

# L I V E S T O C K

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**Yak bull, Langtang, Nepal, 1975 [chapter photo]**

**Y**aks are one of the most important domestic animals found in the pastoral areas of the Himalayan and Tibetan Plateau. Yaks provide milk and milk products, meat, hair and wool, and hides. Yaks are also used as pack and draught animals and for riding. Yak dung is an important source of fuel in an area where firewood is not available. Without the yak it is doubtful if man could live as well as he does in high altitude pastoral areas. The yak makes life possible for man in one of the world's harshest environments.

The wild yak is the progenitor of all yak populations. There is little doubt that the presence of wild yaks, and their later domestication, was the single most important factor in the adaptation of civilization on the Tibetan Plateau. Yaks still play an important role in many pastoral rituals and religious ceremonies. Events such as yak dances signify the vital role that yaks have in pastoral society, not only as a means of daily sustenance, but also for their cultural and spiritual value. Yak herd movements are often integrally linked to religious calendars and monitored by complex social structures.

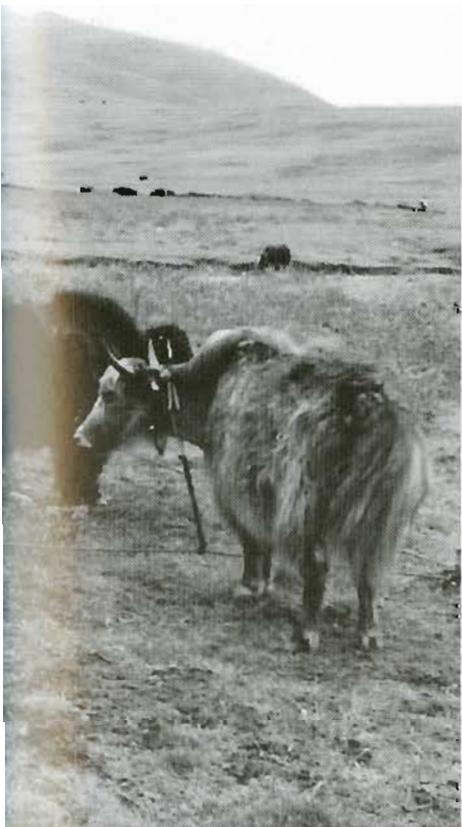
**Yaks tied up for milking, Hongyuan, Sichuan, China, 1996**





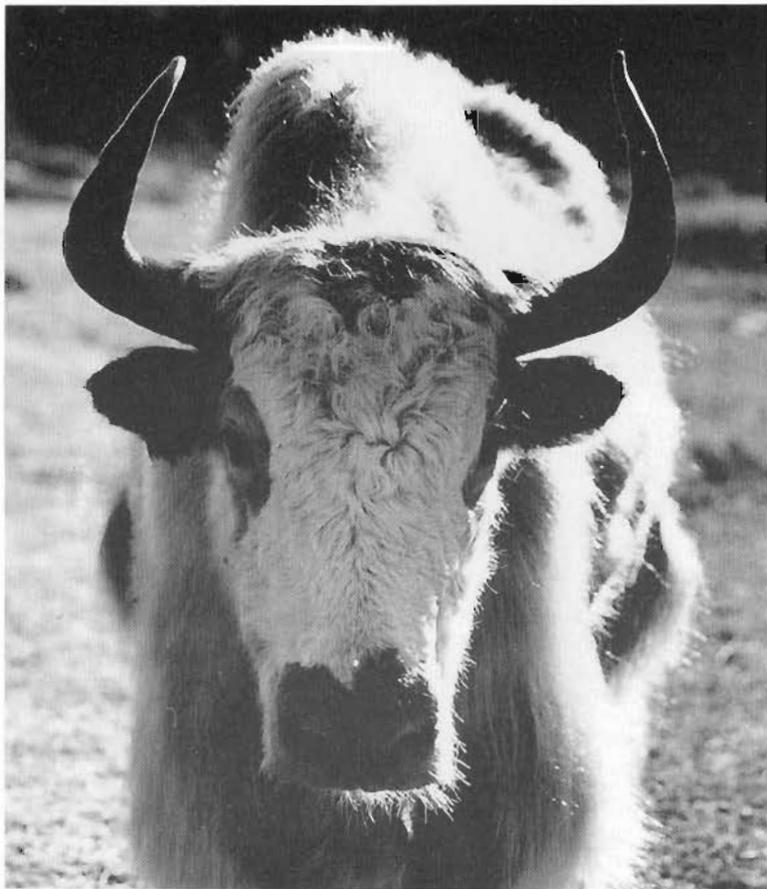
**Riding yak, Hongyuan, Sichuan, China, 1996**

**White yak, Tianzhu, Gansu, China, 1996**





**MILKING yak-cattle hybrid (*dzo-mo*), Phijor, Dolpo, Nepal, 1978**

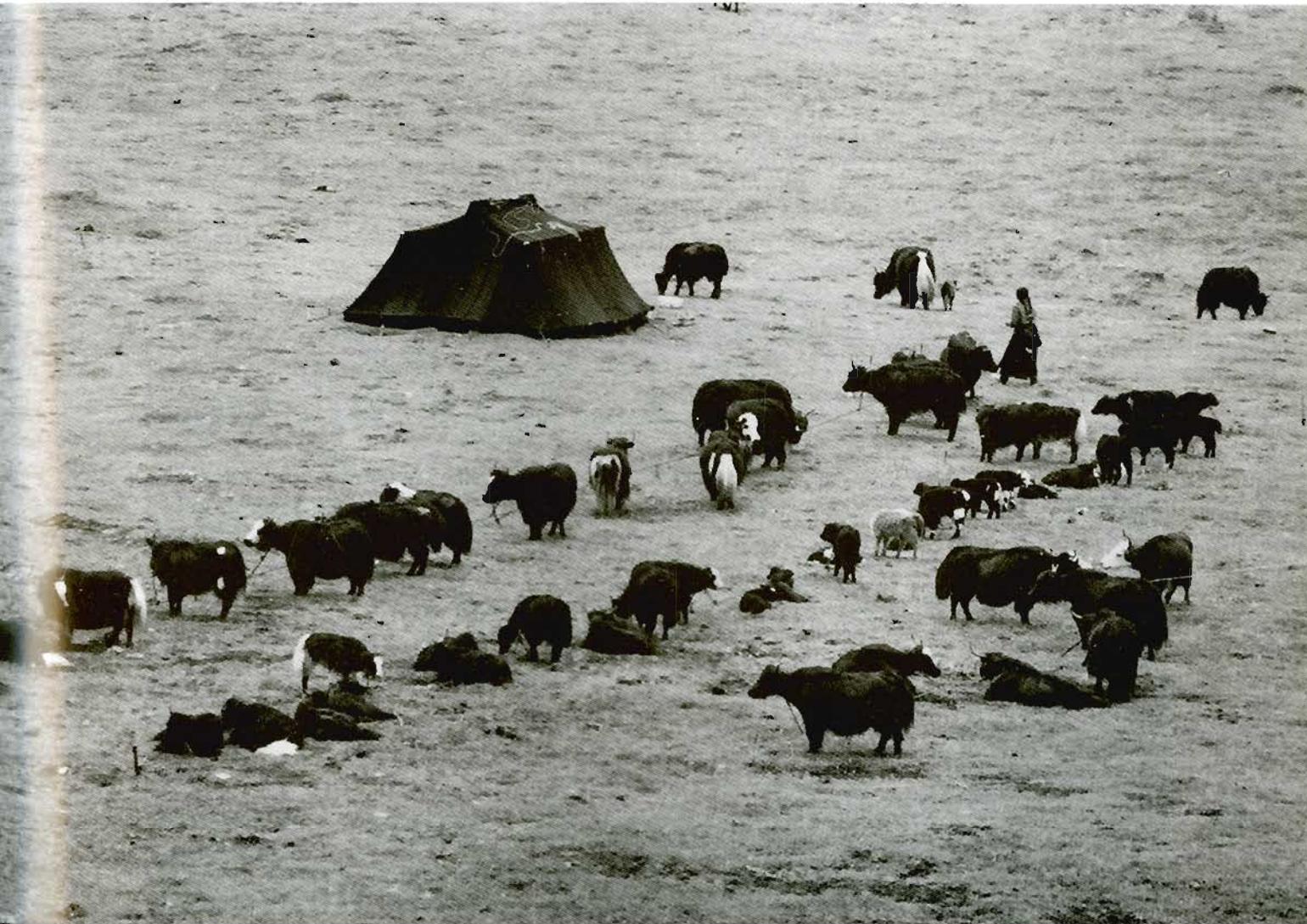


**Yak used for packing supplies, Namche Bazaar, Khumbu, Nepal, 1984**



**Y**ak production systems vary widely across the Tibetan Plateau. In some areas, herders maintain only yaks and, in other regions, both yaks and yak-cattle hybrids are raised. Complex systems for cross-breeding, with specific nomenclature for the different crosses, are also found in yak-raising areas. The wide range of yak production practices is a testimony to the diverse animal husbandry skills yak herders have acquired and the unique adaptations they have made for survival in a harsh environment. Despite these adaptations and skills, yak production today faces many problems. Improving yak productivity is often constrained by inadequate forage, especially in the winter. This leads to poor nutrition, health-related problems, and reduced fertility. Some of the current yak-breeding practices are thought to lead to inbreeding, which lowers yak performance. Although access to pastoral areas is improving, yak herders are often still marginalised; social services are inadequate and outlets to markets for their livestock products are limited. Yak production systems, and especially their socioeconomic characteristics, are still poorly understood. As a result, many development interventions are often inappropriate. All of these issues combine to create considerable challenges to improving yak productivity.

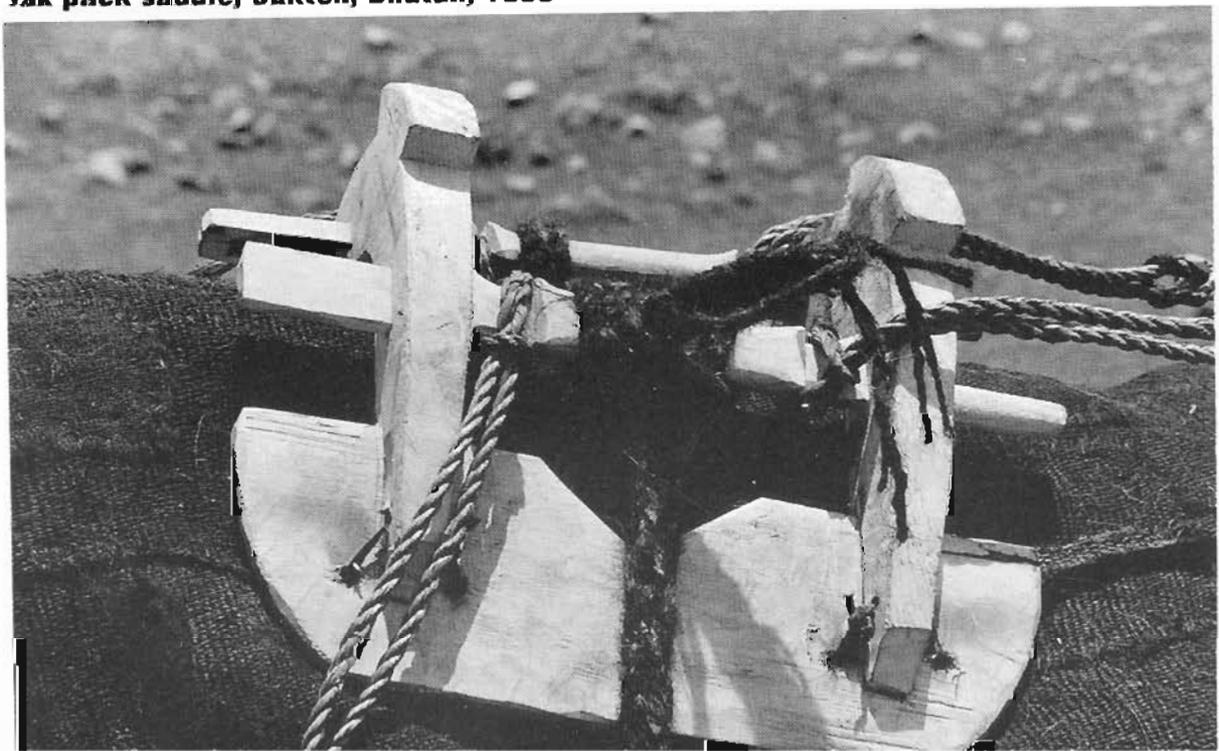
**Nomad camp, Longri, Hongyuan, Sichuan, China, 1996**





**Yaks and yak herders, Mustang, Nepal, 1992**

**Yak pack saddle, Saktien, Bhutan, 1990**





**Y**ak herders have developed local yak types, often recognised as distinct breeds with different characteristics. However, to date, there is little scientific data available about the genetic variations between these breeds. Research needs to be carried out to determine if there are genetic differences among the various yak breeds.

Yaks will continue to be important draught animals in many areas of the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayas for years to come. Improving animal draught power efficiency will be an important challenge for livestock and development specialists in yak pastoral areas.

**Yak hybrid crosses plowing, Zhongdian, Yunnan, China, 1996**





**Yak hybrid cross used for riding, Hongyuan, Sichuan, China, 1997**

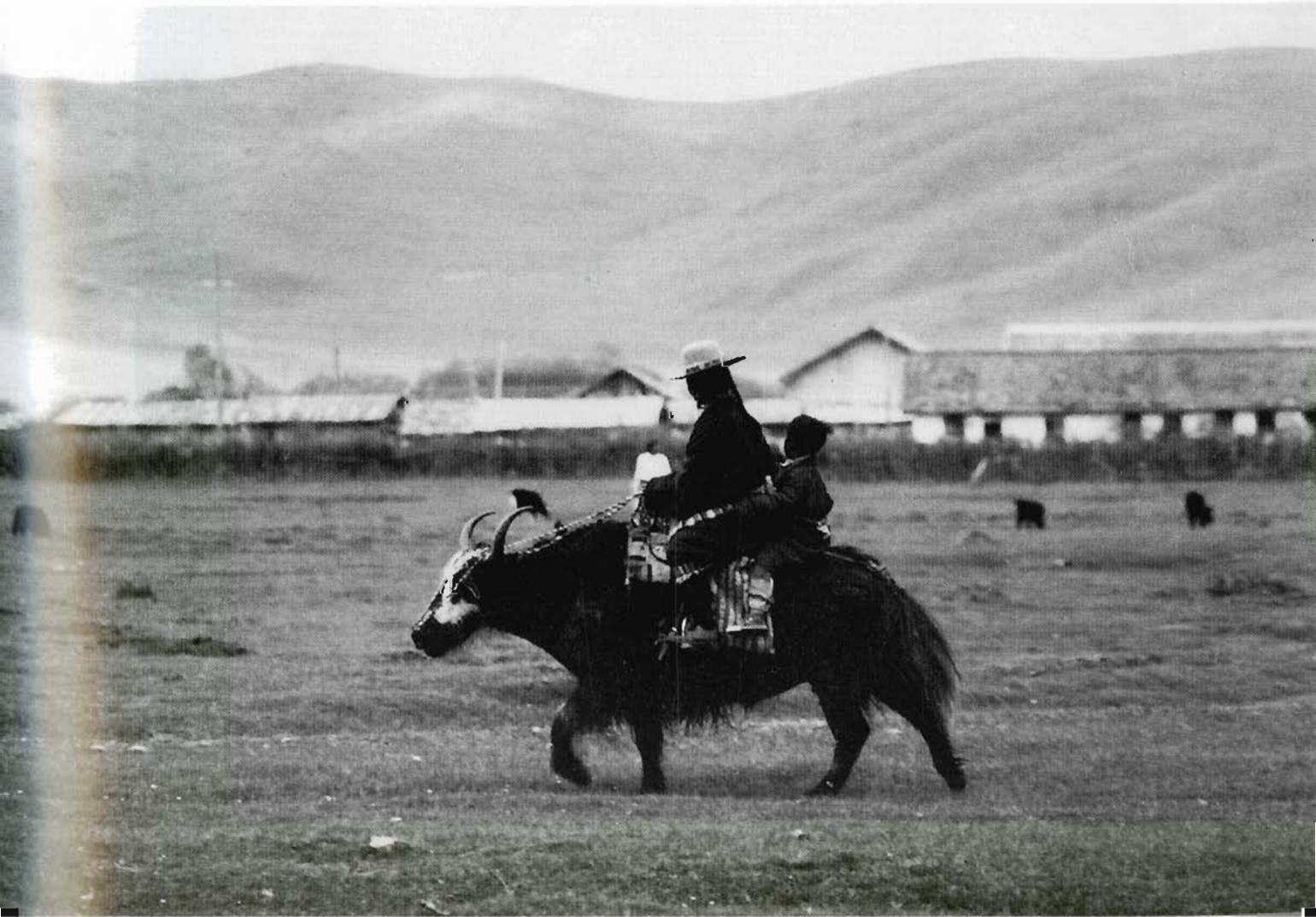
**P**ure-bred yaks and yak crosses are trained to the saddle and used both as pack animals and as mounts. Yaks, once trained, are easily handled, even by women and children. Yak races are held in some parts of Tibet. These events, like their equestrian equivalents, are popular community events wherever and whenever they occur. Yaks and yak-crosses are often ridden in the winter instead of horses since horses tend to be weak at that time of year. Yaks are sure-footed and can travel easily across rough terrain. They can also withstand colder temperatures than horses.



**Y**ak hybrid crosses give more milk than pure-bred yaks and can calve every year. Intricate cross-breeding programmes have been developed by Tibetan yak herders and the various offspring of these crosses and back-crosses have separate terminology. The female hybrids are fertile and can be bred to either yaks or cattle bulls, but male hybrids are sterile.

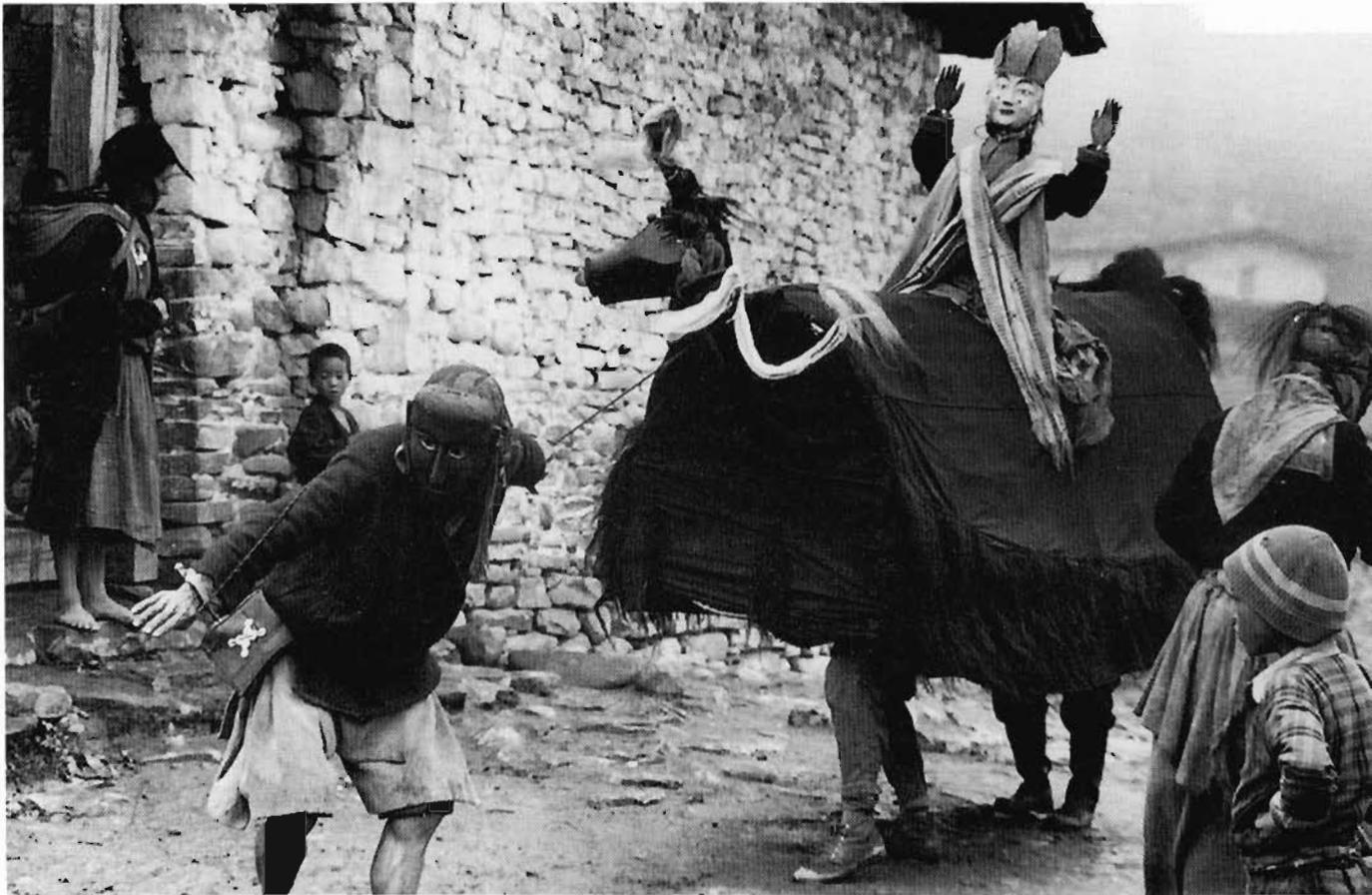


**Riding yak, Maiwa, Sichuan, China, 1996**





**Yak dance, Sakten, Bhutan, 1990**



**I**n addition to providing Tibetan nomads with sustenance, yaks also play an important role in many pastoral rituals and religious festivals. For example, yak dances are held by herders throughout yak-raising regions. These events signify the vital role that yaks play in pastoral society; not only as a means of daily sustenance, but also for their cultural and spiritual values. In many pastoral areas, the community will often set a domestic yak free. This 'god yak', as it is called in Tibetan, is an offering to the local gods, a gift back to the environment which sustains the pastoralists.



**Yak skulls in a *gomba*, Sakten, Bhutan, 1990**

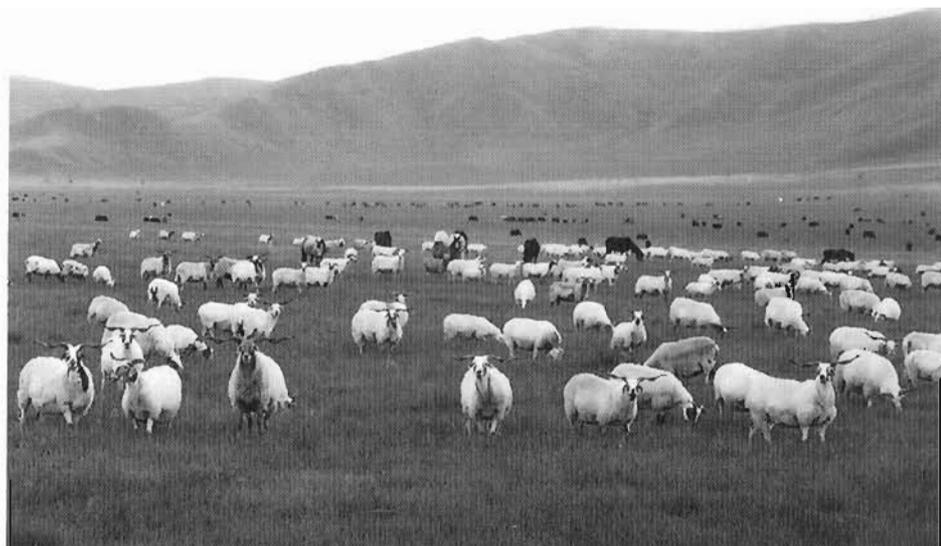


**Yak skull and Tibetan Buddhist prayers, Sakten, Bhutan, 1990**



**Sheep and rangelands, Baingoin, Tibet, China, 1994**

**S**heep are very important animals on the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan rangelands. Although yaks characterise Tibetan pastoralism, sheep are often more important economically in many areas. Sheep provide wool, meat, hides, and, in some areas of western Tibet, sheep are also milked. Sheep meat is the preferred meat among nomads and agricultural people throughout Tibet. The wool from Tibetan sheep ranks among the best carpet wools in the world. Tibetan wool is highly prized in the carpet industry for its great elasticity, deep lustre, and outstanding tensile strength. The fibres of Tibetan sheep wool have an exceptionally smooth surface which reflects extra light, making them more lustrous than wool from other breeds of sheep. These factors help give Tibetan carpets their unique characteristics: the subtle, shaded abrash; supple resiliency; and a potentially radiant patina.



**Fat Tibetan sheep, Zoige, Sichuan, China, 1996**

**Sheep tied up for milking, Phala, Tibet, China, 1997**

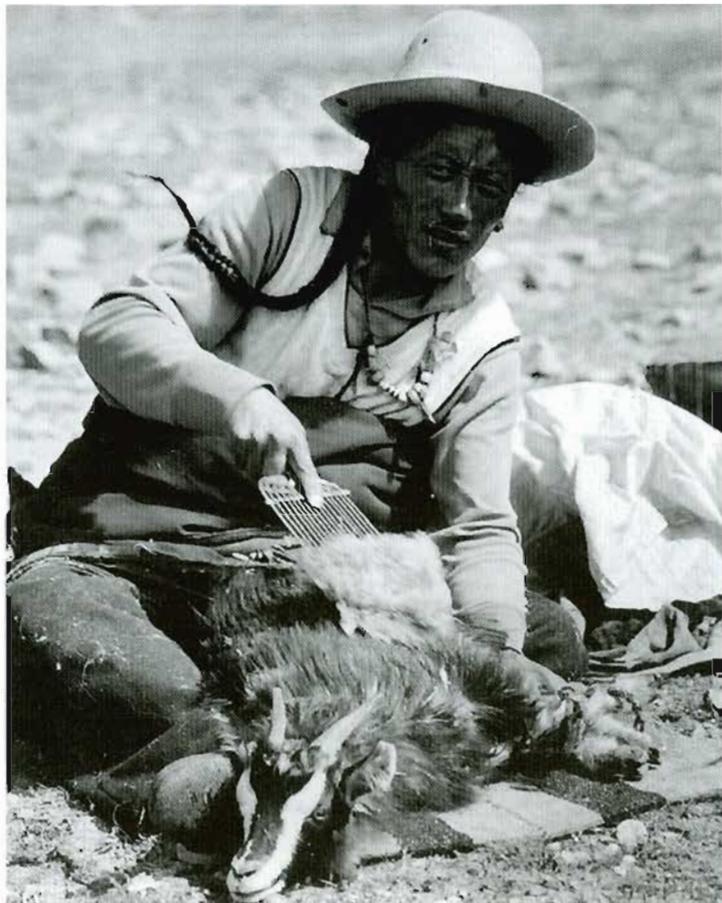




**Goats being milked, Phala, Tibet, China, 1997**

**T**ibetan goats are raised widely in western Tibet and parts of the western Himalayas. These animals are cashmere producing; some of the finest cashmere in the world comes from western Tibet. Kashmir shawls, made from the cashmere of Tibetan goats, became popular in Europe in the late 1700s. Kashmir had a monopoly on the supply of cashmere at the time. The British were eager to enter this profitable business. Early British interests in the northwest Himalayas and Tibet in the late 1700s and early 1800s were often linked to the trade in shawl wool. The fine cashmere from Tibetan goats enjoys a strong reputation even today, as much of Tibet's cashmere is exported to Europe. Goats are also milked by nomads and actually produce milk for a longer period of time than sheep.





**Harvesting cashmere, Phala, Tibet, China, 1997**

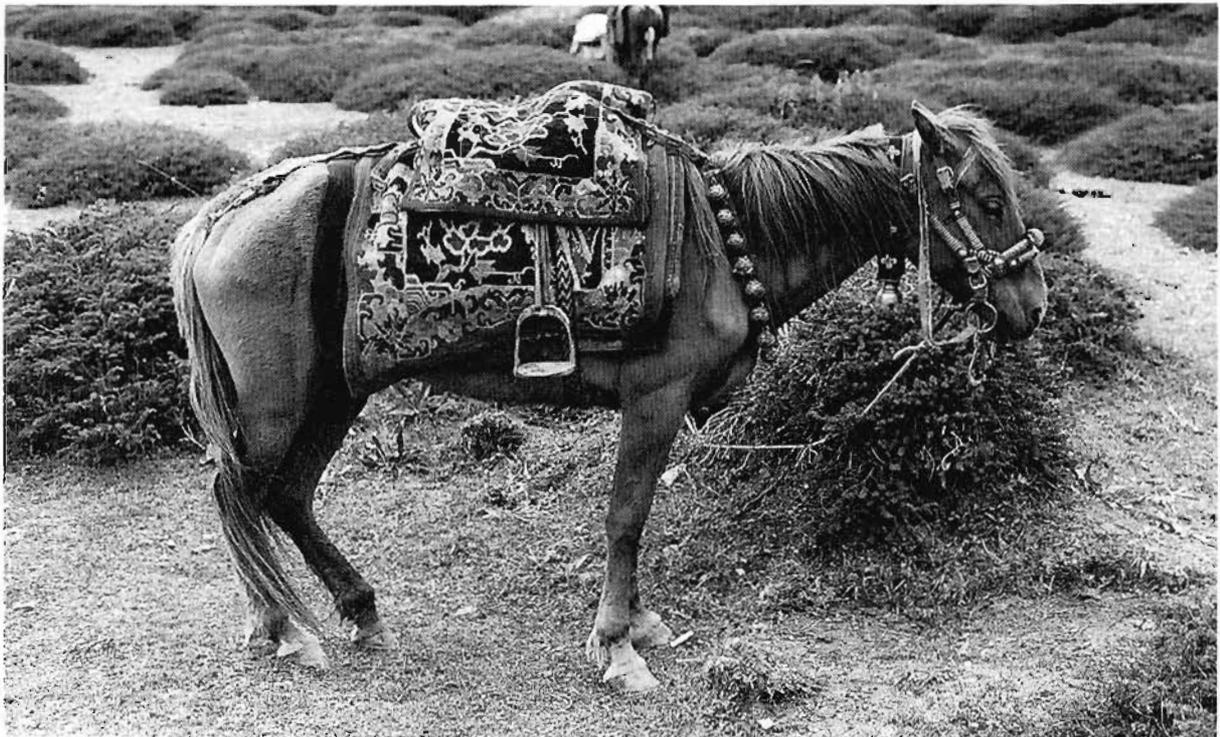
**Goats being milked, Phijor, Dolpo, Nepal, 1978**

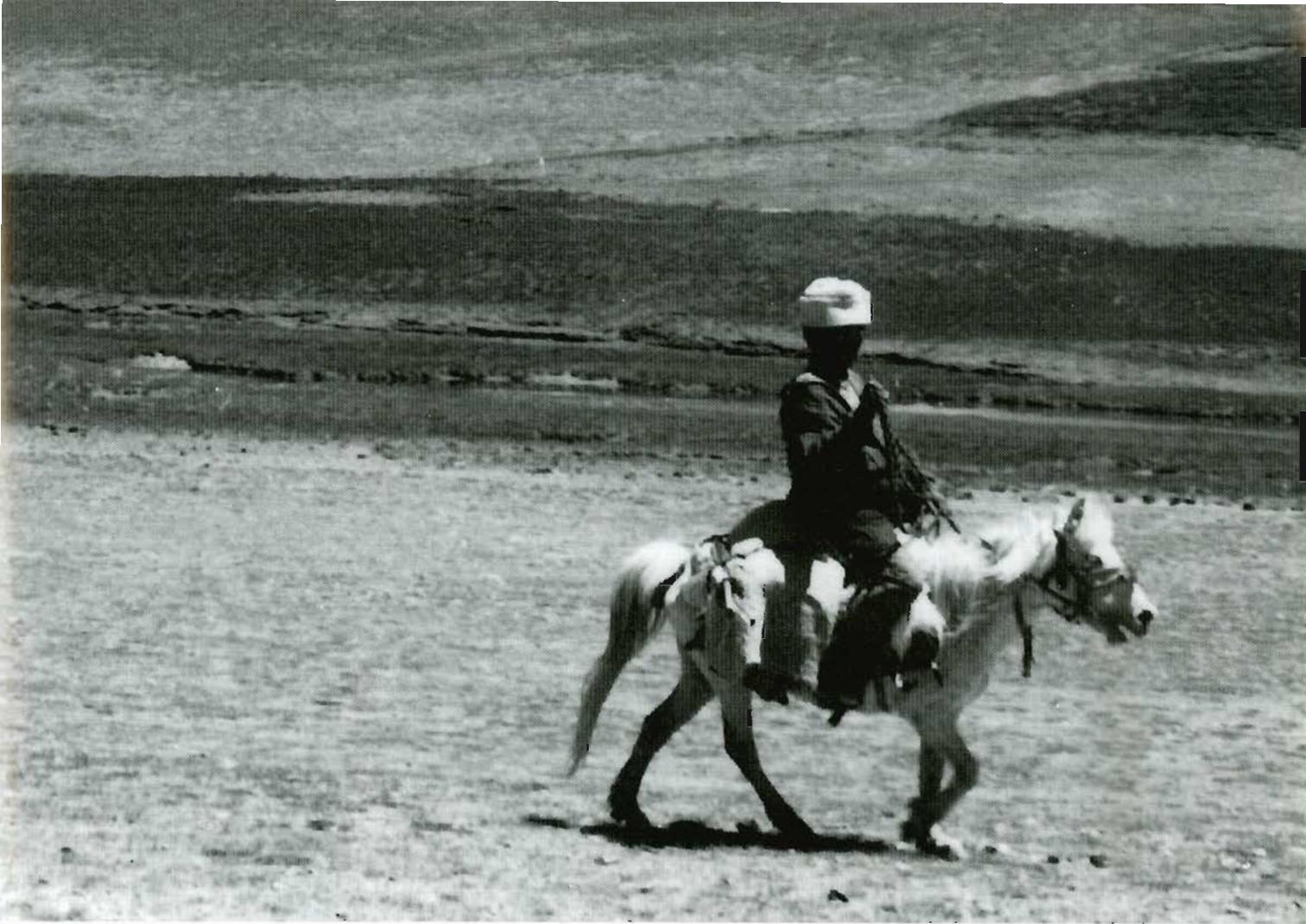




**Horsemen, Nagqu, Tibet, China, 1984**

**Horse and saddle carpet, Namdo, Dolpo, Nepal, 1978**

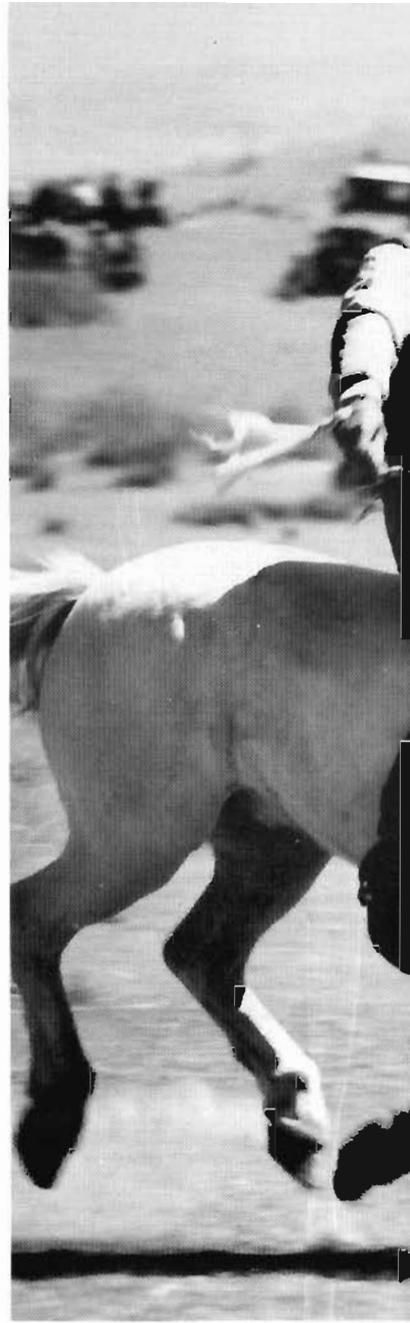




**H**orses were believed to have been first domesticated on the steppes of southern Russia about 5,000 years ago. Whenever the horse was first domesticated, it probably appeared on the steppes of the northeastern Tibetan Plateau soon afterwards. Horses would have been quite easily brought down to Tibet through what is now Xinjiang and Gansu on trails that later became the Silk Road. The Tibetan Plateau grasslands of present day western Gansu, eastern Qinghai, and northwestern Sichuan Provinces, the area known as Amdo in Tibetan, has long been renowned for producing good horses. Horses bred from around Qinghai Lake were supposed to be able to run 1,000 *li* (500km) in a day. This area is also the home of the legendary *Golok* tribes, excellent horsemen who are descended from ancestral nomads who considered it bad manners to walk even when exchanging greetings between one tent and another. The sport of polo is even thought to have originated in Tibet over 1,000 years ago.



**Siling horse, near Qinghai Lake, Qinghai, China, 1997**



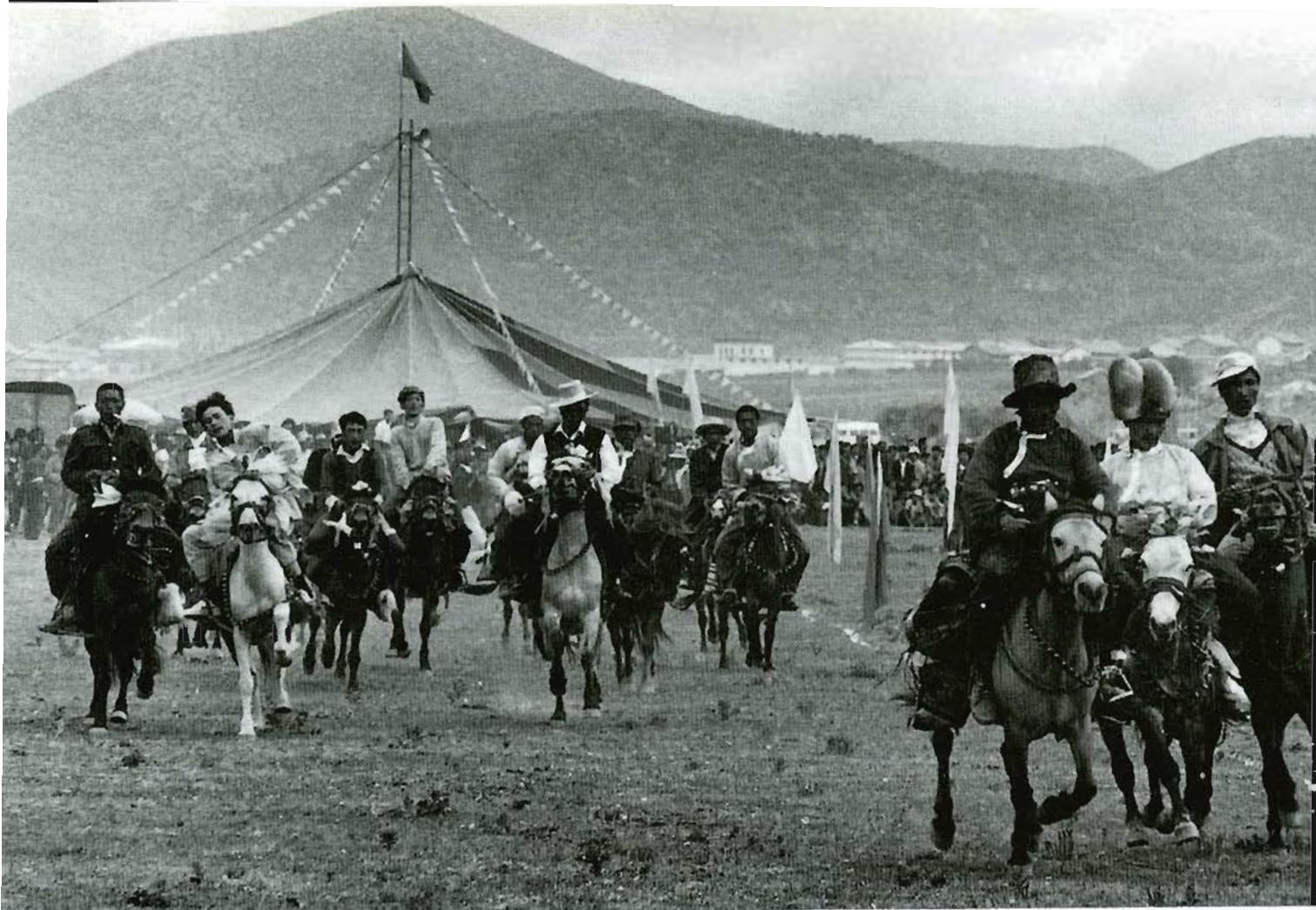
**Tibetan saddle, Henan Mongol, Qinghai, China, 1997**





**Horse race, near Qinghai Lake, Qinghai, China, 1997**

**A**mong Tibetan nomads, horses are highly valued, especially in the northeastern region of Amdo and in the eastern area of Kham, where the best horses in Tibet are found. Although horses play only a minor economic role in Tibetan nomadic production, and their numbers are never anywhere near as large as those found in the horse pastoral cultures of Mongolia, horses do help to create special attitudes and values among Tibetan nomads often characteristic of horse-culture modal personalities. Horsemanship is a highly regarded skill among many Tibetan nomads, especially in Amdo and Kham. Throughout Tibet, and the Tibetan regions of northern Nepal, horse races and various contests are held that test both riders' skills and horses' performance.



**Horse race, Zhongdian, Yunnan, China, 1996**

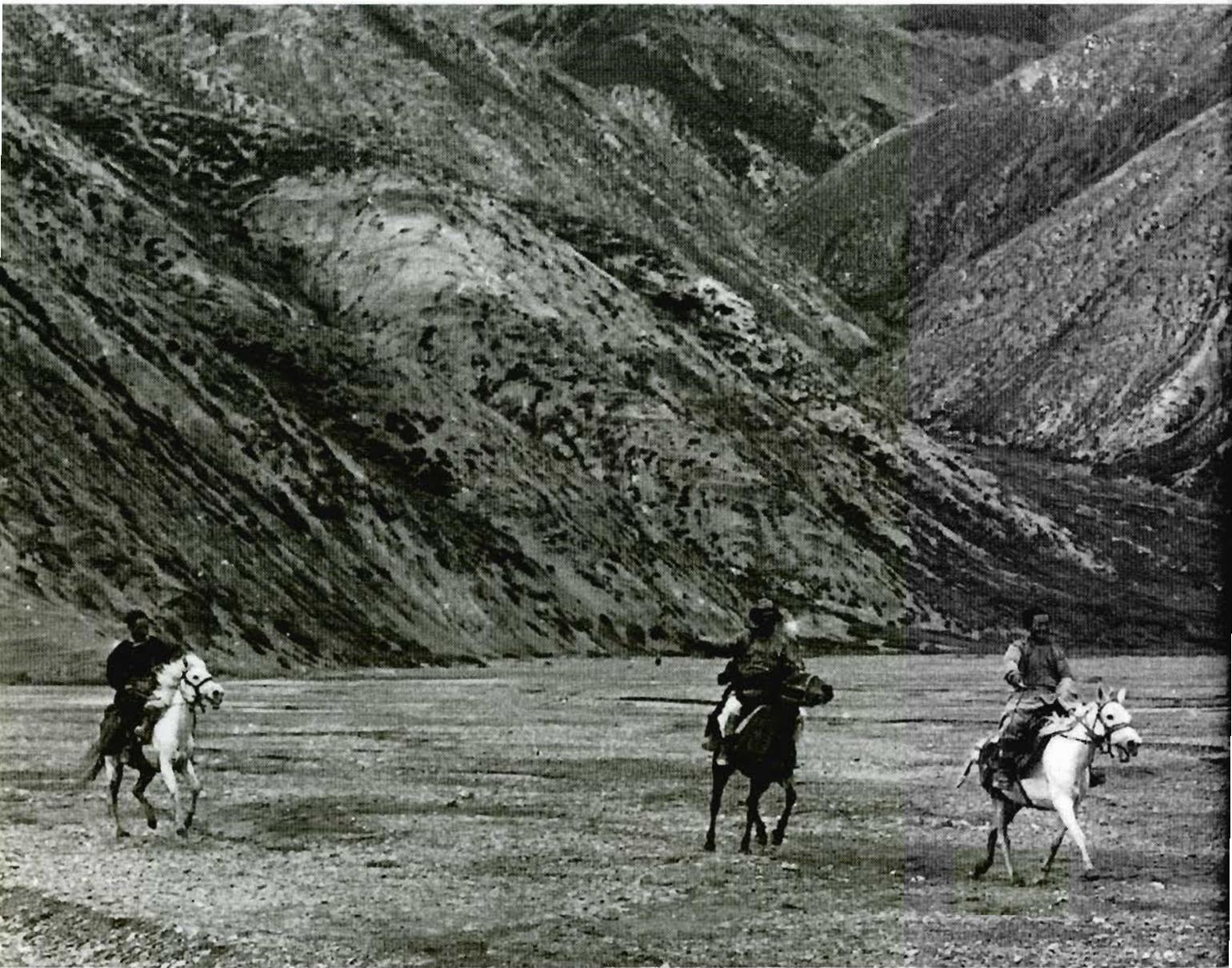
**Horse, Hongyuan, Sichuan, China, 1996**





**Horse and saddle carpets, Zhongdian, Yunnan, China, 1996**

**N**umerous legends attest to the Tibetan's prowess with horses. In one well-known Tibetan tale, the kings of India, Persia, Turkestan, and Tibet sent envoys to the Chinese court, each seeking the emperor's daughter as a bride for their king. These envoys were subjected to a number of tests. In one of the tests set to the envoys, 100 mares were kept in one place. 100 foals in another, and the envoys had to identify the offspring of each mare. When the Tibetan envoy easily succeeded in this, the Chinese emperor supposedly waved the matter aside, saying, "*The test is not a fair one, for Tibet is known as the Land of Horses*".



**Horse races, Namdo, Dolpo, Nepal, 1978**

