

# N O M A D S

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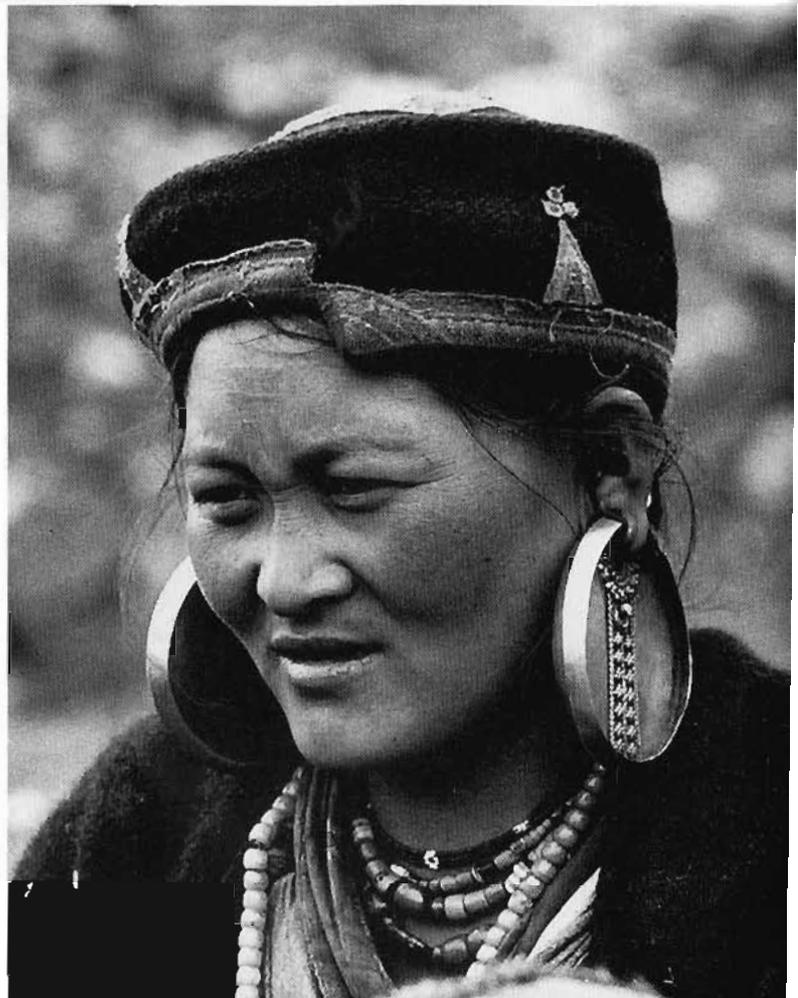




**Nomad woman, Langtang, Nepal,  
1976**

**V**arious pastoral cultural groups inhabit the rangeland areas of the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayas, but the Tibetan language, or dialects of it, is a common bond for most of these herders (except for small groups of Kazak and Mongol nomads in Qinghai) Tibetan Buddhism is also a cultural trait that links many of these different nomadic groups together.

**Herder, Zhongdian, Yunnan, China, 1996  
[chapter photo]**

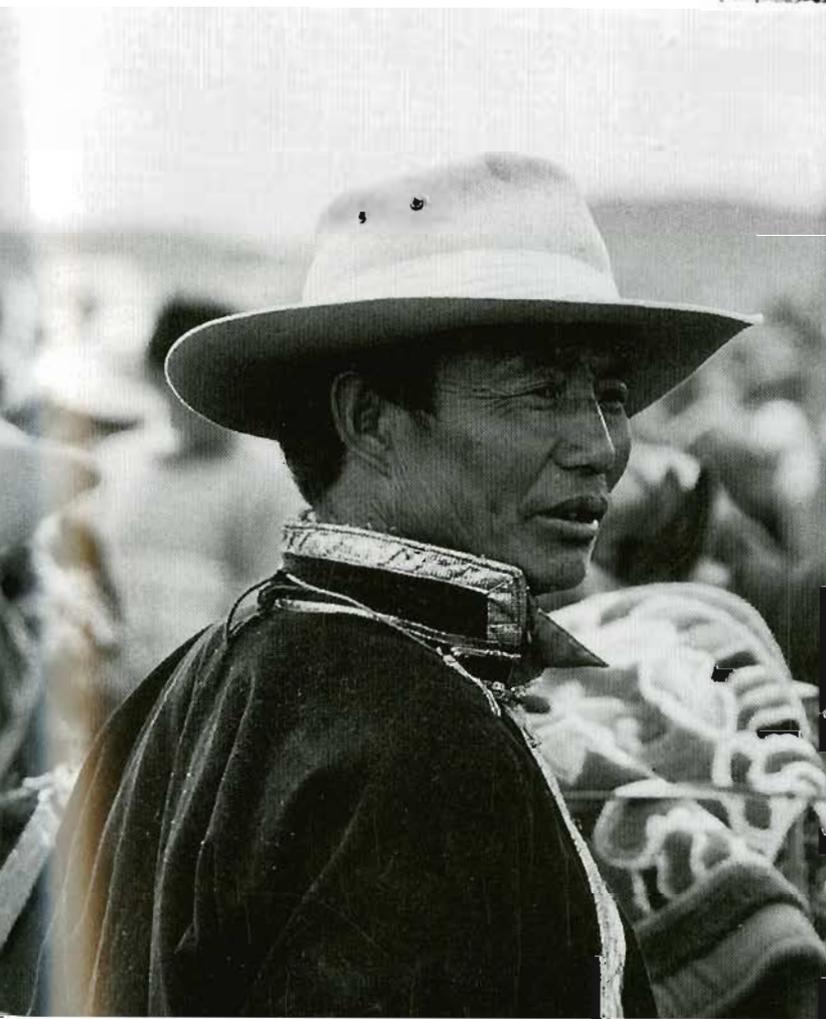


**Nomad woman, Langtang, Nepal,  
1976**

**A**nother characteristic that binds these disparate groups of nomads together is their hardiness. Constantly exposed to the harsh elements of the Tibetan Plateau, these nomads display an impressive disregard for what we Westerners would regard as poor weather conditions. Whether it is sudden hailstorms in the middle of summer or severe snow storms in the frozen depths of winter, nomads seem to accept these hardships with amazing equanimity.



**Nomad man, Zhongdian, Yunnan, China, 1996**



**Nomad man, Zhongdian, Yunnan, China, 1996**

The classic nomads of the Tibetan Plateau, known in Tibetan as *drokpa* (high grassland people), are distinct from the settled agriculturalists of the lower valleys. The *drokpa*, or 'pure' nomads, traditionally practised no cultivated agriculture. Their lives were almost totally dependent upon animals. Another group of Tibetan pastoralists are the *sa ma drok*, or agro-pastoralists, who practice both cultivated agriculture and extensive animal husbandry. All of these herders, men, women, and children, are very adept at handling animals. It is the pure nomads, the *drokpa*, however, who have really mastered the skills of taking care of yaks, sheep, goats, and horses.

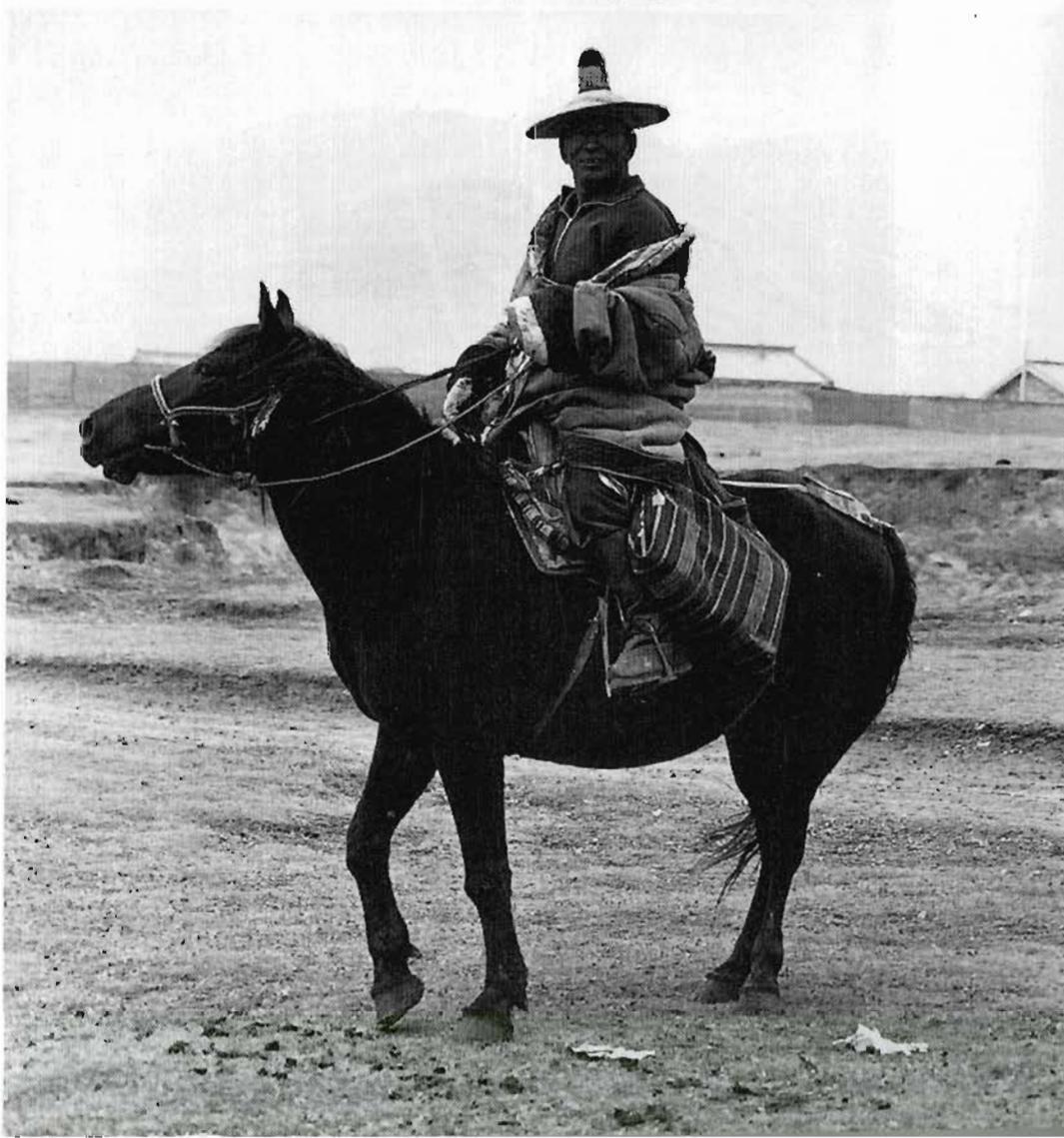


**Nomads, Henan  
Mongol, Qinghai,  
China, 1997**





**Nomad woman and horse, Zeku, Qinghai, China, 1997**



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



Tibetan horseman, Kangding, Sichuan, China, 1996



**Kazak horseman, Wild Yak Valley, Qinghai, China, 1990**



Tibetan nomad woman, Phala, Tibet, China, 1997



**Nomad dancers, Namdo, Dolpo, Nepal, 1978**

**N**omads possess a great body of indigenous knowledge about the environment in which they live and the animals they herd. Unfortunately, the nomads vast ecological knowledge and animal husbandry skills are often not well recognised or appreciated by scientists and development planners working in pastoral areas. As a result, herders have often been left out of the development process, with neither their knowledge nor their needs and desires being considered by many governments and development agencies in introducing more 'modern' and 'scientific' methods of livestock production. The key to sustainable pastoral development in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan Plateau lies in incorporating and building upon the indigenous knowledge and skills that herders already possess when designing new interventions.



**Old herders, Zhongdian, Yunnan, China, 1996**



**Nomad woman,  
near headwaters  
of Yangtze River,  
Qinghai, China,  
1993**

**Nomad man,  
Phala, Tibet,  
China, 1997**

**Nomad woman,  
Phala, Tibet,  
China, 1997**





**Nomad woman, Phala, Tibet, China, 1997**



In northeastern Bhutan, a unique tribe of yak herding people are found in the region known as Merak-Sakten. Known in the Bhutanese language as *Brokpa*, these people migrated into Bhutan from the nearby Tibetan area of Lhoka centuries ago. According to historical biographies of people from Merak-Sakten, these herders settled in Bhutan in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, bringing their herds of yaks with them. These yak herders of Merak-Sakten are distinct from other pastoral groups in Bhutan with regards to language, customs and attire. All the men and women from Merak-Sakten wear unique round hats, made from yak hair, with five pointed appendages – almost as if they had large black spiders on their heads.

**Herders, Sakten, Bhutan, 1990**





**Tibetan nomad women, Phafa, Tibet, China, 1997**

**W**omen play a very important role in Tibetan nomad society. Since they bear and rear children, women directly influence future human resources. As managers of the household and tent, nomad women make vital decisions about the use of natural resources (grass and water). As herders, women are responsible for many of the activities regarding livestock production. Their decisions and actions have effects on range resources and livestock. Efforts to improve livestock productivity, conserve and manage rangeland resources, reduce population growth, and improve nomads' livelihoods will, therefore, have to focus on nomad women. These efforts will have to try and reduce women's time constraints; remove barriers to women's access to credit and extension advice; introduce technologies useable by and beneficial to women; and improve women's educational levels. Women are key actors in the sustainable development of nomadic areas in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan Plateau. Governments, donors, researchers, and pastoral specialists need to better acknowledge women's critical roles in nomadic livestock production.



Nomad woman, Phala, Tibet, China, 1997



**Nomad women, Phala, Tibet, China, 1997**



**Nomad women, Phala, Tibet, China, 1997**



**Looking out on the world, Namdo, Dolpo, Nepal, 1978**

**N**omads of the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayas, as in other pastoral areas of the world, are often popularly imagined to be wild barbarians. Many people still believe that Tibetan nomads just wander freely across the grasslands with their animals, with no homes or fixed abodes. These romantic images, mistaken beliefs, and negative attitudes about nomads were often used as the basis for misguided pastoral development policies. Tibetan nomads, while proud and individualistic, and sometimes conscious of the adulation they are accorded by farmers and other sedentary peoples, are nevertheless bound by cultural norms and various ties to other social groups. Contrary to popular images, Tibetan nomads follow very well prescribed movements with their animals, often in a fairly small geographic area. Most Tibetan nomads are also already 'settled' and have houses in their traditional winter pastures and barns or simple sheds for their animals. In many ways, nomads on the vast Tibetan steppes are more constrained by relationships and the demands of their production system than are upwardly mobile people in urban areas who can freely move from one job to another.



**Tibetan herder, Zhongdian, Yunnan, China, 1996**

**Nomads and stupa, Namdo, Dolpo, Nepal, 1978**





**Summer festival, Langtang, Nepal, 1976**



**Tibetan dancers, Solu, Nepal, 1977**



**Masked dancer, Saktien, Bhutan, 1990**

**P**astoral nomadic peoples of the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayas have cultures brimming with fascinating traits, many of which are linked to the annual cycles of pastoral production. Nomadic pastoralists in the Tibetan Plateau have historically had closer links to sedentary rulers and farmers than nomadic societies in other pastoral areas of the world. Tibetan nomads also rarely developed the autonomous tribal structure so characteristic of other pastoral societies, although there were some Tibetan nomad tribes, such as the *Golok* in modern-day Qinghai Province of China, that were more fiercely independent.

Tibetan nomads developed and maintained complex relationships with agricultural villages, as the nomads depended on farmers to provide them with barley grain, a staple of their diet, in exchange for livestock products. Unlike most other nomadic societies in the pastoral world, Tibetan farmers occasionally become nomads, often marrying into a nomad family. Language, religion, and many other cultural aspects were shared among nomads and farmers, helping to facilitate relationships. Many aspects of Tibetan nomadic culture are Buddhist, but vestiges of shamanism and local-spirit, or mountain-god, worship are also common to both nomads and farmers.



**Tibetan nomad  
woman, near  
Qinghai Lake,  
Qinghai,  
China, 1997**



**Hiding from  
the rain,  
Sakten  
Bhutan, 1990**



**Watching the horse races, Zhongdian, Yunnan, China, 1996**

**T**ibetan nomads cannot be understood without an awareness of their long pastoral history and their position in modern Tibetan life. It is also important to keep in mind that Tibetan nomads have always made adjustments in their lives, both as rangeland conditions changed and as relationships with other nomads, farmers, and rulers evolved over time. Tibetan pastoralism has been adapting to changes for millennia. Today, nomads are still a vital element of the Tibetan landscape and the regional economy, and, given their remarkable capacity to adjust, nomads should be able to surmount any challenges they will face in future.