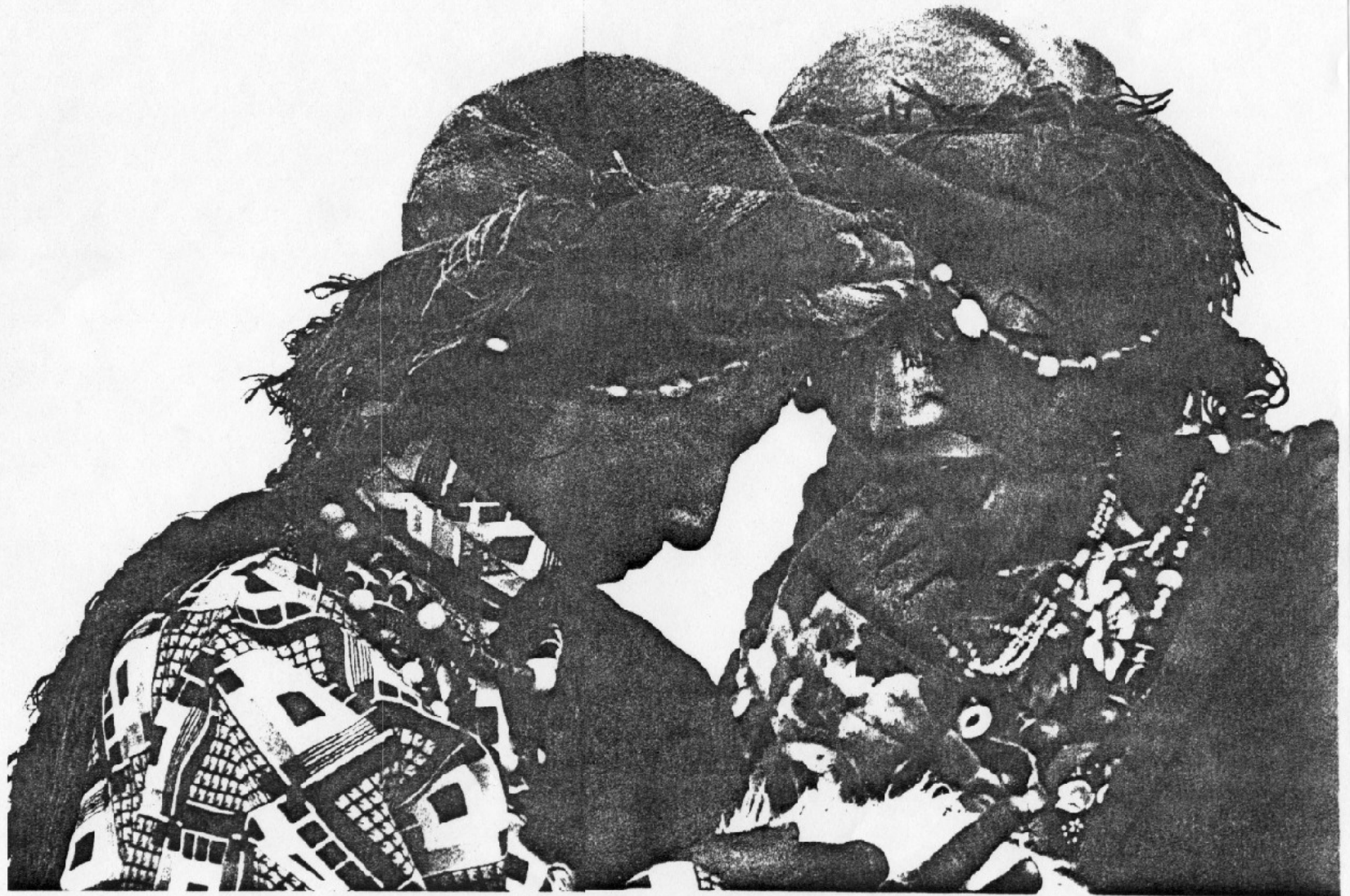


The Remote World of Tibet's Nomads

In a lofty realm beyond the Himalaya, nomads lead their sheep, goats, and yaks from pasture to pasture as they have for centuries. Man and beast thrive in the rarefied air of Tibet's starkly beautiful Chang Tang (northern plateau), where a teenage girl, at right, chatting with her sister, toys with a tassel in her hair.

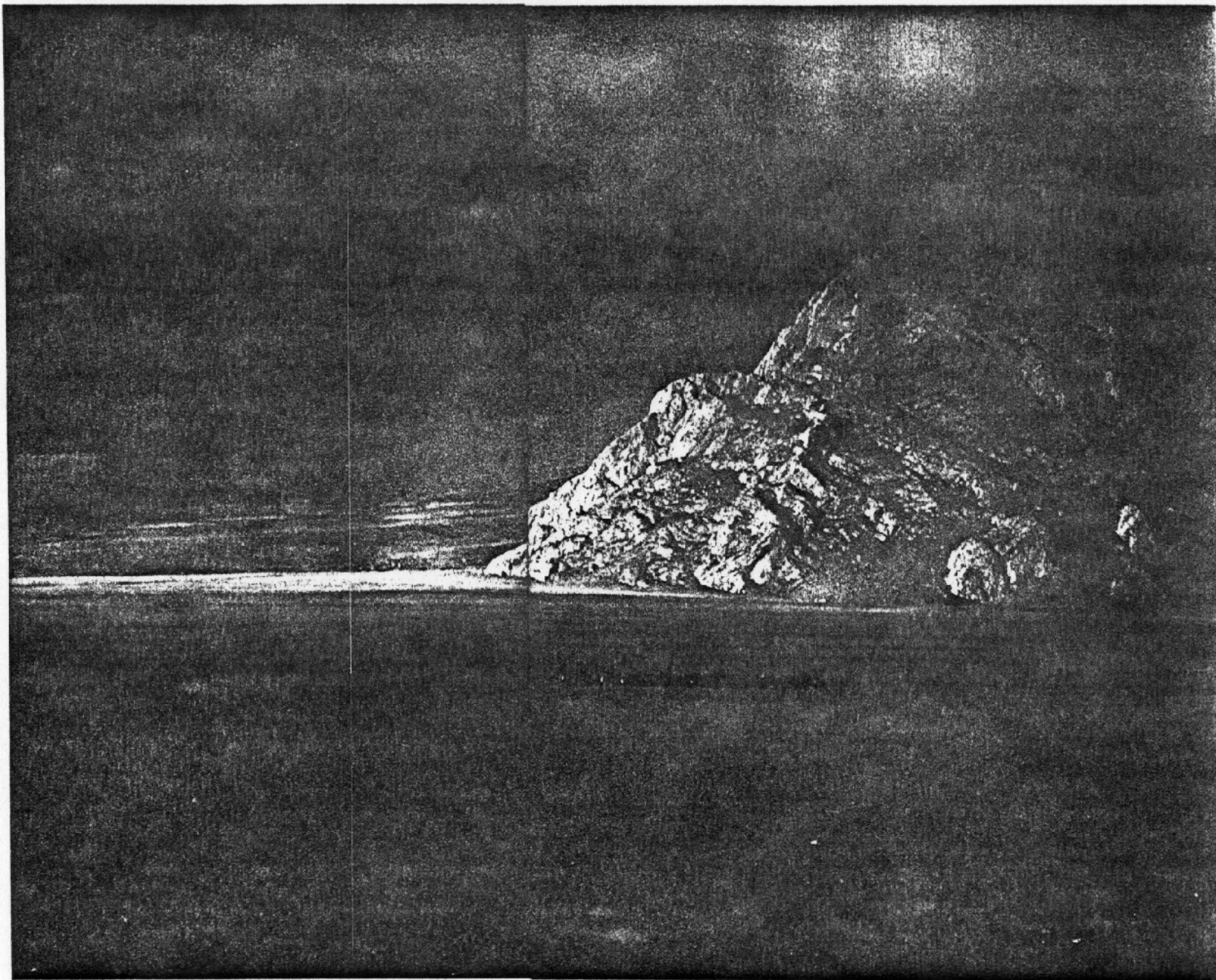
In the late 1960s the Chinese forced the nomads into communes, a policy abandoned in 1980. The authors—first Western anthropologists allowed to do long-term fieldwork in modern Tibet—found a recommitment to traditional ways among one of the world's last great nomadic societies.

Text and
photographs by
MELVYN
GOLDSTEIN
and
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BEALL



An afternoon rainbow paints the summer sky as yaks head back to camp after a day of grazing. About half a million nomads live on the forbidding Chang Tang, where dramatic mountain ranges rise from a land dotted with landlocked salt lakes. Here, where the average elevation is 15,000 feet, temperatures can drop 80 degrees in a single day as sudden and ferocious winds usher in stinging hailstorms.

The authors spent 16 months studying a group of 265 nomads who live in widely scattered camps within a 250-square-mile area abutting a lake called Motsobunnyi, meaning "two sisters." With many camps isolated and separated by mountain passes, some nomads never see other group members during their entire lives.





Tethered shoulder to shoulder by a single rope, goats are milked on a snowy summer evening. A mere pull on the rope frees the animals when milking is done. "I was impressed by the nomads' efficiency," says co-author Goldstein. "They perform their tasks with very little wasted motion."

Summer is the busiest time for women. That is when sheep and goats produce the most milk, which must be collected and processed into yogurt, butter, and cheese. Women also tend the fires and cook, all the while watching children.

SITTING BESIDE A DUNG FIRE in his black yak-hair tent, aromatic smoke whirling around his head, Trinley, a 63-year-old Tibetan nomad, rhythmically pumped the fire with his goat-skin bellows.

As he offered us the typical nomad hospitality of salted butter tea, yogurt, and *tsamba*—a flour made from roasted barley—we told him of our plan to stay with his group for more than a year. A look of incredulity spread across his face.

"But it is not possible for you to live here on the Chang Tang in tents," he said. "It is bitterly cold and windy in winter, and only we, the *drokba* [nomads], can survive here."

With that sobering introduction we began our study of the inhabitants of one of the world's highest frontiers—the awesome area of Tibet known as the Chang Tang, or northern plateau.

Despite its name the Chang Tang's flat grasslands are broken up by twisting mountain ridges and dotted with bright, sapphire blue lakes. Located in central and northern Tibet, the Chang Tang contains some two-thirds of Tibet's landmass and spans about a thousand miles, from the Indian region of Ladakh in the west into the Chinese province

of Qinghai in the east (map, right). With elevations between 14,000 and 18,000 feet, the Chang Tang suffers extremes of weather: daily temperature variations of up to 80 degrees; winter temperatures of minus 40°F; and sudden storms whose gusts can blow a rider off his horse or yak or bury him under drifts of freezing snow.

Yet this bleak, majestic plateau is home to between 400,000 and 500,000 pastoral nomads who for centuries have not merely eked out a living but have so thrived that they are an integral part of Tibet's economy.

We first came to the Chang Tang in June 1986—the only Western anthropologists so far permitted to conduct extensive field research in Tibet, which is known officially as the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China.

During an earlier visit I was struck by the vitality of nomad life on the Chang Tang, one of the last examples of the great nomadic societies that were once widespread throughout the world. On my return to Case Western Reserve University in Ohio, where Cynthia and I both teach, I proposed a joint field study of the Chang Tang nomads.

After winning approval from the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences in Lhasa, the



capital, we began a 16-month study. We received funds from the National Geographic Society, which had supported projects of ours in Nepal and India, and from the National Academy of Sciences' Committee for Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China. The National Science Foundation later gave us supplementary funds.

We chose as our research group 265 pastoral nomads living in Phala, an area about 300 miles northwest of Lhasa. They comprise 57 tents, or households, organized into small camps numbering two to eight tents each. The Phala nomads herd yaks, sheep, goats, and horses, residing throughout the year at sites ranging from 16,000 to 17,500 feet in elevation. Living at such heights makes them the highest resident native population known in the world.

WE KNEW that the nomad herders of Tibet had undergone excruciating changes since 1959, when the Dalai Lama fled to India in exile. First there had been the closing of monasteries, then the Cultural Revolution, with its insane violence and its enforced communes. Then in 1980-81 China reversed itself and implemented the so-called "responsibility" economic system, which restored the family as the basic unit of production.

One day not long after we arrived in Phala, we heard our first account of this from Wanam, a devout Buddhist and head of one of the wealthier families in the area before the Cultural Revolution. Wanam is a pseudonym,

as are all other names in our story: Policies have changed too often in China over past years, and we would hate to see one of our friends and neighbors punished later for something they told us.

One morning in 1970, Wanam recalled, the local Tibetan leaders of the Cultural Revolution appeared before his tent and ordered him outside.

"They called me a reactionary and a class enemy," he said. "They told me, 'From today on, your animals and goods are confiscated, and you will live under the guidance of the people, just as the poorest of the poor lived in the old society.'

"They ripped off my earring, my rings, my necklace, and took my silver flint striker and bullet holder," Wanam continued. "They also confiscated my new sheepskin robe, saying that it was too good for the likes of a class enemy such as me. In its place they gave me an old worn-out robe."

"What happened to the rest of your family's possessions?" we asked.

"We lost them all," Wanam answered. "At the time my family owned about 1,200 sheep and goats and 100 yaks. The new leaders took everything except 40 goats. They left us only one pot, some barley grain, and a little *tsamba*. And then they took away our fine yak-hair tent, giving us an old, tattered canvas tent in its place." He shook his head.

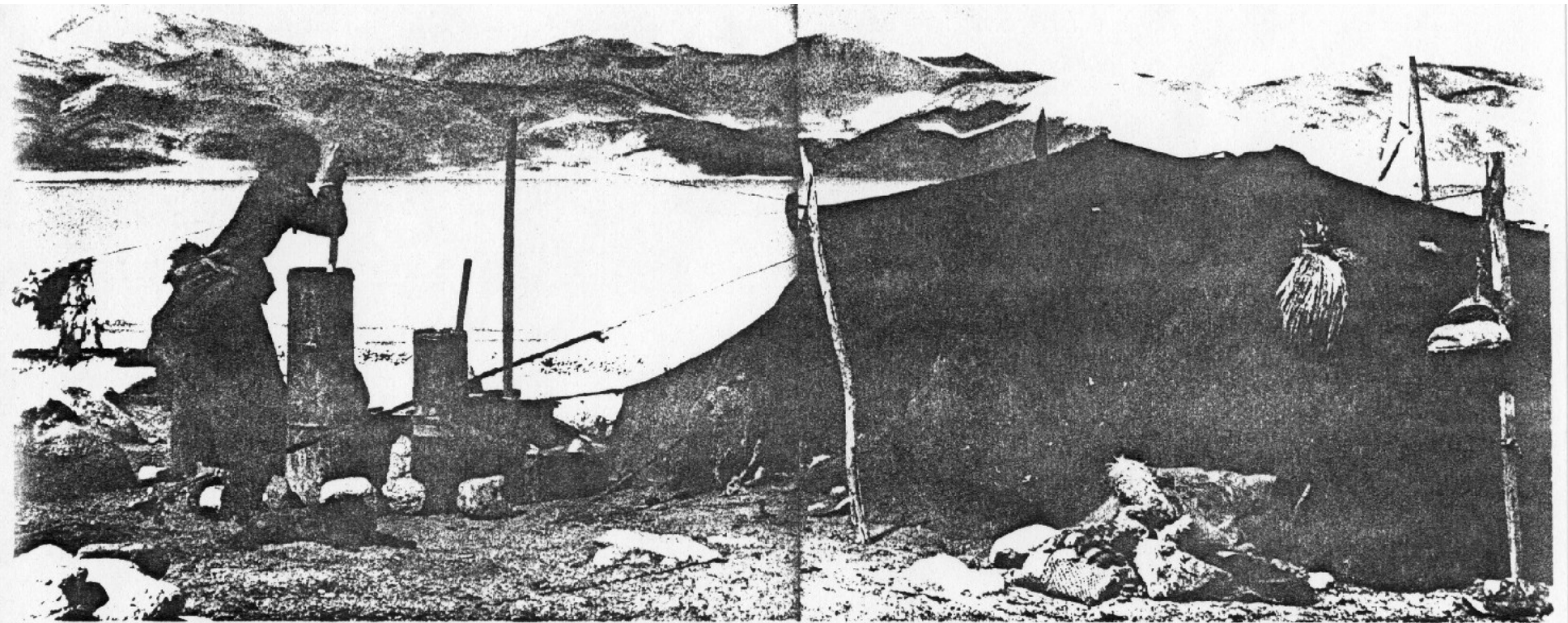
"We were stunned. Our whole life's wealth was eliminated in minutes. We didn't know how we would survive, since the leaders also said we could (Continued on page 764)

Tall in the saddle, six-foot Dr. Melvyn Goldstein rides a yak from camp to camp during summer. In winter he walked to



stay warm. Dr. Cynthia Beall measures blood pressure for a hypertension study. The authors plan to publish a book, *Nomads of Western Tibet*, next year.





Housekeeping beside Motsobunnyi lake, a woman churns yogurt into butter. Added to salted tea, it makes a nutritious beverage drunk as often as 40 times a day. After breaking ice, a woman collects water (right). With lake water too salty to drink, nomads always camp near a spring—in winter seeking one flowing fast enough to prevent the buildup of thick ice.

Devout Buddhist nomads are reluctant to kill an animal. Hence an owner (left, at right) uses hired help to dispatch one of his yaks, though he joins in the butchering.





On a lonely vigil, a woman named Lhamo greets a December day from her tent in the mountains. There she and a younger brother tend yaks while the rest of the family remains in the main camp at a lower elevation.

Most of the world's nomadic peoples keep their animals in valleys during the winter and move them to mountains in summer. Tibetan nomads reverse this with their yaks, which graze in winter on a particular sedge plant plentiful at higher elevations.

At the relatively advanced age of 31, Lhamo remains unmarried. She wanted to wed, but her widowed father asked her to remain at home, and her suitor declined to join her father's household. Though she could have defied her father, her decision to stay reflects the strength of parental authority.

not join the people's commune but had to fend for ourselves" from people who, perhaps a few thousand years ago, began to move their herds around

As her children watch, a woman applies

for ourselves.

In fact, Wanam and his family survived only on the meager yield from their milk goats and by doing odd jobs for the commune that they were not allowed to join. Finally, two years later, the leaders relented, and Wanam's family joined the commune.

At 50 Wanam is once again one of the wealthiest nomads in Phala. His recovery typifies the economic and cultural rebirth of the Tibetan nomads after the disastrous decade of enforced communes.

Pastoral nomadism developed relatively late in human history, about 8,000 to 9,000 years ago. The nomads of Phala are descended

years ago, began to move their herds around the Chang Tang, converting the energy locked in wild grasses into food, clothing, and shelter.

THE NOMADS CONTINUE to flourish because they have no competitors. Even with modern technology farmers cannot grow crops in the extreme high altitude and bitter climate of the Chang Tang. If there were no nomads on the high plateau, it would revert to wild animals, not to other humans. Yet the nomads feel their way of life is far easier than that of farmers.

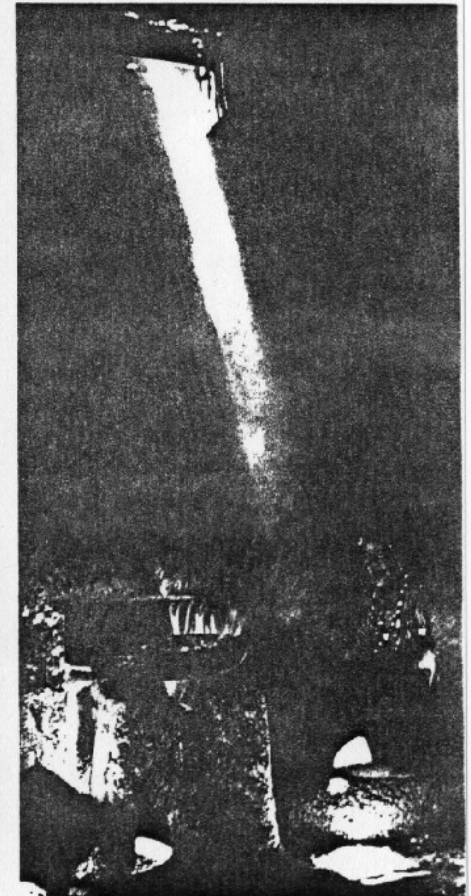
"Look," explained one, "it is obvious that we have a very easy life. The grass grows by



ada, a lotion made by boiling whey into a concentrate. A salve to protect the skin, it is also used for beautification.

Although they keep their tents, wealthy nomads also build permanent homes. In a newly built structure (below), a woman tends a fire as sunlight streams through a smoke hole. In the pan, barley obtained from traders is roasted on sand to keep it from scorching.

As his daughter plays with a baby goat (below left), a man uses a hand mill to grind roasted barley into a flour called tsamba. A dietary staple, tsamba can be eaten dry, stirred into tea, or mixed with tea and butter to form patties.



they give milk and meat without our doing anything. So how can you say our way of life is hard?"

Although they are looked down upon by farmers and townfolk as simple, uncouth, and backward and although they have little in the way of material possessions, the nomads see themselves as masters of their environment and are proud of the leisurely life such mastery provides.

"We don't build canals to irrigate pastures, and we don't build fences and sow seeds to grow more grass," another nomad remarked. "They tried to make us do this during the Cultural Revolution, but that is not our way. The Chang Tang is a ferocious place. One minute the air is calm and the sun is shining, the next it is hailing. It isn't possible to try to control and alter the Chang Tang. We don't try; instead we use our knowledge to adjust to it."

Traditionally the nomads had a remarkable pasture-management system that allowed them to live a secure existence without destroying their grassland resource base.

extraordinary cold, deadly blizzards, unpredictable rainfall, and occasional catastrophic epidemics maintained livestock numbers below the region's maximum carrying capacity. However, while such a "natural" balance could operate over a large region, it could not always prevent overgrazing and degradation on specific local pastures. Before 1959, when the Chinese took control, the nomads divided the region into scores of discrete pastures registered in a "pasture book," each pasture being permitted only a specified number of livestock—seven goats or six sheep were equal to one yak in this calculation. Every three years a livestock census was taken, and families whose herds had increased received additional pastures while those whose herds decreased relinquished some. Occasionally whole families and their herds were shifted to nearby regions to maintain the balance. In this manner the nomads' grasslands were conserved despite the centuries of continuous use.

THE NOMADS LIVE primarily on food derived from their herds, milk products being one of their main sources of calories. Although yaks, sheep, and goats all provide milk, the sheep do so for just three summer months and the goats for four and a half. The nomads turn much of the summer milk abundance into butter and cheese that can be sold or stored for later use.

Processing dairy products is almost exclusively the responsibility of women. They milk their animals and make yogurt, butter, and cheese. But the backbreaking milking is more than just work. The animals of several families at a campsite are usually tied together, so milking time is also an occasion when the women come together and chat.

Milking invariably brings out their children, who play games beside the animals and often try to help the milkers in sweet and humorous ways. One may try to push back a sheep that has turned out of line, while another earnestly holds the end of the rope that ties the animals head to head while they are milked from behind. Other children pretend they are yaks or antelope, walking around on all fours while holding discarded horns to their heads.

The nomads' herds provide more than dairy products; virtually every part of their animals is used. Sheep provide wool for weaving and barter, meat, stomachs into which butter is

are also a valuable trade item that the nomads barter with distant farmers.

Goats used to be less valuable than sheep because farmers preferred mutton to goat meat. But goats have become more valuable recently with the expansion of the lucrative international market for cashmere, the soft undercoat of cashmere goats.

The yak furnishes the critical muscle power to transport a nomad tent, each half of which weighs about a hundred pounds, excluding the pegs and poles. The yak's fringe of coarse belly hair is the fiber from which the nomads weave the tough tent fabric. The yak also provides a cashmere-type undercoat used for making cloth and ropes, a thick hide used for boot soles, and, of course, lots of meat. A *dri* (a female yak) also furnishes eight times as much milk per year as a goat and 16 times as much as a sheep, and does so year-round.

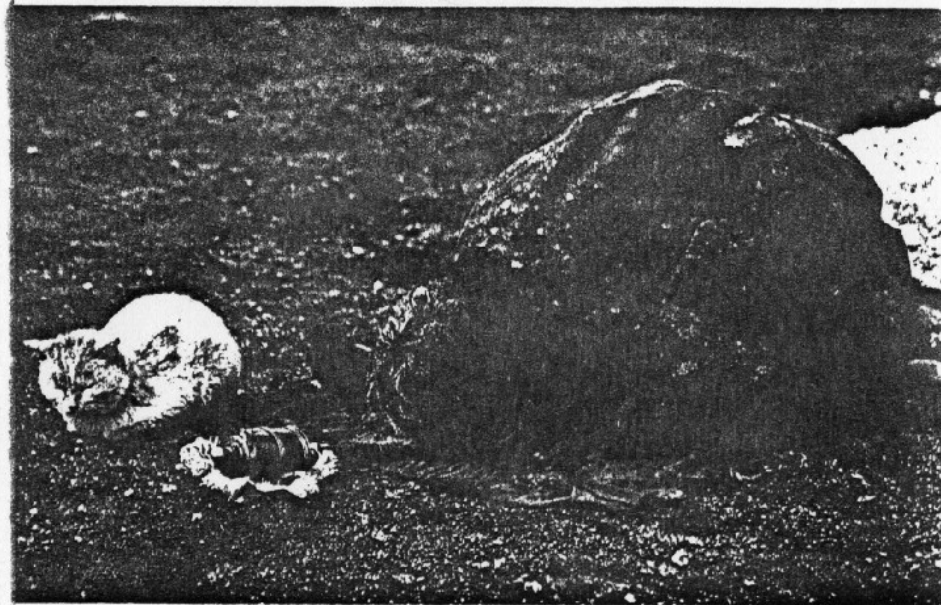
The nomad economy has two other significant components. Since time immemorial Tibetan nomads have been the main source of salt for the villagers and town dwellers of

of Nepal and Bhutan. Phala men take a salt-collecting trip in spring, driving their animals 140 miles northwest to Lake Drabye, a trek of 20 to 30 days each way. We joined them at Lake Drabye, though we drove there by jeep rather than making the two-month trip with the pack animals.

Though yaks can carry four to six times the weight of sheep, few of the Phala nomads have enough male yaks for that purpose, so most of the pack animals are goats or sheep. These can each carry loads up to 30 pounds in saddlebag contraptions like the ones that hikers strap to their dogs. The sheep and goats sleep with the saddlebags on, relieving their owners of the time-consuming task of loading and unloading scores of animals each day.

At the lake the nomads camp on the white salt pans, which look like vast snowfields. The entire process of gathering the salt has been worked out to the last detail. One nomad explained the strategy.

"On the trip to the lake," he said, "we go very leisurely so that our animals can maintain

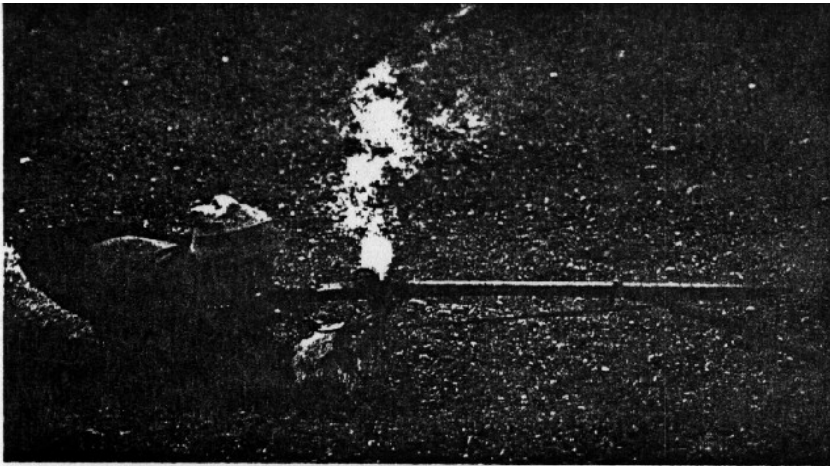


In worshipful repose with her prayer wheel, a woman bows toward the local mountain god, Dargo, the nomads' protector. Such open displays of faith have increased since 1980, when the Chinese eased a ban on religion. A young boy (facing page) openly displays his love of yogurt.



Marching stolidly over the empty land, a train of yaks carries the authors' belongings. Although the nomads rely heavily on sheep and goats, the yak is their quintessential domesticated animal, making life on the Chang Tang possible.

Besides their carrying capacity, yaks furnish abundant milk, meat, hide for boots, and hair for making tents, cloth, and rope. Only castrated males are called yaks by the nomads; a bull is a bo, and a cow is a dri. So vital is the animal to the economy that the nomads' generic name for the beast is nor, meaning "wealth."



Slow on the draw, a hunter uses a matchlock that requires a brace and manual lighting of a wick to ignite the firing powder. Hunting dogs hold game at bay within the musket's limited range. This hunter felled a blue sheep; other quarry are gazelles, Marco Polo sheep, and wild yaks.

their strength. Pasture is a problem, for the new growth of spring grass has yet to begin and we must depend on the grass left over from last summer. At the lake, pasture is even more critical, since there are so many nomads and animals there. Because of this we send a small advance team of four or five men to the lake to dig and collect the salt, so that when we arrive with the animals we can load up immediately and leave the next day."

By the time the animals have arrived, bricks of salt have been stacked to form a corral into which the sheep and goats are driven. Then the grueling job of loading begins. The salt to be taken has already been pounded into small pieces with old yak horns and stuffed into saddlebags, which have been sewn shut. One nomad guards the entrance to the corral while the others, often singing haunting work songs, single out the animals and load each one. The goats and sheep continually try to escape, and at one point I tried to lend a hand.

The first time I grabbed a sheep by its coat to stop it from escaping, I thought it would be easy, since it seemed quite small. Instead, I was pulled right off my feet by an animal that left me flat on the salt bed, panting for breath. Though the lake is only 14,100 feet in elevation, within 15 or 20 minutes I was drenched with sweat and completely exhausted.

ANOTHER FACET of the nomad economy is hunting. The Chang Tang once abounded with antelope, blue sheep, Marco Polo sheep, gazelles, and wild asses and yaks. Hunting by officials with modern rifles and jeeps—banned a few years ago—has reduced the numbers, but there are still many animals, and men still hunt with the traditional matchlock muskets.

One of the best hunters in Phala is Jigme, a taciturn 47-year-old bachelor. We accompanied him and his three hunting dogs on a trip in search of blue sheep.

Jigme's matchlock seemed no threat to wild sheep, and we asked him about it as we trudged up the slopes.

"It is only accurate up to a hundred feet," he acknowledged, "and it takes a very long time to fire."

Jigme was right. Even though he kept his musket loaded with powder and a lead ball, he had to plant the gun on the ground with its brace, light the wick with a spark from his flint striker, and then put the wick to the small powder pan on the outside of the gun, igniting the powder and firing the musket ball.

"By the time I have done all that, the sheep would be long gone," Jigme said. "That is why we always hunt with our dogs; they tilt the odds in our favor."

These sleek dogs, known as *naki* (blue-sheep dogs), are bred especially for hunting, the best being worth a yak in trade. We soon saw why. After a time Jigme spied a flock of ten blue sheep on a mountain slope, and his dogs took off like greyhounds at a racetrack. They bounded up a steep, rocky slope whose base was at just over 18,000 feet and were quickly out of sight.

We followed as best we could, moving toward the sound of the dogs' barking. Jigme, who was always complaining that he couldn't work because his lungs were no good, scrambled up the 45-degree slope at a very fast pace without any rest. We tried to keep up with him, but every few minutes we had to stop and gasp for breath. It was a humbling experience; more than anything else it demonstrated the difference between lowlanders living at high altitude and native highlanders.

High-altitude adaptation is Cynthia's specialty. She points out that in the rarefied atmosphere at 17,000 feet, only about half as many oxygen molecules enter our lungs as at sea level. The effect on lowlanders at high altitude is shortness of breath, headaches, and occasionally even death. These effects have been known for centuries—as early as A.D. 100 a Chinese official visiting the Tibetan Plateau referred to the area as "Headache Mountains."

Just how high-altitude natives such as the Tibetan herders adapt to this environment is an important area for research. We know that the nomads have as much as 22 percent more oxygen-carrying hemoglobin in their blood than do lowlanders, giving both groups roughly the same amount of oxygen on their home grounds. But the natives of the high Andes, whom Cynthia has also studied, typically have greater concentrations of hemoglobin than do the Phala nomads, even though the nomads live at higher elevations. Thus humans may have adapted to life at high altitude in more than one way, and further research is needed to identify the physiological mechanisms.

THE HUNT with Jigme was a modest success. Though the main herd of blue sheep escaped his dogs, he bagged two small ones. However, as Buddhists, many nomads are reluctant to hunt or even to butcher domestic animals. This was brought home to us vividly once when we were out of meat in Wanam's campsite. With a thousand

sheep and goats in front of us, we waited two days until a poor nomad was summoned from a neighboring camp to slaughter an animal.

The revival of Buddhism has made itself felt in other ways. "Last summer," one of the Phala men told us, "traders from outside came and said they would pay high prices for snow leopard or lynx pelts. I wanted some extra money, so I bought two Chinese steel traps and baited them and killed two snow leopards, which I sold to the traders for a good price."

But during the winter the man's wife, who had always been healthy, suddenly fell ill and died. "I now know," the man said sadly, "that Dargo—our powerful mountain-god protector—was angered by my slaughter of those animals for profit. He showed his displeasure by taking my wife from me." Despite the enormous profits involved, from the day of the woman's death trapping for pelts ended in this region.

Neither herding nor salt collection is sufficient for Phala nomads to survive. There is another dimension to their economy—trade. "All our pastoral skills can't give us a good living by themselves," Pemba, a young man and enterprising trader, proudly explained. "Like hunting and salt collection, trade is a job for men. Personally, I think it is the most important skill."

One of the vital commodities for which the nomads must trade is barley, which provides about half their calories. They get the barley, as well as flour and even rice, by bartering their animal products with villagers along the southern edge of the Chang Tang.

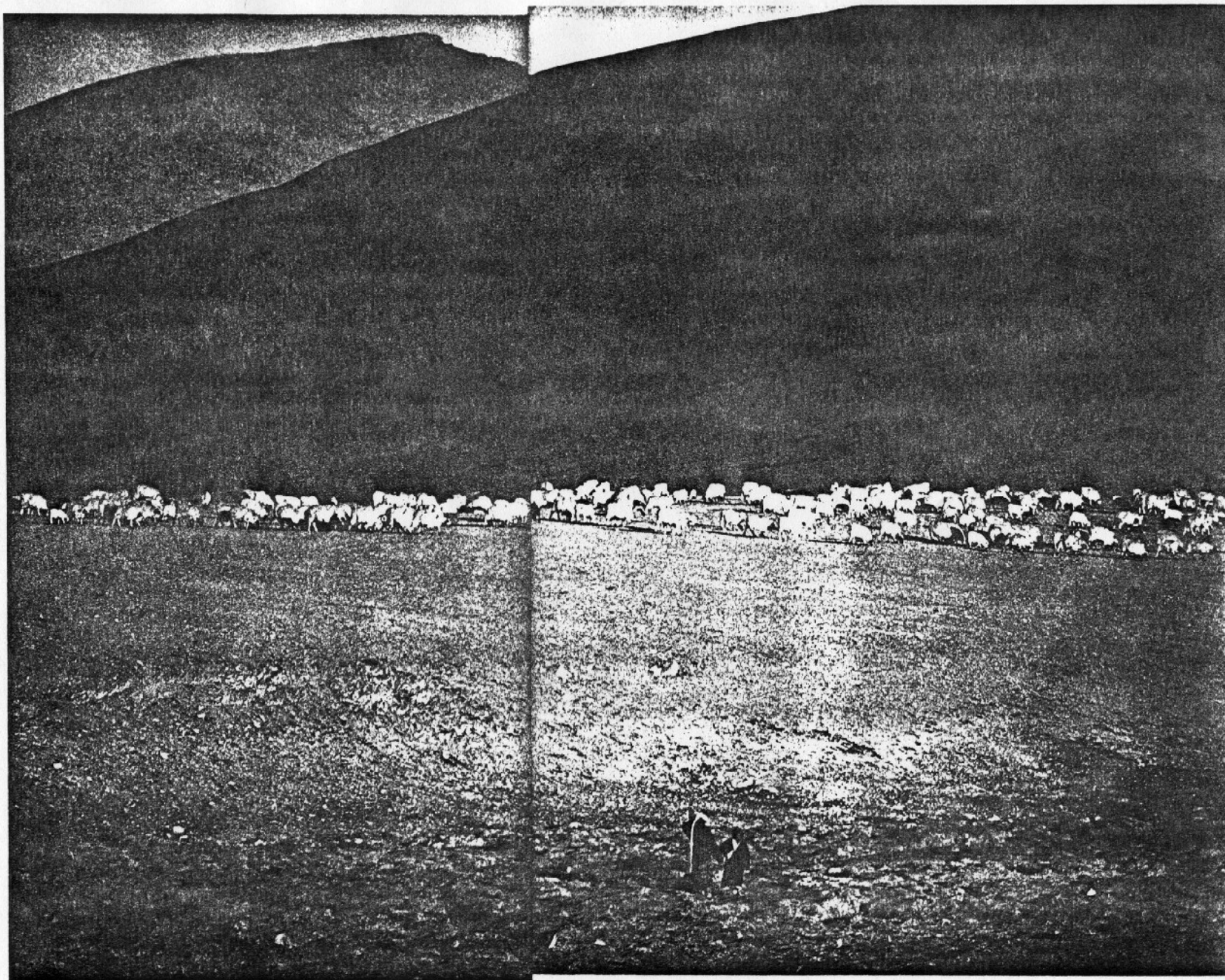
"This trade is no simple matter," Pemba told us. "I have to choose what and how much to take for trade—yaks, sheep, goats, hides, wool, or butter. I have to decide which farming areas to trade with and what rate of exchange to accept. Then I have to make a month-long round-trip with my animals in winter."

Trading skill is highly valued among nomad men, but in the end the key to survival on the Chang Tang is pasture—its availability and conservation.

In mid-September the grasses stop growing and lie dormant until May. Forage dries and turns color, cloaking the plains and mountains with a beautiful yellow-rust hue. However,

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A day in the pasture ends as sheep are led back toward camp for milking. The nomads are skillful in the husbandry of their stock. Ewes and rams are separated until August so that young are born in late winter and early spring. After nursing for several months, lambs are weaned from their mothers in summer, when grass is plentiful, and sent to pasture with another flock. Since a lactating ewe will nurse only her own offspring, the milk is saved for human consumption.



the short growing season creates problems.

"The animals can survive in summer even if the rainfall is poor," a wily old nomad named Dorje explained to us. "But unless there is enough grazing in summer for them to build up stores of fat, many animals cannot survive the harsh winter eating the poor fodder."

For this reason the nomads move their herds in September from the summer camps to pastures one or two days distant that have been left ungrazed for several months. They return to the summer area in December, using the remaining cover of grass that their migration preserved until the new growth of grass begins in early May.

The nomads, therefore, by and large use the same grazing area for winter, spring, and summer. It serves as their home base. There each family's main tent is pitched, and rich families build small storerooms. When the family must move its herds to a pasture beyond the daily range of that base, the husband and wife prefer to remain with the main tent. If possible, adolescent children or hired hands take the animals to a smaller camp in the more distant pasture.

There are ten such home-base camps scattered throughout Phala's 250 square miles of territory. Moving between their home base and fall pasture, these nomads never reside together in a single large settlement.

The nomads of Phala have no romantic illusions about moving. One experienced woman herder echoed the sentiment of almost all nomads when she told us, "We only move when we feel we must." And then they can only move to their own pastures.

A local official explained, "Every pasture in our area is named and given to a family or a small group of families, which has exclusive rights over it. We are allowed to use another group's pasture for one night while moving, but not longer. This is as true of Phala today as it was during traditional times."

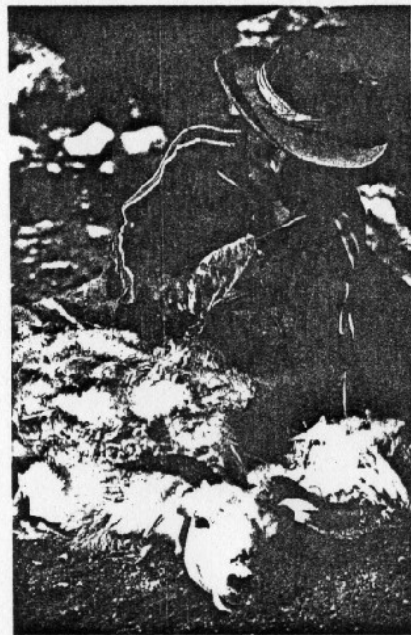
BY "TRADITIONAL TIMES" the nomads mean the period before 1959, when the Dalai Lama fled into exile. We spent numerous hours sipping butter tea in smoky tents and talking to elderly nomads about that "old society" as they now call it.

"In the old society," said Trinley, the old nomad who feared for our ability to survive the Chang Tang, "we were part of a larger

administrative unit of nomad groups. We all belonged to the Panchen Lama," he added, referring to Tibet's second most powerful lama, who died this year. He remained in Tibet when the Chinese took control.

"The Panchen Lama," Trinley continued, "owned areas and appointed officials to settle disputes and collect taxes. He was our lord, although he never came here himself. Our taxes were heavy in those days, but we never went hungry."

Nomad society was similar to that of medieval Europe and tsarist Russia. Though they owned their herds, nomad families were not free to leave their area. They were hereditarily bound to their lord and land and paid taxes to the Panchen Lama according to the number of animals they owned. On the other hand the



Using time-honored but tedious methods, a nomad shears a sheep with a stone-sharpened iron knife. The finished product is displayed at right. Local officials force the nomads to sell as much as 75 percent of their wool to the Chinese government in an unauthorized form of taxation. With growing world demand, cashmere, the soft undercoat of cashmere goats, now rivals sheep's wool in the economy.





As days grow short, a woman bales grass for winter fodder for horses, prized as luxury animals. Left ungrazed throughout summer, a section of communal grassland is opened for a week's unlimited cutting. At night traders sell their wares, offering shoes, saddles, and cassette players for listening to music and Buddhist prayers.



Tsatsay, three days' walk south of Phala, can truck in large quantities of grain and other staples. More and more Phala nomads, therefore, now skip the arduous winter trading trip, bartering instead with the government office at Tsatsay.

The opening of the roads also has facilitated the construction of storerooms and houses at the nomads' home-base campsites. There are no trees on the Chang Tang, and all wood, even for small items such as tent pegs, must be brought from elsewhere. Now large wooden beams and pillars are easily imported by truck from southeast Tibet at relatively low prices, leading to a house-building boom.

The nomads see no contradiction between having a house and being *drokba*. Rich nomads often slaughter 50 to 75 animals in

December and have difficulty storing the meat and skins (together with their saddles, packs, and other equipment). So they have always built storerooms. Residential houses at the home base were rare in the old days, but prized. As one nomad explained, "Houses completely cut out the wind and are much warmer than tents. They make the long winter less difficult for us, and everyone wants one."

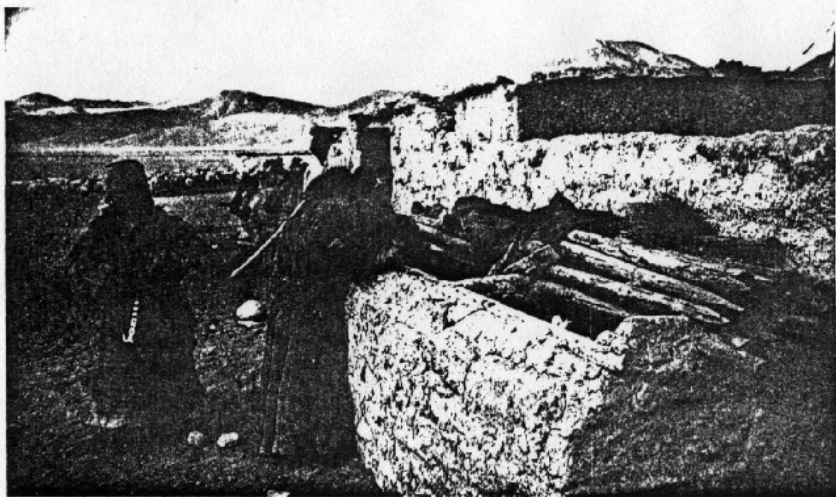
A house, for the nomads, is a substitute for the home-base main tent, and the nomads see it as a symbol of their newfound affluence, not a loss of their identity.

The important changes brought about by the road have had little effect on the attitudes and perceptions of the nomads, who still know little of the tremendous political and economic transformation that has taken place in the rest

of China. They do not know, for example, the name of the head of the Tibet Autonomous Region, let alone the leaders in Beijing. No one speaks Chinese, and the district administrative center teaches only Tibetan to the few children sent to its primary school.

The new policies, however, have not benefited all, even though everyone had an equal start in 1981 when the commune ended. As in the old society, lesser degrees of skill and bad luck have seen some nomads lose most of their livestock and forced them to work as herders for others. They receive room and board, some clothes, and 12 sheep for a year's work, but have a much harder life than the newly rich nomads who employ them. And this gap between rich and poor will undoubtedly increase.

Taking pains to protect livestock, a woman places a baby goat in a pen designed to keep newborn animals warm at night. To ward off dust, a man with chronic eye problems wears goggles usually used to prevent snow blindness as he tends a corral for adult animals. Traditional leggings sewn onto sneakers reflect the nomads' willingness to accept some trappings of modern society, while holding fast to ways that have served them well for centuries.



Despite the antiquity of the nomads' pastoral system, the government believes that it leads to overgrazing and environmental degradation. It therefore has set limits on the number of animals per person in some areas, while forcing periodic reductions in herd size in others. In Phala a 20 percent reduction was implemented in 1987 despite the nomads' protestations that there was no shortage of grasses.

The nomads perceive this as a bias against their pastoral system and worry that it could lead to even more inappropriate programs that will impose new patterns of herding that would ultimately destroy their way of life.

Our research supports the nomads' contention that the government's order to reduce livestock in Phala was unwarranted. We found no evidence of overgrazing and pasture degradation.

Preserving the unique environment of the Chang Tang is not only a Chinese but also a world concern, and protection of the indigenous people who reside there is equally important. It would indeed be ironic if after surviving the destructive Cultural Revolution, these nomads' way of life was destroyed

by modern notions of conservation and development that are based on faulty evidence and flawed assumptions.

The most striking feature of nomad society today is the powerful revitalization of traditional values and customs and the deep commitment to the traditional way of life. For example, the nomads are again proud that they do not eat fish (though many camp on the shores of lakes teeming with fish), or fowl, or vegetables, or wild asses, or meat from animals killed by women—these all being things that "drokba do not do."

The nomads of Phala like their religion and way of life and want to maintain them in the years ahead, choosing to incorporate or to ignore new items as they see fit. Deeply resenting government interference, they want nothing more than to be allowed to live as their ancestors did and to flourish or fail as their gods and their own abilities dictate.

Thus, despite the attempt to destroy the Phala nomads' values and beliefs during the Cultural Revolution, for now, and for the foreseeable future, the nomadic pastoral way of life is alive and well on the Chang Tang, and all of us are richer for it. □



