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Edited by

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THE WASHU SERTHAR:
A NOMADIC COMMUNITY OF EASTERN TIBET

by
Gelek, Beijing

Tibetan cultural geography divides Tibet into three regions: west or upper Tibet, called Nari Korsum (sTod mNga Ris sKor gSum); the middle area of Tibet Ü-Tsang (Bar dBus gTsang Ru bZhi), including the central Tibet cities and valleys of Lhasa, Yarlung, Shigatse and Gyantse; and eastern or lower Tibet, Dokham (Amdo and Kham, sMad mDo Khams sGang Drug). Kham and Amdo are now in part incorporated in Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan provinces. This eastern area at the edge of the Tibet plateau is occupied by various groups of pastoral nomads or drokpa (’Brog pa), among whom the Washu Serthar (Wa Shul gSer Thar) Golog are one of the most notorious groups.

The term Golog has the sense of ‘handsome, warlike and independent rebels’. Western explorers and travellers who visited the region earlier this century left a number of descriptions of the nomads, whom American explorer Joseph FR. Rock considered to be the most uncouth, fearless and impudent of all Tibetan peoples (1930: 402)

...the Golog attack anyone approaching the region west of the Yellow River. They acknowledge no one’s authority except that of their chiefs, and as the Shing bZah incarnation told us their word could not be trusted. They enjoy attacking anyone, especially foreigners who penetrate their mountain fastness... Their life is spent on horseback, always ready for battle and even among themselves they squabble to the point of combat.... They bring terror to the hearts of all their neighbours and travellers... They even ask the blessing of lamas before going on robbing expeditions.

(Rock 1956: 127; see Plate 2.1)

The Washu Serthar Golog are sometimes called the Golog Serthar (mGo Log gSer Thar). If you have read the book Tibetan Venture by André Guibaut (1947) then you have read about Washu Serthar. In 1940 two Frenchmen who wanted to find the source of the ‘Tong River’ (actually the Chin. Dadu He), carried out a second expedition to the home of the of the ‘Ngolo-Seta’ tribes in eastern Tibet. However, one of them, Victor Louis Liotard, was killed in an ambush by Washu Serthar tribesmen on September 10th 1940. Teichman (1922: 77) notes that this area, in common with the other nomad areas to its north was a land closed both to Chinese and foreigners and one of the least known areas of Asia. The writer Dorje Zödba refers to all the Golog including the people of this area as robbers (Combe 1926: 107). The nomads of Washu Serthar are known for their independence, for their ferocity, for their unity in conflicts, and for the threat they posed to traders who passed through their territory. Up until the Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911) and Republic of China (1912–1949), neither central, nor in what are today local governments in Qinghai and Sichuan, nor for that matter Lhasa, exercised any political control over the nomads of the Washu Serthar. The people were referred to by Chinese as ‘wild barbarians’

1 This paper was largely rewritten during and after my stay in Oxford 1991 and I am grateful for the assistance in re-drafting given me at that time.
Plate 2.1 – Eastern Tibet, Amnye Machen (A Myes rMa Chen) region: some of an escort from the rGya bZah Tibetan nomad tribe in the Tsha Chen valley; the trees on the valley slopes are Juniperus tibetica Kom., in the foreground Potentilla bushes, 3,810 metres. Joseph F. Rock 1926

Plate 2.2 – Eastern Tibet, Amnye Machen (A Myes rMa Chen): the black tents of the nomads by the Tshe Chus (river) on the Na Mo rGan plain are arranged in a circle, 3,670 metres. Joseph F. Rock, 1926
(Chin. ye fan) and their district was termed ‘the region beyond the boundaries’ (Chin. hua wai zhi ye). The Washu Serthar have remained isolated until the present-day, and little has been known of them by the outside world.

In the same way as with other Tibetan pastoralists, grain, tea and salt are essential for the Washu Serthar. They obtained these goods largely through exchanges with arable farmers, and in the past such dealings were not always friendly or even businesslike, since the nomads also conducted raids on the local villages as on traders travelling through the region. Tibetans have traditional tales of the fearless and rough Washu Serthar, notorious for their robberies. A settled community or village that attacked its neighbour would be vulnerable to retaliation; but a group of nomads such as the Washu Serthar who have no fixed homes to protect, who move from place to place, and who own fast horses which can rapidly carry away people and possessions to remote locations, is well-equipped to supplement its income with raids.

Like the Golog of Amdo they set great store by martial activities, and view raiding as a chance to display individual courage. All the men of the tribe, if they do not become priests or monks, are expected to be brave in this manner, or are looked down upon by their own people. However, they draw a firm distinction between robbery as part of a raid or a retaliatory strike, and theft from fellow tribe members or from people under the tribe’s protection. On the one hand, open robbery is supported and praised; but on the other hand, ‘in-group’ theft is strictly punished as it is considered as the most shameful action.

There is little information on the social structure and economic conditions of Washu Serthar from the above early travellers’ reports. In recent years, investigations by western scholars in Tibet have become possible. Several western anthropologists have been in western and central Tibetan nomadic areas to conduct field research and have published reports on social life and the economic conditions of western Tibetan nomads – Pa La2, and central Tibetan nomads – Namtsho3. However, very little information has been available on nomads of eastern Tibet. This paper will introduce the Washu Serthar nomadic pastoralists, describe their traditional social structure and lifestyle, and their life after recent socialist reforms. The account is based on my own first-hand field research in the area, carried out during the almost eight years when I lived with the nomads of Washu Serthar in the early 1970s, followed up by more recent visits.4

The nomadic pastoralists of Washu Serthar live about 400 miles north of the Sichuan-Tibet main east-west road (see Map 4) located between Qinghai and Sichuan. Now it is one of the counties (Chin. xian) of Gardze (dKAR mDzes, Chin. Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in western Sichuan.

The Serthar region is also one of the highest and coldest regions of eastern Tibet, at an altitude of about 4,000–5,000 metres. Although the Serthar pastureland was close to farming settlements such as those at Brago (Brag mGo, Chin. Lu Huo) and Ata (rNga Ba), it is almost entirely beyond the altitude limit of the farming areas. The extreme high altitude and bitter climate of Washu Serthar have effectively precluded agriculture as an economic alternative to pastoralism, even with modern technology. The temperatures reach 30 to 40 degrees below zero during the long winter, and there are freezing temperatures for eight months out of twelve, that is from October to May, and even during the growing season, from May to September. Snow and hail

2 Goldstein and Beall 1990.
4 These recent visits were in the company of Levine and Miao in 1994. See Levine this volume also on pastoralism, and Gelek and Miao on marriage patterns in the main volume of the proceedings.
storms and evening frosts are common, and there are no absolutely frost-free periods during the year.

Due to the short growing season, the intense cold and frost and the fierce summer hailstorms, nomadic pastoralism continues to flourish in Washu Serthar as elsewhere in Tibet, where the nomadic lifestyle is not endangered by agricultural competition. These nomads raise yak, sheep and horses and do not engage in any farming. This is unlike other well-known traditional nomadic areas such as in Iran, Turkey and Africa, where farmers have encroached on nomadic pasture, forcing nomads to emigrate and find work in the non-pastoral economy.

Traditional Social Structure and Lifestyle

In Serthar before 1960 there were about 5,340 households and 21,900 persons dispersed among 48 groups (Tsho Ba) over an area of around 11,500 sq. km. Like many other pastoral societies, the Washu Serthar have a complex socio-political organisation which unites thousands of households from widely separated encampments at levels of various groups or ‘tribes’.

Various words are used for these groups and the terms Tsho Ba (here pronounced tsho wa), Shog Khag and De Ba all can refer to the same group. Literally, Tsho Ba means ‘group’ and is the most commonly used term in Washu Serthar. I gloss Tsho Ba as ‘wider camp group’ as it has a territorial basis; but it also conveys the idea of common descent; Shog Pa is literally a ‘wing’, ‘section’ or ‘division’, and Khag means a part; De Ba has the sense of co-villager. Locally, people also use the terms Ru sKor and Ru Rogg, but the sense of these terms is slightly different to Tsho Ba. The Ru sKor is a unit smaller than the Tsho Ba but larger in size than the family: in this region Ru sKor refers to a pastoral economic unit – the people who herd livestock together, that is up to around five tents or households, and I gloss Ru sKor as ‘encampment’. Traditional encampments could take on the form of a protective circle, and sKor also has a sense of a small centred group or a circle (Plate 2.2). The local territorial group can focus on a local lineage but is not exclusively constituted by that local lineage; though many people in one encampment are from the same patrilineage or clan it is a diverse group. Each encampment is formed by a number of different Rus, or exogamous patrilineages which can intermarry.

Families cannot live alone in these areas without a wider economic support group. Even when unrelated, households are linked by their complementary economic imbalances. Some families are rich in livestock but poor in workforce, while others have an excess of workers but not enough animals to support themselves. The poorer households then work for the wealthier ones, although the two usually co-operate as equals in other collective activities. However, even in a society that moves frequently it is not possible for too many households to live together, as the resources of a part of the grassland cannot support a large number of people and animals. This is one reason why each ‘wider camp group’ of Washu Serthar was divided internally into the smaller local encampments.

Tsho Ba are larger groups of up to 400 households, and come together only at certain times of year, for festivals and fairs. A Tsho Ba or ‘wider camp group’ can have up to around 30 ‘encampments’, and ten different Rus, or local lineages. These local lineages can be the same lineage or clans between different Tsho Ba. The Tsho Ba are named after local territorial features, such as rivers, mountains, and place names, and also from mythical sagas. There is a well de-

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5 Over 80 per cent of their livestock are yak and only 15–20 per cent are sheep, which is different from western Tibet where Tibetan nomads raise sheep and goats as the main livestock.

6 This historical demographic data is not directly comparable to the more recent data given by Levine in this volume and cannot provide an overall index of historical demographic changes.
veloped sense of territorial rights, and each such ‘wider camp group’ had well-defined rights to a certain territory as grazing land. Young herdersmen patrol the grassland, and incursions from other groups or their animals into their territory may lead to skirmishes and casualties; such incidents still occur today. Members of the group were not allowed to sell, buy or give away any part of the public grassland, and even needed permission from the camp-group to rent it out.

The largest ‘wider camp groups’ were made up of around 400 families, the smallest of 20 or so families. The ‘wider camp group’ size depended on the area of grassland which originally was decided by the display and size of the armed force or power, that is how many horses, men and guns they could muster. Hence the importance of the use and display of force as well as of direct material production, and frequent fighting between different ‘camp groups’ over grassland.

The 48 ‘camp groups’ were collectively known as the larger Union of the Washu Serthar. This union was divided into two sub-categories, the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ camp groups. The inner (Nang) groups included those who claimed descent from the same founding ancestor, in contrast to the outer (Phyir) groups, whose members came from different places and did not boast a common ancestor. The inner groups, considered to be the core of the union, were known as Gur, their symbol being a white tent. The outer camp groups were divided into four sections called Gur dKar Po Chung Chung bZhi, literally the ‘four small parts or guy ropes of the white tent’.

The economy of these Tibetan nomads was largely self-supporting. The family as an economic unit needs enough members for a division of labour to engage in different kinds of activities, such as the herding of sheep, yaks, horses, the raising of small animals, livestock processing and trade. Extended family households provided the benefits of economy through shared expenses, labour, security, and companionship, so the nomads welcomed the addition of children to increase the workforce. Although they did not get involved in business, war, carrying loads or religious activities, women were major producers and were highly valued because of their reproductive capacity. Marriage in Washu Serthar was one important traditional way to acquire economic advantage; but at the same time many women never formally married and instead spent their lives in their parental tent. This gave rise to the possibility of a localised matriliney as children belonged to the tent or family in which they were born. They would expect only a few animals and occasional aid from the child’s father in this system. Hence, a large number of children were born without marriages as we might recognise them; but they were accepted fully by the society and some even became the heads of their camp groups.

Most Washu Serthar families have more than six members, and about 20 per cent of the tents had more than ten members. The family is extended rather than nuclear. Joint families not only allowed for the efficient carrying out of economic interests, but also obligations for military association and trade in a vast and sparsely populated area. A small-sized family would find it difficult to deal with various natural calamities and sudden danger, and the families of Washu Serthar frequently had extended lateral ties between siblings and different generations to other tents in the encampment. A family consisted of a man, his wife, his nominally unmarried daughters and their children, and his sons and their wives and children who were resident in that tent. Each couple in principle had a separate tent in an encampment, but shared livestock and often ate together with the wider joint family.

Families take the name of their leader, who can be the senior person in the main descent line, or merely the most competent person – the names can change on succession. Despite the fact that the children of unmarried daughters belonged to their mother’s ‘tent, the strength of the idea of descent, that is of descent as conveyed by the ‘bone’ or Rus in the male line, is one of the most singular traits of these nomadic people. Almost every Washu Serthar family knows its
Rus. Members of the same Rus were considered as descended from the same male ancestor, the same patrilineage or clan, and were not allowed to intermarry. The largest Rus clan in the area is the ‘Washu’—literally the ‘Fox line’; however this is not ‘totemism’ in the classical anthropological sense: the herdsman did not worship a fox or believe that they were descended from a ‘fox’ ancestor. The name of the focal or original Rus recalls their earliest male ancestor, Wa Ser Skyabs, whose saga reposes that his strength comes from the skin of a fox. Some thirteen generations are recorded from Wa Ser Skyabs to the most recent chief of the Washu, Rinzen Don-drup, in 1950, which would suggest a time some 350 years ago. However, their oral history links their origin to a saga from an earlier period, and genealogical amnesia and creativity are common in such oral records.

The oral history is as follows. The former residence of the founding ancestor Wa Ser Skyabs was in Ngari in western Tibet, where over several hundred years the Washu divided into ten camps due to frequent fighting, conflicts and moves. A seventh century king of Tibet despatched warriors who included this ancestor of the present day Washu Serthar herdsmen, to the eastern border of Tibet to fight against the Tang invasion. Subsequently the Tibetan monarchy collapsed, and the ancestors of the Washu stayed on in the grasslands, near Mount Bayan Har (Bayankela), as members of the overall wider ‘union’ of the Golog nomads.

During the Yuan dynasty an increasing number of Mongols came to the area now known as Qinghai: the Washu herdsman left the Golog ‘union’ and moved their camps southwards to places such as Aba, and then westwards from Aba to Serthar. Members of the Washu clan moved frequently, divided and settled in different places, eventually coming to places such as Brago (Brag nGoi), Niarong (Nyag Rong), Dawu (rTa’u), Baiyu (dPal yul), and Li Thang, in present-day Aba and Gardze ATPs.

However, the scattered members of the Washu lineage did not forget their original clan: even after several hundred years they took Washu as their first name in conjuncts such as Washu Serthar, Washu Choskor, and so on. Members of this clan have become scattered over a wide range of territorial camp-groups and are core kin of the wider camp group union that forms Washu. They link different camps, and provide a point of unity to tribal structure: only men of the Washu clan can be chiefs of the overall tribe or ‘union group’ of the Washu Serthar.

Until modern times clans have had a strong functional political significance. In the event of a dispute between members of different clans, people sided more closely with those who came from the same clan; clan and patrilineal descent bonds often united members of the same local groups, particularly during periods of warfare. Externally, the clan was effective because it enabled local lineage segments to call on ever-increasing support when faced with disputes over use of the grassland. However, there are contradictions between the clan and territorial base of the groups. This lineage-based system tended to break down when members of many different clans migrate into Serthar from different places such as Gardze, Aba and Niarong; these had to be incorporated as the ‘outside’ Washu groups into the one centralised union chieftain – Washu Serthar, under the authority of the ‘inner’ clans.

The Washu Serthar union or camp groups did not have a special police force, nor courts or special civil agencies formally responsible for resolving disputes; but the territorial segments, the Tsho Ba or ‘wider camp groups’ had an everyday political or organisational significance here as in other areas. The union or alliance of the separate 48 ‘wider camp groups’ and their

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7 Clearly this is an allusion, historical or legendary, to Srong bTsan sGam po.
8 The term ‘confederacy’ has also been used as well as ‘union’ in this volume to refer to the overall grouping of Washu Serthar, see Levine.
‘union’ had customary procedures for making decisions and resolving disputes, ways and means of creating and maintaining social order and coping with social disorder. These were as follows:

- First, to elect the head of the tribal union and to appoint the successor to the hereditary chief. The head had to be a person of an inner Washu clan, and also recognised as such and supported as the leader by most of the heads of 48 camp groups. In Serthar, the union head or chief was called *Ponchen (dPon Chen)* meaning ‘great official’; he was assisted by two other *Lonpo (Blon Po)* meaning ‘ministers’, as well as one very powerful *Lhapon (Lha dPon)* meaning ‘god-official’, who worked together with him. Although the ‘union head’ had a higher rank or authority than the others, when he decided an issue with a direct bearing on all the camp groups, he had to hold meetings to discuss the decisions with the heads of the separate camp groups.

- Secondly, to organise militarily to protect the interests of the tribes, which was an extremely important function of the alliance, the role of the ‘union’ including military organisation.

- Thirdly, to mediate or settle fights and disputes, including blood feuds among the tribes. This was a common function of the alliance.

- Fourthly, to organise annual religious festivals and associated activities.

When there was a dispute over animals or the right to water or pastures, or when husbands discovered adultery, men had the right to challenge the person who had wronged them to a fight which was usually accepted. From childhood, the males of the Washu Serthar were encouraged to settle their conflicts by fighting. Not every such internal dispute resulted in violence, nor did every challenge end in the death of one or both combatants. However, it was customary that if a man killed someone he would not be punished but would have to give compensation for the price of the life. A person of high rank acted as an intermediary between the murderer and the victim’s kin. Although he had no formal political power he was generally an elder respected by the people, and tried to persuade the two parties to accept compensation instead of a blood vengeance, and determine the price of the life. He succeeded in most cases since the nomads believed that it would be unkind to execute the murderer. According to the traditional customary law of Washu Serthar, there were 15 different prices for different categories of lives, and a distinction was made between a man’s life and a woman’s life.

If both parties to the dispute were still not willing to come to terms, the mediator had no authority to force them to come to terms. In this case, there was yet another way of peacefully resolving disputes. This was through oaths: both persons had to make an oath in the face of an incarnate lama or god. Generally nobody had the courage to go against the oath that was made in the face of an incarnate lama, because all the nomads of Washu Serthar had a strong faith in the Buddhist religion.

**Religion**

As with other nomadic pastoralist groups of Tibet, the Washu Serthar placed great emphasis on the worship of ancient mountain gods who have been assimilated into the Buddhist pantheon. Almost every camp group has its own mountain god, appealed to before any important action is started, with recitation of prayers, offering of butter, lamps, playing of music, and the firing of guns around the mountain. One god named ‘wild yak mountain’ (*Brong Ri*) was common to all the Washu Serthar. It was said that the nomads were like wild horses when they fought with weapons; but in front of the sacred mountain god they were like obedient puppies and the mountain god played a role in unifying the thoughts and actions of all the members of the tribe. Before carrying out any important action such as fighting and robbery, all the members of the tribe, young, old and women alike gathered around the mountain to offer sacrifices to the god.
Now, such gatherings have also become an important festival and fair for the nomads, with dancing, meetings, and trading.

The Washu Serthar herdsmen believed that a tribe without a monastery was incomplete. There were 24 monasteries and more than 3,300 monks among the 48 groups. These monasteries served as centres of culture, education and religion and also operated as market centres. People gathered there on religious holidays, and old people no longer able to travel with the herds lived in the precincts of the monasteries. At times, they were also used as courts by the herdsmen, to settle outstanding lawsuits. Then they would make a vow to explain their cases truthfully in front of the lamas and the gods, and the case would be settled.

The Washu Serthar ruled through the above two systems of chieftain, one secular with the dPon Chen or 'great official' as the leader, another theocratic whose officials were always known as Lha dPon. The religious structure followed the military structure in that for every thousand households there was a senior Bon spirit-medium called Lha dPon and a junior Bon spirit-medium called Lha Pa for each combat group. They both were responsible for offering prayers but there was a division of labour between them: the former presided over all sorts of rites of worship on important occasions; the latter simply prayed for help in vanquishing the enemy when the occasion arose. Later, when tribal alliances emerged, each of the groups had one hereditary Lha dPon to preside over the rites of worship, while each of the tribes under it had one Lha Pa. The pattern was maintained in the tribe of Washu Serthar until 1960.

Lha Pa differed from monks in that they mostly supported themselves through their own labour, and mixed with the tribesmen in their productive and communal activities. Easy to approach, they were welcomed by the populace and possessed certain prestige (Plate 2.3). The status of the god-official Lha dPon and the spirit medium Lha Pa were hereditary, and neither wore the patched robes of the Buddhist monk or lived in a lamasery. Rather, they lived and acted the way any of their neighbours would, there was nothing overt to distinguish them from hereditary priests or spirit-mediums; only when war or other important occasions arose, would they then step out to perform their duties. The gods they served were chiefly mountain gods. In Washu Serthar the 'god officials' claimed descent from the god of the wild yak mountain; the local herdsmen who supported them declared that this was why the Washu god official's complexion was purplish, since that was also the colour of the holy mountain. Religious activities of the 'god official' were centred on this praying to the god-mountain for the safety of the groups and the flourishing of the herds; thus they were directly relevant to the livelihood and productivity of the herdsmen. The dPon Lha also presided over the annual rites of saluting the gods before the mountain. In earlier times this called for sacrificing large numbers of oxen and sheep. Later, with the introduction and spread of Buddhism, such offerings were replaced by smoke sent up at the foot of the mountain. On the day of the ceremony members of all the tribes gathered there, paying calls on each other and providing entertainment, feasting and celebrating, as on any festival. This was intended to renew and reaffirm the alliance as well as to celebrate the harvests. In so doing they followed the traditional way of dispelling suspicion and eliminating discord which had arisen during the year, in order to consolidate their alliance and unity.

The 'god official' also took part in tribal warfare. It was reported that long ago a war broke out between the Washu Serthar and the Black Water group or tribe living in Abei (Aba). In order to subjugate the enemy, the Washu Lha dPon led his people to build a white tower for ritual performances. From that time on, it is said that the Black Water tribe never harassed them

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9 Many settlements in eastern Tibet had towers with defensive as well as symbolic functions up until the standard military use of the cannon.
Plate 2.3 – Eastern Tibet, Amnye Mechen (’A Myes rMa Chen) region: a Golog (mGo Log) spirit-medium (Lha Pa, or Lha dPon) or Bon lama (bLa Ma). Joseph F. Rock 1926
again. Another myth is as follows. Once, when a headman of Nyarong initiated a feud with the tribe, the Washu ‘god official’ immediately invoked the divine infantry and cavalry from the wild yak mountain god to help and put him to rout. Each time before the tribesmen went on raids against other tribes, rites were held to pray to the holy mountain to confer courage and strength on the warriors, and to protect them in combat. These rituals were also presided over by the ‘god official’. All these showed the important role the ‘god official’ undertook in military affairs.

Before 1960, the Lha Pa or spirit-medium served mostly among the camp-group tribes as intermediary between the gods and man, often relaying what the gods had said. When the spirit-medium did so, complex rituals were held. First, he would enter a different state of consciousness through the help of various drugs, to show that his soul had separated from his body and gone to heaven to invite various gods hostile to the group to descend among the herdsman. Almost every spirit-medium used alcohol to achieve this effect.

Besides liquor, the spirit-medium also used the smoke from cypress wood as a kind of drug. Once under the effect the spirit-medium would enter a trance-like state; his limbs would become rigid, his eyes would stare, and he would begin to dance in a frenzied manner said to be patterned on the movements of both hostile and friendly gods who had descended to the altar. Then he would fall silent, his eyes glazed, while the saliva would froth around his mouth. The silence would last for quite a while. Then all of a sudden it would be broken by a piercing shriek from the ‘spirit-medium’ announcing that all the guardian deities of the tribe had entered him, and that from then on what he spoke would be the words of the spirits. Such performances of the Lha Pa ‘spirit-mediums’ are similar to those of other shamans from this cultural area.

The Impact of Reforms on Pastoralism

The traditional nomadic structure of Washu Serthar ended in 1960. Like the agriculturalists, the Serthar pastoralists have undergone many changes since that time. From 1960, mutual aid teams were set up on the base of the Ru skor, so they were readily accepted by the Tibetan nomads. First, the livestock was divided equally among individual households; then people formed cooperatives in which they maintained individual control over the animals and engaged in exchange labour, the system known as Phan Rogs Tshogs Pa or Rogs Res Tshogs Pa meaning ‘group of mutual aid’ or ‘mutual assistance team’. At least on the surface the system was similar to the traditional Ru skor group and there were no noticeable differences in the social structure. The nomads adapted to this ‘new’ system without problems as the family continued to be the basic productive unit; there was exchange labour with several households which were organised into the ‘mutual aid groups’ and shared the pastureland. They co-operated in herding and trading; but in effect as before each household still owned its own livestock and sold or traded its products as they wished, independently of the others in the group.

Organised religion and monasteries were abolished at that time, and a growing number of monks returned home to take part in economic production; but religion continued as a private practice. Not long after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 changes were introduced. All the land and the livestock were collectivised and the nomads worked under a system allotting to each the same benefits, regardless of the amount of work produced carried out or output produced. Following the harvest the work-points were counted and each household received the same amount of crops.

One consequence here was that the nomads reduced their level of work under the collective production system. One of the other major changes was that the nomads lost their religious free-
dom and their right to trade. Both activities were completely prohibited. This deeply affected the nomads who rebelled and broke up most of the co-operative teams for a time. This was only one side of the issue; at the same time the fact that labour was centralised and unified without factional division tied to dispute over pasture, made it possible to conduct large-scale capital construction, such as roads and settlements for herdsmen. In turn, these have greatly contributed to the growth of the market economy today.

After the reforms of 1980, all the grassland and livestock were redistributed to individual households according to the size of the families, and the production teams were disbanded. Finally, fixed prices for the sale of goods were abolished, and people became free to sell their products again, either to the state, or on the open markets. One other notable aspect of these 1980 reforms was the reinstatement of a considerable amount of religious freedom: the nomads were free to practice their religion as they chose.

The economic and cultural policies implemented by the Chinese state in Tibetan areas after 1980 produced a major reverse transformation of the Washu Serthar region. The nomads’ economy immediately reverted to the previous system of production and management; they also openly expressed their commitment to their traditional values and customs. Nowadays, life in this region is closer to that ideal than at any other time since the 1960s, the nomad’s values being strongly associated with the grassland, mountain gods and camp group institution.

It cannot be said that Washu Serthar will not change in the future. Today, more and more nomads are eager to acquire the symbols of status and success, such as cars, tractors, wristwatches, tape recorders and new clothes, and they are willing to trade extra livestock to obtain them. In this way, a growing amount of the nomad’s income and the articles for daily use depends on the market; more and more young nomads go to cities and engage in trade, and more groups of nomads settle near cities and towns to build modern facilities for commercial animal husbandry. The question is how this new commercial economy will combine with traditional beliefs, values and lifestyles, how the Washu Serthar nomads’ character and traditions will be affected by the commercial economy that now flourishes in Tibet. There are no simple answers to these important questions.

Many traditional culture changes have been caused, directly or indirectly from commercialisation. It is clear that the nomads’ dependence on markets has increased since decollectivisation. There has been a construction of jeepable and tractorable roads from most local camp places to rural townships and county headquarters, and from counties to the market centres of eastern Tibet. Dardo (Dar mDo, also Dar rTse mDo, Chin. Kang Ding) even has regular bus transport.

Some nomads who live near to the towns or road like to own private tractors or trucks as a symbol of their wealth. Washu Serthar nomad households tend to buy sprung mattresses, steel stoves and machines for milking cows; traditionally the nomads do not like traders; but now they want to be in contact with the traders for these goods. Traders, Chinese, Tibetan and Hui can easily bring grain and other commodities needed by nomads to Washu Serthar; the nomads also easily can take yak butter, meat, wool, even live sheep and yak, to be sold in Dardo or Gardze market centres; then they use the cash to make their purchases.

When I first arrived in Serthar in 1969 I heard one story of the 1960s I did not at first believe: this was that some nomads posted up their paper money on their tents as ornaments as they did not know its value. This did not happen again recently. In 1980, when the commune gave back shares in livestock and land to nomads, they obtained paper money from their shares, and immediately went to the shops to acquire goods; they did not want to keep the money in their homes, nor did they want to deposit it in the banks. Nowadays, in the 1990s, more and more nomad people save their money each year and accumulate funds to await the autumn
commodities fair, which is held each year in Washu Serthar. Over 10,000 nomads then come
together with over 1,000 traders from different distant places.

These changes do not mean that Washu Serthar nomads have accepted the values of a com-
mercial economy; on the contrary, many nomads have strong traditional values and are unwill-
ing to sell animals, though they have more than necessary to support family life. All the same,
commoditisation, and trading skills are likely to increase in importance in the future as the
nomads gain familiarity with the growth of new markets in Tibet.

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