

# THE WASHU-SETHARE

## A NOMADIC COMMUNITY OF EASTERN TIBET

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### Introduction

In traditional Tibetan cultural geography, Tibet is divided into three regions: west Tibet or upper Tibet, called To Ngari Korsum; the middle area of Tibet-Tsang (Bar dbus gtsang ru-zhi) including the central Tibet cities and valleys of Lhasa, Yarlung, Shigatse and Gyantes; and East Tibet or lower Tibet-Dokham (Amdo and Kham, Mad Do Kham Gang Drug) . Eastern Tibet is traditionally divided into the regions of Kham and Amdo, and these are now are incorporated into parts of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan provinces.

In recent years, investigations by western scholars in Tibet have become possible. Several western anthropologists have gone to 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 (Phala)<sup>1</sup> and central Tibetan nomads (Namtsho)<sup>2</sup>. However, very little information has come forth on the nomads of Eastern Tibet. For this reason I selected the nomads of eastern Tibet as the object of my research.

Eastern Tibet is occupied by various groups of pastoral nomads or *drokba* ('Brog Pa), among whom the Washu Serthar (Wa Shul Seda) are one of the most notorious nomadic groups. They are also sometimes know as Golog Sether (mgo log gser thar). The term *Golog* literally means "heads on backwards" but it is used here symbolically to mean "handsome, warlike and independent rebels". Western researchers who traveled to the region have left a number of descriptions of the nomads. The American explorer Joseph R. Rock described them thus: "Such hostile and unfriendly people I have never

met anywhere in the world: It seems that a smile never crosses their coarse features”<sup>3</sup>. Pamela Nightingale writes, "The Ngolo Setas tribesmen belong to that other Tibet which few Europeans have penetrated, the Tibet of primitive herdsmen of high plateaus far removed from the civilization of Lhasa and the settlements of the valleys"<sup>4</sup>.

If you have read the book *Tibetan Venture- in the Country of the Ngolo-Setas, Second Guibaut-Liotard Expedition* (1947), then you may recall an area inhabited by the Washu Sethar Tibetan nomads. The authors of the book were two Frenchmen who wanted to discover and map the source of the Tong River (now called Datu He) carried out a second expedition to the home of the Ngolo-seta tribes in eastern Tibet in 1940. However, during their trip, one of them, Louis Victor Liotard, was killed in an ambush by Washu Sethar tribesmen on September 30, 1940. Teichman (1922:77) notes that this area, similar to the other nomad areas to its north, was a land closed both to Chinese and foreigners and one of the least know areas of Asia. Rockhill said, "the Golok [including Washu Shether] are the most interesting but unfortunately the least known of the tribes"<sup>5</sup>. The writer Dorje Zodba refers to all the Golog including the people of this area as robbers (Combe 1926:107). The nomads of Washu Shethar 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. Until the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and the Republican Period (1912-1949) the local governments of Qinghai and Sichuan provinces had never exercised any control over the noonday of the Washu Sethar; even the Tibetan local government could not control this region. They were known in the Chinese language as “wild barbarians” (□□- yefan) and their district was described as “the region beyond the boundaries” (□□□□- hua wai zhi yu). The Washu Sethar have remained isolated up to the present day and little is known often in the outside world.

Grain, tea and salt are essential for the Washu Sethar, just as they are for other Tibetan pastoralists, and they obtain these goods through exchanges with farmers. 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 traveling through the region. Tibetans have traditional tales of the fearlessness and roughness of the Washu Sethar, who are

notorious in-part for their robberies. Like the Gologes of Amdo, they put great stock in raiding and other martial activities as a chance to display individual courage. If they don't become lamas, the men of the tribe all expected to be brave or else were 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 meanders or frauen people under the tribe's protection. Open robbery is supported and praised but stealing is strictly punished, as it is considered as the most shameful action.

In a settled community such as my hometown, town Ganzi, a village that attacked its neighbor was very vulnerable to retaliation. But a group of nomads such as the Washu Sethar who have no fixed homestead to protect, who move constantly from place to place, and who own fast animals such as horses that can quickly carry people and possessions to remote locations, such a group is well-equipped to supplement its income with raids.

There is little information on social structure and the economic conditions of Washu Sether in the early traveler's reports. This paper will present an introduction to the Washu Sethar nomadic pastoralists, describing the salient features of their traditional social structure and lifestyle, and their life after recent socialist reforms. This introduction is based on my own firsthand field research in the area, carried out during the almost eight years when I lived with the nomads of Washu Sethar.

The nomadic pastoralists of Washu Sethar live about 400 miles north of the Sichuan-Tibet east-west road located between Qinghai and Sichuan. Now they live in one county (Xian) of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the western region of Sichuan. Traditionally, Sethar encompasses roughly 11,500 sq. km of area.<sup>6</sup> These nomads raise yak, sheep and horses and do not engage in any farming. Over 80% of their livestock are yak and only 15-20% are sheep. They differ in this way from the nomads of western Tibet, who raise sheep and goats as the innate livestock.

The Sethar region is also one of the highest and coldest regions of eastern Tibet, at an altitude from of between 4,000 and 5,000 meters above sea level. It was beyond the altitude limit for farming areas, even though the Sethar pasture land was close to farming settlements such as Ganzi, Brago and Aba. The extremely high altitude and bitter climate of Washu Sethar have effectively precluded agriculture as an economic alternative, even with modern technology. The temperatures reach thirty to forty degrees below zero during the long winter. There are freezing temperatures during eight months out of twelve (i.e., from October to May) and even during the growing season, from May to September. Snow, hail storms and evening frosts are common and there are no absolutely frost-free periods during the year. Due to the short growing season, the fierce summer hailstorms and the intense cold and frost, nomadic pastoralism continues to flourish in Washu SETHA and Tibet, since the nomadic lifestyle is not endangered by any agricultural competitor's. This is unlike other well known traditional nomadic areas such as those in Iran, Turkey and Africa where farmers have encroached on nomadic pasture land, forcing nomads to emigrate and find work in the nonpastoral economy.

The Sethar is one county in Sichuan Province including four chus and seventeen Xiang (a transliteration from the Chinese term *xiang* a rural administrative unit normally glossed as township). But the Serba Chus and its five shang do not belong to what is traditionally Washu Sethar.

### **Traditional Social Structure**

Before 1960, there were about 5,340 households and 21,900 persons dispersed among over 70 local territorial camps and groups (*tsho-ba*). Like many pastoral societies elsewhere, the Washu Sethar have a complex sociopolitical organization which unites thousands of households and widely separated encampments (*ru-kor*) into broad groups (*tsho-ba*). Various words are used for groups: the terms *Tsho-ba*, *Shog-hkag*, *Ruba* and *Deba* all refer to the same group. Literally, *tsho-ba* means group, and *ba* is a masculine affix, *shog* is a section or division, and *khag* means part. *De-ba* literally means co-

villager or local group of a territory. The most common term is Tsho-ba in the Washu Sethar region. They also use the term Ru-kor, but the sense of this term is slightly different from that of tsho-ba. The ru-kor is a smaller unit than the tsho-ba, but larger in size than the family. In this region ru-kor is used to refer to a pastoral economic unit- the people who herd livestock together, a unit made up of from five or so tents or households together. I gloss ru-kor as "encampment" or "circle".

In a society that moves frequently, it is not possible for too many households to live together since the resources of a part of the grassland cannot support a large number of people and animals. On the other hand, families cannot live alone in the remote wilderness without a wider economic support group. This is why each camp-group of Washu Sether was divided internally into smaller encampments of co-residence households, known as ru-kor, which I have referred to earlier and that function as economic units for cooperative herding and other productive activities. When unrelated, the households are linked by their complimentary economic imbalances: some families are rich in livestock but poor in work force, 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 cooperate as equals in other collective activities. Since 1960, the mutual aid teams have been setup on the basis of the ru-kor, which has made them really acceptable to the Tibetan nomads.

Marriage in Washu Sethar was one important way to acquire economic advantage. The economy of Tibetan nomads is self-supporting. The family as the basic economic unit needs enough members to be able to divide into teams to engage in different kinds of activities, such as the herding of sheep, yaks, horses, the raising of signal animals, livestock processing and trade. Extended family households provided the benefits of economy through shared expenses, labor, security, and companionship so the noonday welcomed the addition of children to increase the work force. Women were the main producers and they had high value because of their ability to have children, although they did not get involved in business, war, carrying loads or religious activities. Accordingly, some of the women never married and spent their lives in their parental

tent. If they had children, they expected only a few animals and occasional aid from the child's father. A number of children were born without marriages as we might recognize as a result of this system, but these children were accepted by the society and some even became the heads of their camp-groups. The family is extended: in Washu Sethar family size not only depends on economic interest, but also on obligations for military association and trade over a vast and sparsely populated area. A small sized family would find it difficult to deal with the many natural calamities and sudden dangers. Therefore the families of Washu Sether frequently had extended lateral ties between siblings and different generations. A family consisted of a man, his wife, his unmarried daughters and their children, and his sons and their wives and children, since the sons brought their wives to their father's home. Each couple had a separate tent in the ru-kor, but they shared the livestock and often act together. Most Washu Sethar families have more than six members, and about 20% of the drills had more than 10 members. A tsho-ba can have from 10 to 30 ru-kor or encampments, and will have a number of different *us*, a term that here can mean clan or lineage. These local lineages can be the same as tsho-ba or overlap between different tsho-ba. The tsho-ba are named, and the names are taken from local territorial features, such as rivers, mountains, place names or even stories. I gloss these territorial units as "camp groups". Each camp-group had well defined rights to a certain territory of grazing land. The sense of territorial rights is very strong among the Washu Sethar. Young herdsmen patrol the grassland, and incursions by other yak or their animals may lead to skirmishes and casualties. Such incidents still cologne Toda. Members of the group were not allowed to sell, buy or give away any part of the public grassland, and tile even needed permission from the camp-group to rent it out. The largest camp-groups were made up of between 100 and 400 households, the smallest were between 20 and 40 households. Some of these were further divided into two sub camp-groups called *Tod* and *Mad* meaning "upper" and "lower".

The meanders of camp-groups come together only at certain times of the year for festivals, religious creeds and fairs. The camp-groups size depends on the area of grassland, and this was originally decided by the size of a display of armed force or power- how many horses, men and guns. This may be a reason the Washu Sethar

nomads traditionally liked to keep many horses and guns although these items did not have as much economic value as yak or sheep. It is also a reason for frequent fighting between different camp groups over grassland.

The over 70 camp groups were described collectively as the larger union or tribe traditionally known as the Washu Sethar. The union was divided into two sub-categories, the “inner”, and “outer” camp groups. The inner (Nang) groups included those who were descended from a common ancestor. This contrasted with the outer (Phyir) groups whose members came from different places and did not boast a common ancestor. The inner groups were considered the core of the union with their members descended from its founding ancestors. These groups were called "gur", their symbol being a white tent. The outer camp groups were divided into four sections called Gur-Kar-Po'-Chen-Chen-Bzhi, that is the four main pulling ropes of the white tent.

The strength of the idea of descent as conveyed by the "bone" or us, the male line, is one of the most singular traits of these nomadic people. Almost every Washu Sethar male knows its rus. Members of the same rus were considered as descended from the same male ancestor, the same patrilineage or clan, and were out allowed to intermarry. The largest rus clan in the area is the Washu. The name of the *rus* line given to their group recalled their earliest male ancestor, “Wase skyabs,” whose strength and exploits in myth were linked to one Buddhist scripture, Ta-drin Wachi. Hence the name Wash for the patrilineage. There are 13 generations from the founding ancestor Wase Skyabs to the most recent chief (in 1950) of the Washu, Rinzen Dondrup.

The history of the lineage is as follows. According to Tibetan oral tradition, the Dong were one of the six original Tibetan clans. The dong divided into eighteen clans of which the Washu is one. According to the legend, the Dogsa had four sons, the first three of whom died. The fourth became sick and the "Bon-po Lama" was sent for. He read the scripture called in Sanskrit Ta-drin watching over the boy and the boy was saved. In recognition the boy was called Washu after the name of the scripture. Since then the whole lineage has called itself the Washu. At this time, six or seven hundred

years ago, they lived in the area around Kokomor Lake. According to the oral tradition in the fourth generation there were again four brothers, Gepan , Getse , Gegyal and Wan De Jiao . To reach richer grasslands they moved south to the Dokog River (which now forms the border between Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces).

During the Yuan Dynasty, an increasing number of Mongols came to Qinghai. The herdsmen ancestors of the Washu group left the Kokonor Lake region and moved their camps southwards to the Dokog River. They finally settled around the Dokog River and stayed there for around one hundred years until the ninth generation. This was during the early Qing Dynasty and there were again three brothers, one of whom was named Washu Shia ja da. The main group moved to better grasslands, but because of the frequent moves and the constant warfare, some groups split off and went off on their own eventually settling in places such as present day Aba Tibetan Autonomous prefecture, Nyagrong, Dawu , Baiyu , Brago, Lithang and Hongyuan in present-day Aba and Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous prefecture. The main group moved to Sethar where they live today.

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 names such as Washu Rosa and Washu Choskor, and so on. Members of this clan have also scattered into other wider territorial camp-groups and have become core and close kin of the wider camp-groups union that forms Washu. They are thus in different camps and provide a point of unity in tribal structure, because only men of the Washu clan can be chiefs of the tribe or "union group" of Washu Serthar. Different local segments of a clan are found in different ru-kor or tsho-ba, that is in the local lineages. A name of a group such as Washu Sethar refers to both the ru-kor, the encampment and the tsho-ba or group-camp name. Hence we have the Washu Rosa and Washu Choskor as names of groups that combine both features. The Washu Sethar clans are examples of a patrilineal system. Many camp-groups, even if they live far away from each other, are linked by common clan membership.



Until modern time, clans have had a strong functional political significance. In the event of a dispute between members of different clans, people allied themselves with others who came from the same clan. This was particularly the case during periods of warfare. Clan or patrilineal descent bonds often united the members of the same local groups. Externally, the clan seems to have been effective because it enabled local lineage segments to call on ever-increasing support with faced with disputes over use of grassland. However, this system tended to break down as members of many different clans migrated into Serthar from different places such as Ganzi, Aba and Nyarong. These were incorporated as the "outside" Washu groups into the one centralized union chiefdom of Washu Sethar which represented the "inner" clans. The territorial segments, the tsho-ba or wider camp-groups, had further everready political or organizational significance.

The Washu Sethar union camp-groups did not have a special police force for crime, nor courts or special civil agencies formally responsible for resolving disputes. All the same, they had a wider political life and organization. The union or alliance of the over 70 separate camp-groups and their "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 are as follows:

1. The main function of this larger group was 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 had to be recognized as such and supported as the leader by most of the heads of the over 70 camp groups. In Sethar, the "union head" was called bou-Chen meaning "great official". He was assisted by two other lon-po meaning "ministers", as well as one very powerful lha-bon, 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 all the heads of the separate camp groups.

2. The "union" organized military forces to protect the interests of the tribes. This was an extremely important function of the alliance. The role of the "union" included military organization.

3. It mediated, or attempted to settle, fights and disputes including blood feuds among the tribes. This was a common function of the alliance.

4. It had the responsibility for the organization of annual religious festivals and associated activities.

The nomads of Washu Sethar are a turbulent people. Like the Khampa, or the Golog, they were easily roused to violence when there was a dispute over animals or the right to water or pastures, or when husbands discovered adultery. In those cases, the 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 Sethar were encouraged to settle their conflicts by fighting, but their system of justice was very different from that of other ethnic groups. Not every dispute resulted in violence nor did every challenge end in the death of one or both combatants. It was customary that if a man killed someone, he would not be punished but would have to compensate for the price of the life. A chief called jod-dpon 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 he tried to persuade the two parties to accept compensation instead of a blood vengeance, and to 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 Sethar, there were fifteen 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 of the dispute were still not willing to come to terms, the jod-dpon chief had no authority to force them to do so. In this case, there was yet another way of peacefully resolving disputes. This was through oaths. Under this system both persons had to make an oath in the face of the incarnate lama or god. Generally nobody had the courage to break an oath that was made in the face of an incarnate lama, because all the nomads of Washu Sethar had a strong faith in the Buddhist religion.

## **Religion**

As with other nomadic pastorals groups of Tibet, the Washu Sethar 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, and these are appealed to before any important action is started with the recitation of prayers, offering of butter, lamps, the playing of music and the firing of guns around the mountain. One mountain god was called Brongri (which means wild yak mountain), and it was common to all of the Washu Sethar. 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. The mountain god played a role in unifying the thoughts and actions of all the members of the tribe. In Washu Sethar, before carrying out any important attack, 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 Sethar herdsmen believed that a tribe without a monastery was incomplete. There were 24 monasteries and more than 3,300 lamas among the over 70 tribes. These monasteries served as centers of culture, education and religion and also operated as market centers. People gathered there on religious holidays, and old people

no longer able to travel with the herds lived in the precincts of these monasteries. As this, 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 Sethar ruled through two systems of chiefdom, one secular with the dBon Chen (Great Official) as the leader, and the other theocratic with officials always known as Dpon lha. The latter were responsible for civil administration and religious affairs. The structure was said to have been inherited from the military structure of the old Tibetan Kingdom founded by the Srong Btsan Gan-po regime, for every thousand households this had a senior Bon spirit-medium called lha-dPonpo 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 labor between the lha: 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. This pattern was maintained in the tribe of Washu until 1960.

Lha Pa differed from lamas 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 a certain amount of prestige. The titles and offices of the lha dpon and 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 and of their neighbors would and there was nothing to distinguish them as hereditary priests or spirit-mediums, or rather witches, of the Bon religion. Only when war or other important occasions arose would they step out to perform their duties. The gods they served were chiefly mountain gods. In Wa-shul the dpon lha claimed themselves to be descendants of the god-mountain of Brong-ri. This was why the local herdsmen supported them declaring that this was why the Washu Dpon lha's complexion was purplish, since that was also the color of the holy

mountain. Religious activities of the dpon lha were centered on praying to the god-mountain for the safety of the groups and the flourishing of the herds. Thus they were seen as having a direct effect on 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 at any festival. This was intended to renew and reaffirm the alliance as well as to celebrate the harvests. By doing so they followed ancient traditions for dispelling suspicions and eliminating discords which had arisen during the year and thus could consolidate their alliance and unity.

The Dpon lha also took part in tribal warfare. It was reported that long ago a war broke out between the Wa-shul tribe and the Black Water group or tribe living in Aba. In order to subjugate the enemy, the Washu dpon lha led his people in building a white tower for ritual performances. From that time on it is said that the Black Water tribe never harassed them again! Another myth is as follows. Once, when a headman of Nyag-rong initiated a feud with the tribe, the Washu dpon lha immediately invoked the divine infantry and cavalry from the Borng-ri god-mountain 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 dpon lha. All these showed the important role the dpon lha undertook in military affairs.

Before 1960, The Lha Pa served mostly among the camp-group tribes as a spirit-medium between the gods and man, often relaying what the gods had said. When the Lha Pa 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 herdsmen. almost every lha Pa used alcohol To achieve the effect.

Besides liquor, The Lha Pa also used the smoke from cypress timber as a kind of drug. Once under the effect of these narcotics the Lha Pa 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 pattered 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 broke by a piercing shriek from the "spirit-medium" announcing that all the guardian angels 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.

The traditional use of liquor in ancient Tibetan religion is difficult to establish from records. It was said, for example, that dating master Tsong-kha-pa's pilgrimage to the hi God Mountain, the god-mountain was displeased because of his abstention from liquor dictated by the Buddhist religion and caused his feet to be pricked by the thorny undergrowth when he was crossing the Sgrou-ma Mountain Range. The wounds immediately became inflamed and swollen, dripping blood and oozing pus. crippled by the pain, he was unable to continue his journey. This tale sheds much light on the indispensability Of liquor for the ancient religion.

### **The Impact of reforms on Pastorals**

The traditional nomadic structure of Washu Sethar ended in 1960. Like the agriculturalists, the Sethar pastoralists underwent many changes since that time. From 1960,mutual aid teams were set up on the bases of the Ru sKor, so they were readily accepted by Tibetan nomads. First ,livestock was divided equally among individual households. Then people formed cooperatives in Which they held individual rights over the animals and engaged in exchange labor, the system know 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-kor group and there were no noticeable differences in the social structure. The nomads adapted to this the new system without problems as the family continued to be the basic productive unit; there

was exchange labor with several households which were organized into "mutual aid groups" and shared pastureland. They cooperated in herding and trading; but each Household still owned its own livestock and sold or traded its products as they wished, independently of the Others in the group.

During that time, organized religion and monasteries were abolished and a growing number of lamas returned home to take part in economic production. But religion continued as a private practice. Not long after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution all land and livestock were collectivized and the nomads worked under a system which allotted to each of them the same benefits regardless of the amount of work. In Chinese this was known as 'the big iron rice bowl'. Following the harvest the work-points were counted and each household received about the same amount of crops.

As a consequence here was that the nomads reduced their level of work under the collective production system. One of the other major changes was that during this period the nomads lost their religious freedom and their right to trade: both activities were regarded as the "restoration of capitalism" and were completely prohibited. This deeply affected the nomads who rebelled and broke down most of the cooperative teams for a time. This was only one side of the issue : on the other hand labor was centralized and unified, and it was possible to conduct larger scale capital construction such as the building of roads and new settlements for herdsman. These improvements greatly contributed to the growth in the circulation of commodities occurring nowadays.

After the reform of 1980, all the grassland and livestock were redistributed to individual households according to the size of the family, 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 of the most notable aspects 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 new economic and cultural policies implemented by the Chinese government in Tibet after 1980 produced a major reverse transformation of Washu Sathar region. The nomads' economy immediately reverted to the traditional household system of production and management. It also allowed them to rebuild the foundations of their traditional way of life and openly express their commitment to their ancestral values and

customs. Nowadays life in this region is closer to the traditional ideal than at any other time since the 1960s, with the nomad's value system being strongly associated with the grassland, mountain gods and camp-group institutions.

It cannot be said that Washu Sethar will no change in the future. Today more and more nomads are eager to acquire the symbols of status and success such as cars, tractors, wrist-watches ,tape recorders and new cloths, and they are willing to trade extra livestock to obtain them. In this way, a growing amount of the nomad's income and access to 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 to combine this new commercial economy with traditional beliefs, values and lifestyles. How will the Washu Sethar nomads' character and traditions be affected by the commercial economy that now flourishes in Tibet? No simple answers exist to these important questions.

Many traditional culture changes have been caused, directly or indirectly from commercialization. It is clear that the nomads' dependence on markets has increased since decollectivization. There has been construction of jezebel and tractable roads from most local camp places to rural townships and county headquarters, and from counties to the market centers of eastern Tibet-Dardo(Dar rTse mDo, or Kang Ding), even has regular bus transport. The traders of Chinese or Tibetan as well as Hiu, nowadays can easily bring grain and other commodities needed by nomads to Washu Sethar. The nomads also easily can take yak butter, meat, wool and even live sheep and yak to be sold in Dardo or Ganzi market centers. They then use the profits to purchase what they need.

Some nomads who live near the towns or roads, like to have private tractors or trucks as a symbol of their wealth. The Washu Sethar nomads tend to use sprung matrresses, Steel stoves and machines for milking cows. Since they cannot produce these commodities themselves, they have to buy these tools and furniture from the market' Traditionally the nomads don't like traders, but now they want to be in contact with the traders for these goods.



When I first arrived in Sethar(Seda) 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 didn't know the Value of paper money. When the commune gave back shares in livestock and land to nomads in 1980,they obtained paper money from their shares and immediately went to the shops to acquire valuable goods; They did not want to keep the money in their home nor did they want to deposit it in the banks. Nowadays, in the 1990s, more and more nomad people like to keep money and accumulate their funds in expectation of the autumn commodities fair which is held each year in Wgshu Sethar. Over ten thousand nomads then come fair with over a thousand traders who come from different distant places.

This changes does no mean that Washu Sethar nomads have accepted the values commercial economy. On the contrary, many nomads keep Strongly traditional values and are unwilling to sell animals, though they have more than necessary to support family life. But commoditization 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.

## **Endnotes**

1. M.C. Goldstein and G.M. Beall, 1990. Nomads of Western Tibet. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press.

2.G.E. Clarke, 1986. China's Economic Reforms and their Effects on Pastorals, Institute of development Studies, Discussion Paper 237.

3 Galen Rowell, 1982. "The Nomads of China's west", National Geographic Magazine, 161:2, Pp.244-263

4. Andre Guibault, 1987. Tibetan Venture, Oxford (Oxford University Press), Introduction.

5 G.A. Combe, 1975. A Tibetan on Tibet Kathmandu, Nepal (Ratna Pustak Bhandar).

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