting scarf, as a concrete example of this fusion of influences. The *khata*'s origin can be traced to India, but it has been mostly manufactured in China, and it is used only in the Tibetan cultural areas.

In its artistic expression and other aspects, Tibetan culture has a deeply spiritual foundation. In the Tibetan medical tradition, for example, Tibetan physicians place equal emphasis on medicines (mostly herb and mineral based) and on the spiritual component. Patients need to recite certain prayers before taking some medicines; in other instances, medicines, particularly the *rinchen rilbu* (precious pill), are said to be more efficacious if consumed during certain holy days. Tibetan culture has a holistic approach. It encourages a macro perspective of the issue, whether it is a discussion of deeper Buddhist philosophy or the treatment of sick people. The local *lama* (teacher) is a spiritual leader, psychiatric counselor, medical doctor, and business advisor all rolled into one. The culture also has a pragmatic side,

with people encouraged to find creative ways of adhering to their tradition. For example, traditionally Tibetans refrain from starting on a journey on a Sunday or on inauspicious days as calculated by Tibetan astrology. But when people cannot avoid doing this, they first undertake a make-believe journey on the previous day, complete with a backpack, before returning home after a short trek, to fool the evil spirits. They then begin their actual journey the next day.

The arrival of Chinese troops in Tibet, which forced a sizable number of Tibetans to seek refuge outside of their homeland, upset the Tibetan cultural balance. Tibetan culture, which had until then blossomed in familiar terrain, was exposed to pressure on a large scale. Within Tibet, Chinese values have been forced upon Tibetan society for predominantly political reasons. Chinese influence has become a norm in the daily lives of the Tibetans in Tibet, particularly those living in urban areas. Tibetan dress has become sinocized. Tibetan literature, painting, music, and dance have taken on Chinese overtones with a common



The Dalai Lama receives a ceremonial *khata* from Khyongla Rato Rinpoche in New York, 1999.

Photo © Sonam Zoksang



Left: Two monks read the newspaper during breakfast in Virginia. Teachers from the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön, the indigenous religion of Tibet, travel often to North America to teach meditation.

Photo courtesy Chongtul Rinpoche

Opposite page: Tibetan women in *chubas*, traditional hats, and aprons sing traditional *chang* (beer) songs in a Tibetan refugee camp in South India.

Photo © Sonam Zoksang

theme: depicting the supposedly terrible situation in Tibet in the pre-Chinese era and the so-called positive aspect of Chinese rule.

Tibetans in the diaspora have experienced a different kind of pressure. Having been transplanted to a different cultural environment, Tibetan refugees have had to cope with the cultural values, including climatic conditions, of their host societies, whether in the Indian subcontinent or the West. The post-1959 period also saw Tibetan cultural and religious institutions assuming dual identities. Major Tibetan monastic communities have been re-established in the Indian subcontinent. Today, there are Sera and Tashi Lhunpo monasteries both in Tibet and in exile.

The interaction with the outside culture has posed a dilemma for the Tibetans, particularly when there was contradiction between traditional Tibetan beliefs and the modern world view. The Dalai Lama from an early stage asked Tibetans to be pragmatic as they faced such a situation. Tibetans, he said, should differentiate between the essence of their culture and its more superficial ritualistic accouterments. He stressed the importance of preserving the former while being able to forgo

some of the latter, particularly in terms of rituals like customary ways of greeting that included sticking one's tongue out, or traditional burial styles which are not feasible at lower altitudes.

Tibetans are in the process of doing this. Take Tibetan dress, for instance. The traditional *chuba* (kimono-like garment) is not suitable for the climatic conditions in the Indian subcontinent. Thus, although Tibetan men in exile still preserve our *chuba*, they only use it during formal occasions. Tibetan women, on the other hand, have adapted the *chuba* for daily usage. Tibetan Buddhists also have learned to accept that the world is round, as scientifically proved, instead of being flat, as contained in some of the Buddhist scriptures.

The experience of the past four decades, during which Tibetans experienced close interaction with the outside world, showed that Tibetan culture had much to contribute to the development of world civilization. For example, in India there has been a reverse spread of Buddhism, from the Tibetans back to India. There is an interesting and moving process of re-translation from Tibetan to Sanskrit of Buddhist scriptures which had been

lost in India. Tibetan Buddhist philosophy is a field of study in very many institutions of higher learning in the West; the Tibetan medical tradition has a pride of place in the alternative healing systems of the world.

Tibetan culture itself, rather than being submerged in the cultures of our host societies, has acquired new dimensions. The exposure has created a new breed of teachers of Tibetan Buddhism. Western scholars in suits and ties as well as Western monks and nuns in Tibetan Buddhist robes now lecture on the deeper aspects of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, which 50 years before would have been a strange sight for Tibetans. The widespread recognition of Tibetan culture has also engendered a new market for "Tibetan items" ranging from ashtrays, lighters, and singing bowls to designer prayer flags and root beer. It has also resulted in the secularization of Tibetan culture, if you will. The *thangka* paintings and sacred statues, which traditionally could be found only in the shrine rooms and altars of houses, have also moved into the living rooms. In addition to being symbols of spiritual visualization, these items have become decorative objects.

Today, Tibetan culture is at a crossroads. Diaspora life has changed the mode of its preservation. An institutionalized system has been estab-

lished with knowledge of the culture passed on more through the classroom than through living experience. The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, the Norbulingka Institute, and the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in India, and Tibet House and numerous Dharma Centers in the United States are but a few examples of this development. The Asian Classics Input Project and Nirtartha International, both based in New York, have harnessed the power of the computer to preserve and make available Tibetan literature on the Web. The test for Tibetan culture is to be able to maintain its continuity while adapting to the changes in the situation. One important factor in this is the ability of Tibetan religious and cultural values to make themselves relevant to the daily life of the Tibetan people, whether in Tibet or beyond the land of snows. This 21st century will be a critical period in the evolution of Tibetan culture.

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Canada Tibet Committee <<http://www.tibet.ca>>.

International Campaign for Tibet
<<http://www.savetibet.org>>.

Tibetan Government in Exile

<<http://www.tibet.com>>.



Bhuchung K. Tsering was born in Tibet and brought out by his parents when he was ten days old. He was raised and educated in the Tibetan refugee community in India. He was a journalist with the daily newspaper *Indian Express* in New Delhi before joining the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India, working as editor of the Tibetan journal *Tibetan Bulletin*, as well as working on issues in Zurich and Geneva with the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. He joined the International Campaign for Tibet in Washington, D.C., in 1995 and is presently its director.



Tibetan Buddhism Beyond the Land of Snows

by Matthew Pistono and Jamphel Lhundup

Padmasambhava, an 8th-century meditation master, firmly established Buddhism in Tibet, the land of snows. Known to Tibetans as Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava prophesied, “When the Iron Bird flies and horses run on wheels, Tibetans will scatter like ants and the Dharma [the teachings of the Buddha] will spread to the West, beyond the land of snows.” And in fact, after the first airplanes landed in Tibet carrying military representatives of Mao Zedong’s regime and China’s armored vehicles invaded a roadless Tibet from western China, the embodied symbol of Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism, the 14th Dalai Lama, fled south across the Himalayas.

With the Dalai Lama’s escape in 1959, and that of the more than 100,000 Tibetans who followed, came the diffusion of Tibetan Buddhism beyond the land of snows. Over the last 40 years, this diffusion has spawned monastic institutions throughout the Indian subcontinent, brought the study of Tibetan Buddhism to the classrooms of major Western universities, and led to the establishment by Tibetan lamas (teachers) of spiritual communities in Europe and North America.

BEFORE CHINESE-OCCUPIED TIBET

For over a thousand years, personal and communal resources in Tibet were utilized to further the aims of the spiritual community, which included large monastic institutions, mountain hermitages for meditating ascetics, and secluded nunneries. A mutually beneficial relationship

existed between the laity and the ordained monks and nuns: the laity offered material necessities such as food and clothing, while the monastic community provided spiritual guidance and leadership. Even though some unscrupulous monks and ambitious bureaucrats took advantage of this system for personal gain, on the whole the leaders who developed Tibetan social, religious, and political structures showed deep concern for the spiritual well-being of both the individual and the community. While pre-1959 Tibet was not a utopia, nor did it match its Hollywood depiction as Shangri-La, it was a highly devout society that produced some of the most sophisticated philosophical reflections in world thought.

This system changed dramatically when China invaded Tibet, razing over 6,000 monasteries and nunneries, burning thousands of libraries, and bombarding sacred *chöten*s (Buddhist monuments) and grottos to ruins. Tens of thousands of monks and nuns, teachers, scholars, and devout lay people lost their lives for their religious beliefs, forever altering the spiritual teaching lineages* and the sacred landscape of Tibet.

TIBETAN BUDDHISM BEYOND THE LAND OF SNOWS

Re-establishing monasteries in the refugee communities in India and Nepal was critical to sustaining the cultural and spiritual traditions of the

* A lineage is an unbroken line of successive masters through which are transmitted the oral instructions on particular religious texts and spiritual practices.



Monks at Rumtek Monastery near Gangtok, Sikkim, lift a larger-than-life-size mask of Padmasambhava, worn by a monk. Padmasambhava firmly established Buddhism in Tibet. Photo by Don Farber

Tibetans. Initiated by the many lamas who fled Tibet in the late 1950s and early 1960s, monasteries were established in virtually every refugee community and Buddhist pilgrimage site on the southern slope of the Himalayas. By the early 1970s, the Tibetan government-in-exile assisted in setting up large monasteries on land provided by the Indian government. These monasteries today house several thousand monks each and maintain most of the traditional customs, although some communal agricultural work is required of able-bodied monks.

A notable development in India within the last 20 years has been the revitalization of the nun tradition. Although monks and nuns are meant to have equal opportunities, in Tibet this was not the case. In exile, however, with the Dalai Lama’s support and the dedication and initiative of the nuns themselves, religious and educational opportunities are now being instituted for them.

Within the last decade, some nunneries and monasteries in India and Nepal have merged the traditional religious curriculum of philosophy, debate, and analytical contemplation with a modern curriculum of computer, Internet, and English-language course work.

TIBETAN BUDDHIST STUDIES AND DHARMA CENTERS

Tibetan Buddhism’s influence has stretched far beyond the Indian subcontinent, manifesting itself in North America primarily in the establishment of Tibetan Buddhist studies in universities and of Dharma Centers by Tibetan meditation teachers and their Western students.

Tibetan Buddhist studies in North America were developed by Westerners who had traveled and lived in India and Nepal in the 1960s. These spiritual seekers traded their encounter with the solitary meditator’s life in the Himalayas to become the new generation of scholars, translators, and commentators of ancient religious texts in modern university classrooms.

This new wave of Tibetan Buddhist scholars differs from the 19th- and 20th-century “Orientalists” for whom the study of Tibetan Buddhism — which they termed pejoratively “Lamaism” — was one primarily of textual philology. These philologists subordinated the study of Tibetan Buddhism to that of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese Buddhism. The new Western scholars focus more on the teaching lineages of living Tibetans, bringing refugee lamas into the classroom to explain their traditions. Instead of grappling solely with the literal translations of the ancient religious texts, these new Western univer-



Students at a Dharma Center review notes before a meditation session. Tibetan Buddhist meditation and philosophy are taught in Dharma Centers not only by refugee lamas but Westerners as well. Dharma Centers are a completely new phenomenon in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Photo courtesy Rocky Mountain Shambhala Center

sity professors and their students explore potential applications of Tibetan Buddhist traditions such as analytical meditations and scholarly debate.

Dharma Centers are spiritual communities for Westerners that formed under the spiritual guidance of Tibetan lamas. The myriad forms of Tibetan Buddhist practice have resulted in a variety of Buddhist practices being taught in North America. An expression in Tibet that conveys this notion of diversity states, “In every valley a different dialect, with every lama a different spiritual lineage.” While some Tibetan lamas, for example, have merged Western free verse poetry with Buddhist formless meditation, others have emphasized traditional disciplined study and the fundamentals of Buddhist philosophy. Spontaneity and esoteric rituals have been the focus of some lamas at Dharma Centers, while more conventional lamas have developed and concentrated on a curriculum of study similar to that of their monastery.

Although a handful of Dharma Centers have seen episodes of misunderstanding and controversy between Tibetan lamas and their students, the centers established in the past 30 years have laid the foundation for the flourishing of Tibetan Buddhism in the West — by some estimates, the second fastest growing religion in North America.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the seeds of Tibetan Buddhism will firmly take root. Perhaps in the next three decades, a culture of ethics, concentration, and wisdom will emerge out of Westerners’ practice of Tibetan Buddhism. On the other hand, maybe the profound wisdom contained in the many teachings, seminars, and books that Tibetan Buddhist lineage holders have offered to the West will only be used to reduce stress and provide relaxation.

THE CHANGING FACE OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

As much as Tibetan Buddhists have changed the spiritual landscape of India and academic and spiritual communities in the West, so, too, are the Tibetans themselves changing. Had the Iron Bird not flown into Tibet, Tibetan monasteries would probably not be posting Buddhist teachings on the Internet today. Had military tanks not fired on quiet mountainside nunneries, devoted Tibetan nuns would not have fled Tibet and ultimately revitalized the nun tradition in refugee communities. And while in Tibet the majority of meditators were ordained monks and nuns supported by the material resources of the lay community, in the West the laity are the meditators as well as the

financial supporters of Tibetan Buddhism. But perhaps the clearest example of the changing face of Tibetan Buddhism beyond the land of snows can be found in the 14th Dalai Lama himself.

Enthroned at the age of four, the Dalai Lama was positioned to temporally and spiritually lead his people from inside the massive and secluded Potala Palace in Tibet’s capital, Lhasa. He has emerged, as history has seen, from the cloistered walls of the Potala to become one of the world’s most recognizable leaders.

From convening symposiums on “Mind Science” with Harvard and Columbia professors and medical professionals to giving commentary on the New Testament to the World Community for Christian Meditation in England, the Dalai Lama consistently engages those outside the traditional Buddhist world. The 14th Dalai Lama fills social, political, and religious roles never known to the previous thirteen Dalai Lamas in Tibet. His many books on ethics and compassion have found a vast audience in the West, and his tireless advocacy for human rights on the world political stage and for a non-violent resolution to the current occupation of Tibet, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, confirms the Dalai Lama’s impact on matters far beyond the traditional leadership of Tibetans.

The drastic changes in the role of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism reaffirm the fundamental Buddhist tenet that all things must change. If it is true that all dependent things must change, it is hoped that the forces that continue to keep the Dalai Lama and over 100,000 Tibetans separated from their homeland will also change, and Tibetan Buddhism from “beyond” will return to the land of snows.

BUDDHISM IN CONTEMPORARY TIBET

All major Tibetan religious leaders have fled Tibet in the last 40 years. Few of Tibet’s once-thriving monasteries and nunneries or sacred hermitages and *chôtens* remain standing since Tibet’s invasion by Chinese forces. Despite this exodus and destruction, and continued severe restrictions on religious expression in Tibet today, Buddhist practice is still alive due solely to the devotion and resilience of the Tibetans inside Tibet. The ability of Tibetans to withstand the oppression in their homeland is testimony to the vitality and strength of the Tibetans’ resolve to express their religion freely.



Two monks print Buddhist scriptures for monastic libraries at the famous printing presses of Derge, Kham, in eastern Tibet. Thousands of monastic libraries throughout Tibet have been destroyed in the last 40 years of Chinese occupation. Photo by Carol Elchert

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Matthew Pistono, Manager of Programs for the Conservancy for Tibetan Art & Culture in Washington, D.C., is a Program Coordinator at this year’s Folklife Festival. He received his master’s degree in Indian philosophy from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and has lived and traveled throughout Tibetan communities in Tibet, Nepal, and northern India.

Jamphel Lhundup, co-curator of Tibetan Culture Beyond the Land of Snows, holds a *lopon degree* (M.Phil.) with distinction in Buddhist Sutra and Tantra from Namgyal Monastery in India. As the most outstanding student of the first graduates from the re-established Namgyal Monastery in Dharamsala, he was selected to serve as Junior Attendant to His Holiness the Dalai Lama for ten years, traveling extensively worldwide. Mr. Lhundup worked in the Office of His Holiness for three years before joining the Conservancy for Tibetan Art & Culture.



Chôtens and carved mani stones
mark a sacred site in Ladakh, India.
Photo © Brian Harris/SEVA

Nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition

by Venerable Lobsang Dechen and Elizabeth Napper

Buddhism has had a very long and rich history in Tibet since its arrival in the 7th century. Its establishment in Tibet is credited with spurring cultural development and a literate society. With Buddhism came monasticism and, from the earliest years, the tradition has included nuns as well as monks.

This is significant because in Tibet, unlike in many traditional societies, women have had an alternative to the expected pattern of marriage and motherhood. Tibetan women have always taken advantage of this opportunity to choose a life focused on spiritual endeavor, and many families count one or more nuns among their members.

While the history of Tibet includes numerous female luminaries who reached advanced levels of spiritual attainment, the norm has been ordained women who live quietly, often engaging in meditative retreat without attracting a great deal of attention. Monks, on the other hand, have been a far more visible part of public life and have been involved in the official trappings of power and authority in ways that the nuns never have been. Much of the explanation for this has to do with education. An elaborate system of education evolved in the monasteries of Tibet, culminating in the degree of *geshe*, comparable to the Western doctorate of philosophy. This system was based on many large monastic universities, which at their height in the years before the communist Chinese overran Tibet had up to 10,000 monks in residence in a single monastery.

The nuns were never a part of this system.

Nunneries were smaller, less tightly structured institutions. After ordination, many nuns stayed near their families and built small retreat houses just outside the family compound. Their religious practice focused on meditation and prayer rather than advanced philosophical studies.

All this was radically changed by the communist invasion of Tibet and its repression of religion. Monks and nuns were imprisoned, forced to marry, and most of the monasteries and nunneries were physically destroyed. The years between 1980 and 1987 brought an easing of religious restrictions in Tibet and a slow re-establishment of the nunneries. Women flocked to them. Since 1987, however, severe constraints on the nunneries (and monasteries), such as limiting admission and ordination and instituting “patriotic re-education” to communist ideology, have been re-imposed in Tibet. In response to these coercive measures, large numbers of nuns have fled to Tibetan refugee communities in India and Nepal, and several nunneries have been established there to receive them.

In the refugee communities, a serious movement is underway both to draw upon the strengths of this ancient spiritual tradition for women and to develop and improve it, especially through adding more formal education. In all the Tibetan Buddhist schools, the traditional courses of study are being opened up to women, including those leading to the *geshe* degree. Since it is nearly a 20-year course of study, no women have yet completed it, but some have reached advanced levels of the syllabus,



and the day of the first woman *geshe* is fast approaching.

An interesting case in point is Shugsep Nunnery. The original Shugsep Nunnery is located several hours to the southwest of Lhasa. It was first established as a place of learning and prayer in the 11th century. Destroyed by the Dzunkar Mongols in the late 17th century, the site lay in ruins for more than 200 years. About 100 years ago, the site was re-occupied as a religious center, and the renowned woman teacher, Jetsun Rigzin Chonyi Sangmo, made it her home. Known as Shugsep Jetsun Rinpoche, she was one of the most famous teachers in Tibet during the first half of the century. She died in 1953 at the age of over 100. She was the holder of a number of important practice lineages. Noteworthy among these was the lineage of *chöd* (cutting-off ego) practice that dates back to Ma-jik-lap-dron, a renowned *yogini* (female yoga adept) of the 11th century. The Shugsep nuns received this lineage of practice from her and continue it to this day. They are known for their detailed and beautiful performance of rituals.

Fleeing the repressive environment in Tibet, a number of the Shugsep nuns have come to India

and Nepal. Some left Tibet having endured imprisonment and torture after they peacefully demonstrated on behalf of Tibetan independence, while others left to seek educational opportunities denied in Tibet. A group of about 20 Shugsep nuns live in Nepal, mainly engaged in meditative retreat. A larger group of over 50, including nuns at this year's Folklife Festival, have relocated to the Dharamsala area of North India. There they continue the meditative and ritual practices of their home nunnery. These nuns also have entered into the nine-year course of study that is undertaken by the monks of their Nyingma tradition. In doing this, they are complementing a long and esteemed tradition that stretches back to the greatest women meditators of Tibetan Buddhism, with educational qualifications that will enable them to take more active roles as teachers and representatives of their rich spiritual heritage in the future.

Suggested Reading

Khachoe Ghakyil Ling Nunnery

<<http://www.zamba.com/BuddhasVillage/causes/khachoe.htm>>.

The Tibetan Nuns Project <<http://www.angelfire.com/nt/tnp>>.

Lobsang Dechen was born in India in 1960, just after her parents escaped from Tibet. She became a nun at the age of 13. Because there was no education available at the one nunnery in the Dharamsala area at that time, she remained in the Tibetan schools established in India by the exile community to complete her secondary education. She then attended an Indian college, where she earned a B.A. and B.Ed. In 1992, she began working full time for the Tibetan Nuns Project, in order to advance its efforts to make educational opportunities available for nuns throughout the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. She and Elizabeth Napper are Co-Directors of the Tibetan Nuns Project.

Elizabeth Napper received a Ph.D. in Buddhist studies, with a focus on Tibetan Buddhism, from the University of Virginia. She has taught there, at Stanford University, and the University of Hawaii and has authored and edited several books on Buddhist philosophy and the Tibetan language. Since 1991 she has devoted her efforts full time to the Tibetan Nuns Project and the establishment of the Dolma Ling Institute of Higher Studies for nuns, the first ever of its kind. Through its sponsorship program, the Nuns Project supports approximately 500 nuns from all schools of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.



Preserving Tibetan Art Beyond the Land of Snows

by Kalsang and Kim Yeshi

Under circumstances of extreme duress, artistic culture suffers greatly as survival becomes people's most pressing priority. The disruptive events of the 20th century in Tibet destroyed much of the nation's cultural wealth accumulated over 12 centuries. More than the physical expressions of this great civilization were destroyed, for the upheavals that shook Tibet from 1949 to 1978 also eliminated many of the heirs and practitioners of the great artistic traditions, as well as their supporting institutions.

Monasteries had long supported the arts in Tibet. Additionally, since the 18th century the traditions of *thangka* (religious scroll paintings), appliqué *thangka*, statue making, and woodcarving were organized into guilds, whose members were highly respected within Tibetan society. After the guilds were forced to disband in 1959, little could be done within Tibet to ensure the future of the traditions they had represented.

In the refugee communities Tibetans first faced an urgent struggle for survival. After safety and a modest degree of stability were achieved, efforts were initiated within the Tibetan community to ensure the preservation of their artistic culture. Training highly skilled artists proved to be unfeasible because Tibetans at that time did not have the means to commission work from them. Many of the refugees accepted the artwork they could afford, despite its lower quality, and gradually the public's appreciation of fine work declined. Artistic creations that would normally have taken months to complete were replaced with more per-

functory versions, using cheaper, ready-made materials. For the first 20 years after fleeing Tibet, refugee artists were likely to give up their trade for more lucrative occupations or to work on their own for very little. The students they trained lacked the vision or courage to set themselves up on their own once they had completed their instruction, and often resorted to working in restaurants or peddling sweaters on the streets of Madras, Delhi, or Bombay. And the few artists who resettled in the West had little opportunity to develop their skills.

By the late 1980s, when conditions for Tibetan refugees had become more stable, new efforts were undertaken to provide support for artists. Experience had shown that mere training was not sufficient; artists required a healthy context in which to work, proper remuneration had to be given, and the craft masters had to command public respect.

Since 1988, the Norbulingka Institute in Dharamsala has sought to reverse the early downward trend, recognizing the dangers that the decrease in quality posed for cultural survival. The institute began as a center to train artists in statue making, *thangka* painting and appliqué, and woodcarving. The institute building itself was intended to inspire the artists who worked and trained within it. It combines modern and traditional Tibetan architecture with a design based on the iconographic outline of Avalokiteshvara (Chenrezig in Tibetan) — the Buddha of compassion, the patron deity of Tibet — and has pools,

lush gardens, and a breathtaking view of the Dhauladhar mountain range of the Western Himalayas.

The system of training at Norbulingka is based on that which prevailed in pre-1959 Tibet. Apprentices work under the guidance of their senior and junior masters in six- to twelve-year training courses. The apprentices receive food, lodging, and a basic stipend which increases in proportion to their participation in the work undertaken by the master and his senior apprentices. By the time trainees complete the course, they have the option of leaving and establishing themselves, working for other patrons, or simply rising to the rank of "worker" or "junior master" and continuing to serve at Norbulingka itself. The intention has been to set up a supportive, free environment so that artists may concentrate on

their work and take whatever time is required to produce the exquisite religious statues, *thangkas*, carved furniture, and so on that have so distinguished Tibet's unique artistic tradition in the past.

In order for an artistic tradition to survive, it must be viable and self-sufficient. It must be appreciated and supported by people belonging to the culture in which it originated. These are the tasks that the Norbulingka Institute has set for itself. The first step was to obtain funds to build adequate workshops for the artists. The next was to ensure that the masters felt comfortable teaching their apprentices the way they had been trained themselves, specifically that they did not feel under any pressure to take shortcuts. The third and most challenging task was to accustom the local public — Indians, Tibetans, and tourists alike — to fine quality and to raise their standards

of appreciation. The masters set the cost of their products based on the use of the best materials, and resulting orders showed that there was indeed an audience for quality products. Norbulingka is confident that the Tibetan public have not forgotten the meaning of quality and that they sufficiently appreciate their past to support the efforts of their artists. Presently, three-quarters of



Kalsang Ladoe measures the height of an unfinished Buddha statue in Dharamsala, India.

Photo © Sonam Zoksang



all orders at Norbulingka originate from the Tibetan community. Revenue generated from this work allows the institute to pay adequate salaries and offer a range of benefits sufficiently attractive that most Norbulingka trainees wish to remain to complete their apprenticeship.

TRAINING AT NORBULINGKA
STATUE MAKING

It takes 12 years to train a statue maker. The master seeks young, bright apprentices ideally no more than 13 or 14 years old. They are first taught to draw and then begin to interpret their drawings in copper, hammered into wax. Only when they have mastered this technique will they move on to participate in the work of the studio. In their eighth or ninth year, they begin to make statues of deities, after they have studied all the proportional iconographic grids particular to each one. These works, made from copper plates that are later gilded and assembled, can measure up to 20 ft. and involve a team of artists working together. Though a fully trained artist may be able to complete the work on a small metal-cast statue by himself, only a team can tackle the unique requirements of larger works. At present, the Norbulingka studio, working under the highly qualified master and Festival participant, Pemba Dorjee, is the only team doing such work.

THANGKA PAINTING

Thangka painters train for six years. Depending on their ability they will begin to participate in the work of the studio within two to three years after having studied the proportional grids of all the classes of deities in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. The Norbulingka studio receives numerous orders which are executed by the masters and the more advanced apprentices. Apprentices may work on sections of *thangkas* corresponding to their ability. Some *thangkas* are commissioned and have to be created from scratch; the master has to do the preparatory research specific to the subject portrayed in the *thangka* by consulting ancient religious texts and the masters of the particular spiritual lineage. Thus, as was done in European Renaissance studios, a number of painters may contribute to a *thangka* working at different levels, with the master supervising the project and contributing the final touches.

On completing a six-year apprenticeship, the newly qualified painter may be able to paint a *thangka* from start to finish, but he may still not be able to accomplish the research required for special commissions. This is a skill acquired with further experience. So far, most of the Norbulingka graduates have opted to remain in the studio taking on increasingly challenging tasks and training new students themselves.



WOODCARVING

A woodcarver's training also takes six years and like the painters' and statue-makers' course begins with drawing. The next task is to create a set of tools and to begin to carve. Talented trainees may be able to participate in the work of the studio within two years, but until they reach that stage, they practice on their own pieces, to be sold by the institute as "trainees' work." In the process, they learn the rules of Tibetan furniture making and the skills to produce altars, tables, thrones, headboards, and chests.



Through well-trained artists whose work is made available to a wider public outside India, Tibetan art should not only survive within its own community, but also gain recognition as a living practice that can take its place among the world's great artistic traditions. It is to be hoped that the Norbulingka Institute and similar organizations such as the Shechen Institute of Traditional Tibetan Arts in Nepal will produce enough highly qualified artists so that Tibetan works of art will not only become more readily available but also regain their position as a source of pride and opportunity among the Tibetan community.

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Norbulingka Institute <<http://www.norbulingka.com>>.
Shechen Monastery <<http://shechen.12pt.com/finley03.html>>.

Kalsang Yeshe was born in Lhasa, Tibet, in 1941 and joined Drepung Monastery when he was 15 years old. He left Tibet with the 100,000 Tibetan refugees who followed the Dalai Lama into exile. Kalsang received an acharya degree (M.A. equivalent) in 1972 and traveled to the United States to teach at the Universities of Pennsylvania and Virginia for five years. In 1979, he married, returned to India to serve as a minister and cabinet member in the Tibetan government-in-exile, and initiated what is now the Norbulingka Institute. He is currently Director of Norbulingka.

Kim Yeshe was raised and educated in France. She studied anthropology at Vassar College and received an M.A. in Buddhist studies from the University of Virginia. Kim married Kalsang Yeshe in 1979. She began the Losel Doll project in 1983 to raise funds for Drepung Monastery, relocated in South India. Through the Losel dolls, more than 175 traditional Tibetan costumes were researched and documented. In 1988, she helped establish Norbulingka Institute and in 1995 became Managing Director.



Left: Choe Puntsok, the senior instructor at Norbulingka Institute, who is participating in the Folklife Festival, demonstrates techniques of woodcarving.
Photo by Jamphel Lhundup

Opposite page: A young Tibetan trains in drawing the strict iconographic forms of the Buddhist deities of traditional *thangka* paintings. Photo by Jamphel Lhundup



Rethinking Tibetan Identity

by Losang C. Rabgey

In Tibetan refugee settlements in rural South India, we drove for what seemed a short eternity past scattered clusters of whitewashed mud-brick bungalows covered with clay tiles and vast stretches of cleared farmland, ready for planting. Along the roadside, wild flowers, red, orange, yellow, grew in profusion. Finally, we turned and sped past an elderly woman in a thick black *chuba* (Tibetan dress) standing placidly under a banana tree. Although I only glimpsed her for a moment, I am sure I'll never forget the sight. I had never before seen a Tibetan in a tropical environment.

The scene was perfect. How jarring was this image of an elderly highlander woman standing in a heavy woollen dress in the unkind heat of India's summer plains? At that moment I began to let go of an earlier need to know the "real" past, to know one truth. I began to shift my gaze to the dialectic of our people's strategies, adaptations, and creativities. I began, in a sense, to search more for the spirit of a people than for a solidified historical lineage.

The Tibetan *identity* I so eagerly sought to quantify had just flashed by me in an instant. Far away and below the pastures and peaks of Tibet, it was there in a dignified old woman's pacific moment in the shade of a banana tree. A piece of the puzzle. My own concerns with diasporic identities did not disappear, but they landed on earth. The pieces were falling together — our story has turned a page to a daring new chapter, fraught with challenge, danger, and hope. And much of the story is still in our hands.

DIASPORA

It is not possible in the space of a few pages to describe fully the tremendous shifts Tibetans in the diaspora have experienced in over 40 years of exile. In that time we have willingly, and sometimes rather unwillingly, opened our eyes to a plethora of places, peoples, issues, and ways of life.

What makes us a diaspora now and not simply a people in exile? It is in part, I would argue, our very diversity. Undoubtedly, we were a diverse people before China occupied Tibet. About the size of Western Europe, Tibet's difficult terrain on the plateau resulted in a nation with a variety of dialects and customs. But our current diversity of languages spoken, cities lived in, professions pursued, and ideas thought is unprecedented in our 2,000 years of history.

For the first brief decade in India, we truly were refugees in exile. Literally uprooted and transplanted overnight into a new world, the displacement was felt most strongly by the adults of that generation. My generation, those in our twenties and thirties, stands as a group on their strong, broad, and *chuba*-clad shoulders.

CHANGES

One of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism centers around *mithakpa* — impermanence or change. After centuries of studying this concept, and to a large extent suppressing it in our secular world, change is now the one constant in Tibetan society, both inside and outside Tibet.



A Tibetan woman dressed in a *chuba* returns from a milk cooperative among the palm trees of South India. Tibetan refugees have had to adjust to the hot, humid environment of the Indian subcontinent.

Photo by Losang Rabgey

In response to a variety of political forces, we have altered our social order, governmental structure, gender relations, even our spoken language. Ordinary Tibetans from all corners of Tibet have never had so much direct contact with each other. The linguistic mix of Tibetan, Hindi, and English is something I like to call "Thinglish": untraditional, but it *works*. This is a key to Tibetan survival beyond the land of snows — we approach what is around us and combine it with what we need and know to define a space uniquely ours. Today, there are *many* Tibetan identities coexisting, all related yet different. If we can reconcile the gaps in this diversity, we can only benefit from the strength of a variety of knowledge, experiences, and outlooks.

MY STORY

My own story is a diasporic one throughout: My parents fled from Tibet, I was born in India, I grew up in Canada, and was educated in England. What has this patchwork past taught me? I am amazed, again and again, at how much Tibetans have had to absorb and adapt, and how quickly and efficiently we have done so in a few short decades. The Tibet before the Chinese invasion is no more. There is a new sun that lights our days, no longer solely a Tibetan sun, but one that reaches all the different spaces we now call home — India, Nepal, Burma, Brazil, South Africa, Prague, Holland, Japan, the United States, Canada, Taiwan, Australia, Switzerland, even Beijing and Chengdu. The list goes on. Those dearest to us are scattered around the world, making our community a village on a global scale.

Growing up in Lindsay, a small town in Ontario, Canada, certainly presented challenges in the 1970s, when tolerance of diversity was not as widely accepted. It was a struggle to maintain a sense of identity that made sense in two worlds, one that engulfed us and one located on the opposite side of the world. It was a struggle to compete with legions of peers who had the cultural and economic capital to succeed.

But like immigrants everywhere, there is the will to move beyond the confines of a blue-collar existence. Education has been a vital avenue for the new generation. Young women and men are encouraged by parents to learn. While our parents are factory workers, janitors, and short-order cooks standing behind us, we are now lawyers, architects, investment bankers, doctors, professors, and writers. In my case, my parents clearly emphasized the need to balance independence with work that positively impacts society.

CHALLENGES

For each new group of Tibetans that arrives in India or the West, once they begin to stand on their own feet economically, I think the question quickly arises — what does it mean to be a



Tibetans on the West Coast of the United States gather for a soccer match during their annual summer picnic in 1998.
Photo courtesy Tenzin Dhongtog

Tibetan now? What is my relation to my homeland and culture? What are my responsibilities? What are my joys and privileges? How will my children identify as Tibetans? How much will it matter to them?

As a Tibetan of the diaspora, I can attest to the fact that most young Tibetans at some point develop a strong desire to connect with their cultural heritage. One of the most precious gifts my parents have given my sister, brother, and me is the language. Through our native tongue, we have been empowered to choose how and when to explore Tibetan culture. Certainly, much can be understood through other languages. But much more of the culture can be *felt* by speaking face to face with knowledge bearers. Thus, the challenge lies ahead for current and future parents to somehow ensure that the future generations speak this ancient word.

Another question that is often asked of Tibetans in the diaspora is whether we would return to a “free” Tibet. Each person has, of course, her/his own reasoning and response. But instead of focus-

ing on this answer, perhaps what we can do instead is to shift to a more pertinent question. We are just about 140,000 in the diaspora. There are several million Tibetans inside Tibet. A crucial challenge we now collectively face is this: With our hard-won experience and knowledge from the diaspora, what can we offer and what can we do for our sisters and brothers in Tibet? What can we do for our sisters and brothers in this shrinking global village?

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After her parents fled Tibet in 1959, Losang was born in a refugee settlement in northern India. Her family soon emigrated to Canada and, by the late 1970s, founded the Potala Tibetan Performance Arts group. In 1987, Losang traveled with her family to Tibet and her father's village in Kham.

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.

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.

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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.