

BODHI TIMES

Benevolent Organisation for Development, Health & Insight (BODHI)

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About the nomads

Due to the popularity of the Revolving Sheep Bank, we thought you'd like to get to know nomads in the Pala area of Tibet. Thanks to Prof. Melvyn C. Goldstein and Dr. Cynthia Beall for permission to use much of the following text and the photographs from their book, Nomads of Western Tibet.

Tibet's nomads represent one of the last examples of the nomadic pastoral way of life once common in the world. Nomadic pastoralism flourishes in Tibet because the nomads have no competitors, unlike other well-known areas in Southwest Asia and Africa.

Sudden gusts can blow a rider off his horse

This part of the western Changtang is one of the coldest and most inhospitable on earth, even though Pala, where the Revolving Sheep Bank operates, lies at the same latitude as New Orleans and Cairo. It is not a vast level plain, but many valleys and plains separated by twisting mountain ridges. The average altitude is 16,000 feet. The average temperature is below 32 degrees F on more than 200 days per year—and colder with the wind-chill factor. Temperatures can reach 100 F in the summer. Diurnal variation is huge. Temperatures can range from 100 F to a night-time low of 32F—freezing in one day.

Extreme high altitude and bitter climate preclude agriculture as a viable economic alternative. The growing season is too short and the weather far too unpredictable.

Nomads' mastery of their environment consists of strategies, developed over many centuries, of accommodating to their environment rather than trying to alter or transform it. Their animal management system, balancing livestock and pastures, has allowed them to live here for centuries without destroying their resource base.

This system has also enabled the nomads to live here despite the bleak environment and a brief four-month growing season. For 8 to 9 months of the year, livestock graze on dried vegetation left standing at the end of the growing season, during which nomads rotate livestock to allow vegetation to regenerate.

Sheep have adapted to high-altitude life with more haemoglobin and larger lungs than lowland sheep, as well as a dense and long coat of wool.

Goats also thrive here, with higher hemoglobin, more red cells, and respiratory rates 4 to 5 times faster than their low-altitude relatives. They provide more milk than sheep, and for longer. Traditionally they were less valuable than sheep (there was no market for cashmere and villagers preferred mutton), but increasing demand for cashmere is changing this.

Economically, sheep are the nomads' most valuable animal. They provide meat, cheese, wool, and the skins and fleece used for their 20-pound robes. These robes have very long sleeves, which function as mittens. Nomads use yak, sheep and goat dung for fuel because there are no trees.

Traditionally, these nomads were the subjects of the Panchen Lama, to whom they paid taxes and provided corvée labour. As long as they fulfilled these obligations, they were free to do as they wished. Chinese economic and

cultural policies imposed a communal way of life until the 1980s, when nomads rebuilt the foundations of their traditional life.

A spirit of sharing and cooperation within families contrasted with strong independence between families. They were self-contained units which hired poor nomads rather than negotiating with neighbours to share tasks such as herding.

Home values

Parental respect within families is strong, with parents controlling such diverse activities as daily herding and marriage partner choices.

Not all nomads accompany herds to new pastures. They value remaining at their home-base encampment, which is located near good water sources and vegetation and occupied 8-9 months per year. To them, nomadism means practicing no farming rather than moving their herds or living in tents. "We suspect that if they knew English they would have no objection to being classified as ranchers," say Goldstein and Beall.



L: Weak or small babies obtain extra nourishment by suckling from a female whose baby has died.

R: Fresh butter ladled from a churn. Nomads consume virtually no milk per se, but turn it into lighter weight, more transportable products. They can get as much as 7 gallons of milk per day.

Good news for a change

BODHI Times 21 pointed out that both the U.S. and Australia governments are very stingy aid donors. Professor Jeffrey Sachs, head of the Center for International Development at Harvard University, concurs.

The Sachs Report

“The most amazing fact of all this in my view is how the very richest country in the world, the United States, my own country, has failed to engage on this issue. As the U.S. calls on the world for help, for solidarity, for community, the simple fact of the matter is that the world’s richest, greatest, most technologically advanced, most powerful country does the least as a share of its income on behalf of the world’s poor. And what’s more, that share has been falling for the last two decades, not rising.

“The U.S. foreign assistance program has fallen so decisively that U.S. aid as a share of our GDP is now 0.07 of 1% of our national income, **in other words, one tenth of the international norm.** Were the U.S. to honor (that) we would have an additional 60 billion dollars per year to address the problems of the world’s poor. **And to make the world a much more safer and much more equitable home for all of us.**

“We are foolhardy if we think that we can solve the problems of terrorism or any other of the conditions of our global society if millions of people are dying unnecessary deaths of terrible and yet treatable disease which undermine society, undermine moral and demonstrate the gross inequities of our world.”

[The U.N. conference on poverty and development was held in March in Monterrey, Mexico. Many world leaders attended, though none from Australia. The meeting was scarcely noticed. President Bush announced a new aid fund, an extra \$5 billion annually, from 2004. If the U.S. delivers on this promise, it will raise its aid budget to barely 0.1% of its GDP, a tenth that of the Scandinavian nations and Holland.]

Sachs also recently chaired the World Health Organization’s Commission on Macroeconomics and Health. This commission, formed to investigate the links between health and economic development, argued that a far greater investment in Third World health would be handsomely repaid by greater economic growth. It called on poor and rich countries to share the burden of

increasing health expenditure, and for donor countries to provide \$27 billion annually by 2007 and \$38 billion annually by 2015, compared with an estimated \$6 billion for health in 2001. The Commission’s report points out that donor funding needs to continue for two or more decades and must include payment for salaries and systems support.

Although \$27 billion by 2007 seems a large amount, this represents only around one-tenth of 1% of the donor countries’ GNP. Overseas developmental assistance is now around \$53 billion, just 0.2% of GNP of the donor countries, compared with a long-standing international target of 0.7% of GNP established by the U.N. General Assembly in 1970. Sachs asserts that if every high-income citizen of the world denied themselves the equivalent of a bag of popcorn and a movie per year, the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB, and malaria could be supported at recommended levels.

Many others leaders have called for a fairer and safer world. This coalition of famous and like minds dominated the recent World Economic Forum and included the World Bank’s James Wolfensohn, Bill Gates (whose foundation has now given away an amount equivalent to twice the annual budget of the World Health Organization), the Irish rock star, Bono, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and even the International Monetary Fund. The U.S. and Australian governments remain out of step, apparently as complacent of the risks to themselves as they are indifferent to the suffering of others.

Good news on global population?

Global population growth rates peaked at just over 2% per annum in the late 1960s. However, the absolute increase to the global population continued to rise, reaching a peak of almost 90 million per annum in the late 1980s. (Because the global population in 1990 was so much larger than in the 1960s—five billion compared to 3.5 billion—this increment was a smaller fraction of the world population than was the annual increase in the 1960s). Recent evidence hints that the global demographic transition (the shift from having many children where several are expected to die to only one or two who generally survive) is accelerating faster than optimists had hoped. Global population may peak below eight billion.

On the down side, increasing evidence shows that malnutrition and environmental

pollution cause significant cognitive impairment to many of the Third World’s poorest people. About 33% of children under 5 years of age in developing countries have growth retardation. This rises to over 50% in some least-developed countries. A recent study in Peru found that children with severe stunting in the second year of life scored 10 points lower on IQ tests than children without severe stunting. Thus, many of the world’s poorest people face an additional burden in order to escape from poverty.

Suzuki on overpopulation

Responding to a question at a recent talk in Hobart, Tasmania, the Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki declined to identify over-population as a major global problem. He argued that overconsumption by wealthy populations is a far more important environmental problem. It is true that a small fraction of the world’s population is currently responsible for most of the world’s ecological footprint. It is also true that attempts by wealthy populations to preach the virtues of smaller family size to poor populations are morally repugnant and unlikely to succeed.

However, it is also desirable, from a human rights position, to greatly increase the living standards of the poor. This will increase the global ecological footprint, even with substantial technological transition. The global ecological footprint already poses a major problem. So does global poverty. The only way the size of the poor world’s population will not become a major environmental problem is if it remains materially poor, or—far less probable—if it experiences a degree of technological leaping, which currently seems fantastic. Advocates for improved living standards for the poor should also support policies that reduce birth rates, such as educating women and raising real wages.

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Revolving Sheep Bank FAQs

responses by Prof. Melvyn C. Goldstein

How did the idea originate?

"We started studying this group in detail in 1986 and have returned for follow-up studies every few years ... [Many] nomads are poor and have not been able to break out of poverty since it is hard to get a core herd of animals (there are no loans available to them) and no sources of sideline income available in the area. The nomads also do not want to migrate to cities (and even if they did, there are no jobs there as the cities are full with more skilled Chinese labourers and Tibetan villagers from the farming areas around Lhasa etc.) ... In most of the poverty cases, the government provides just enough welfare to keep them from starving, but it is a bad situation and local officials have been trying to find some way to intervene for some years.

"In one case ... the Swiss Red Cross gave a package of welfare aid to the province these nomads are in. Included was a one-time gift of some animals. In the area we were working, one family got some sheep as a gift and it was a friend of ours. He received a gift of 40 female sheep in 1994 and by 1998 had been able raise himself from among the very poorest in the area to the middle class. It was a wonderful transformation. He now is working twice as hard as before to take care of the animals and is very careful about not killing too many for food, etc.

"Out of this example, we thought that what would really work with nomads such as these was to provide animals to the poor, not as a gift but rather as a revolving sheep bank that could be used to continuously help nomads who are poor."

Aren't wealthy nomads worried about competition for resources if they sell sheep to poor nomads?

"The richer nomads all have to sell some animals normally and we paid a good price so they did well. You must remember that in this region, nomad households have limits on the number of animals they can have based on their herd size in 1996. Social welfare and poverty alleviation are strong social motives and there is an excess of grassland."

Has anyone looked into the environmental effects of sheep grazing on the Tibetan plateau? Why not yaks?

"This is an area with an excess of pasture so overgrazing is not a problem. In this area, the vegetation yak prefer is scarce so only about 10% of herds are yak. Sheep/goats are the main economic engine since they do well and provide needed commodities. In Tibetan nomad areas more toward the east, the vegetation changes somewhat and the proportion of yak increase."

Project Updates

Revolving Sheep Bank. Year 3 is underway, with requests for both sheep and goats.
Sohbar Adult Literacy. "The project is going beautifully," Dr Ghonglah reports.

See next newsletter for details.

BODHI News

BODHI U.S.

15 Ugly Docs ... Dr Martin Rubin, BODHI U.S. director, and some and colleagues are holding a fundraising dance in Northern California in May, 2002. (That's why this newsletter is early.) The purpose of 15 Ugly Docs is to raise funds for the Revolving Sheep Bank. Marty hopes to make this an annual event.

General Meeting ... June 22 in Southern California. Contact us for details.

BODHI Australia

Tax-deductibility ... Finally some good news. BODHI Australia's application for tax-deductible status has made it past the first hurdle. We're now addressing issues raised by the next bureaucratic level of AUSAid ... **Dalai Lama's visit ...** BODHI Australia is underwriting the Dalai Lama's visit to Australia in May, 2002. (Colin and Susan are personally underwriting this so that BODHI Australia incurs no risk.) We hope this will increase awareness and support for BODHI Australia. With the help of volunteers, we're selling posters at all four venues at which His Holiness appears: Melbourne, Geelong, Canberra and Sydney ... **BODHI Australia AGM.** BODHI Australia's Annual General Meeting was held 7 April 2002. Minutes are available on our website.

Thank you ...

15 Ugly Docs, USA (see next newsletter)
Joselyn E Bailey, M.D., USA
Professor Mark & Dian Elvin, Australia
Martyn Neville, Bendigo Bank, Australia
Camerons Chartered Accountants, Australia
Friends' School students, Years 11 & 12, Australia
Deborah Ginsburg, USA
Henry Hallowell III, USA
Dr. Gerry & Sally McGushin, Australia
Dr. Philip Thomson, Australia
Dr. Victoria von Witt, Australia

... and **Audrey and Jack Meltzer, Luiz Ribeiro** and **Jeni Crump** for their generous help during the Dalai Lama's visit to Australia, with accommodation and publicity.

We need your help

Thanks to your generosity, BODHI has supported numerous exciting and innovative projects. Current examples include continuing education for remote health workers, adult literacy—a key to better health—and a micro-credit scheme working with Tibetan nomads called the Revolving Sheep Bank.

In order to continue, we need your support. Please send your donation, payable in US or Australian dollars, to an address below.

US donations tax-deductible

Benevolent Organisation for Development, Health & Insight (BODHI) aims to find sustainable ways to improve health, education and the environment in low-income countries, which we feel is achievable by providing a hook, not a fish.

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Herding: a daily chore

Several households pool their animals and share the work, sometimes hiring herders. Herding within families is a low-prestige job usually done by teenagers and low-status adults, such as unmarried siblings and childless daughters-in-law.

Herding is uncomfortable and boring. Herders work a long day, usually leaving about mid-morning and returning in the evening. Herders are alone all day, with no hot food or drink and no protection against the elements: in summer, rain, sleet and hail; in winter, bitter cold and ferocious winds.

Some herders say that, on the coldest days, they can't speak when they return because their faces are too stiff from the cold, and they can't open the tent door because their hands are too numb to work the wooden toggle that fastens the tent-flap.

Nomads in



Women use backstrap looms to weave bags, belts and clothes.



The milking's done

A 78-year-old woman relaxes in the sun, chatting with children and other milkers, after she finishes milking her few animals.

Perishable to portable

The first step in transforming milk to butter, via yoghurt, is to boil the milk, as done here. Nomads obtained the iron tripod on which the milk sits from villagers, who barter such products for live sheep and goats, wool and skins. Paying for tanning skins is another use of livestock barter. Nomads regard tanning as work for farmers and pay one live sheep for every 10 tanned.

Nomads eat 2 or 3 meals a day, consuming virtually no fruit and vegetables. Nor do they eat fish or fowl, carnivores, rabbits or wild ass. Fifteen foods comprise the entire nomad diet: dairy products (yoghurt, milk, cream, cheese, buttermilk and whey), meat products (animal fat, blood and meat including organ meat), barley, wheat flour, rice, cooking oil and, rarely, dried radish and dried cabbage. They drink a lot of Tibetan tea, flavoured with salt and butter.



Western Tibet



Beasts of burden

Sheep and goats also work as beasts of burden. Tibetan nomads have always been the main source of salt to villagers and townspeople in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim. Each spring they travel 140 miles northwest to Lake Drabye, a 50-60 day roundtrip. Goats and sheep carry loads of 20-30 pounds. Selling the salt requires another long caravan trip to farming villages, where nomads barter salt for grain soon after the villagers have completed their harvest.