

**An ethnography of life and changes among  
Tibetan nomads of Minyag Dora Karmo, Ganzi  
Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province**

*Une ethnographie de la vie et des changements chez les nomades tibétains de  
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# *An ethnography of life and changes among Tibetan nomads of Minyag Dora Karmo, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province*

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## NOTE DE L'AUTEUR

This article is a condensed version of research from my doctoral dissertation. As always, I am indebted to nomads of Dora Karmo, Khenpo Dorje Tashi, and an anonymous international development organization for allowing me into their lives and work. I would also like to thank my friends at the Sichuan Province Tibetan School, Corneille Jest, Joseph Bonnemaire, Katia Buffetrille and Charles Ramble. Any errors or misunderstandings are my own.

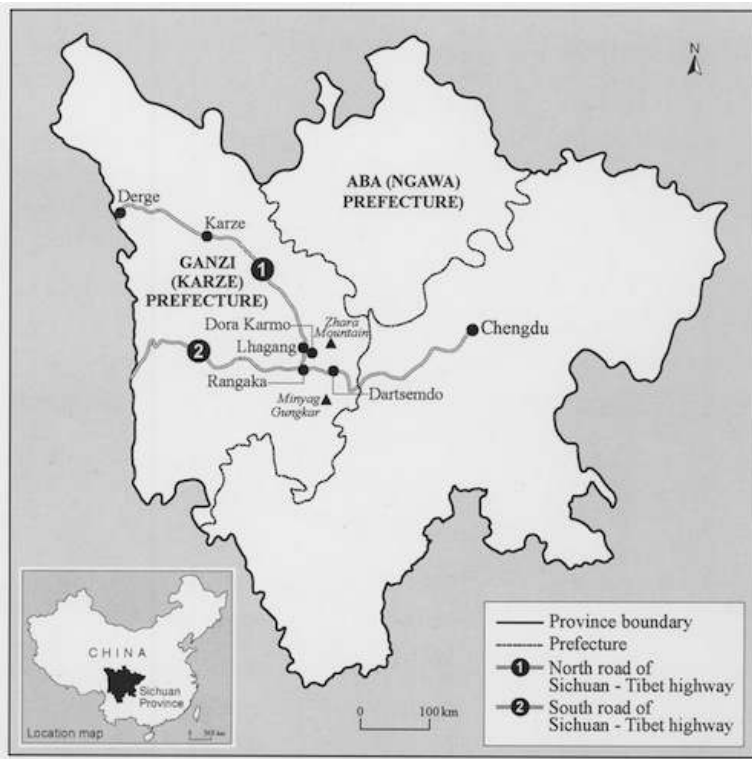
- <sup>1</sup> The wide expanse of land that comprises the Tibetan Plateau is made up of mountains, valleys and highland pastures that are home to both agricultural and nomadic Tibetan communities. This article draws from a one-year period of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2006 to detail the pastoral movements and material culture of one nomadic community in the Eastern Tibetan region of Kham (Tib. Khams)<sup>1</sup>, and to describe how these nomads presently live in the light of rapid and modernizing change. Changes to the grasslands have been directed mainly by the Chinese government through its various policies, such as collectivisation, privatisation of pastures for individual households, settlement into winter houses, and most recently, 'retiring pastures, returning grasslands' (Ch. *tuimu huancao*) in the past five decades. A description of how the nomads

of Minyag Dora Karmo (Tib. *Mi nyag Rdo ra dkar mo*), located in the grasslands of Lhagang (Ch. Tagong) township in Kanze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, have negotiated, and continue to accommodate, these on-going changes will be presented. Furthermore, international development plans and the efforts of a local incarnate lama have influenced and affected the lives of these nomads, and a brief sketch of these efforts will be provided.

## Nomads of Minyag Dora Karmo

- 2 Minyag Dora Karmo is a nomadic community located at the base of the second highest peak, Zhamo (Tib. Bzhag mo) mountain, which may be seen from the grasslands of Lhagang. It is located on a high plateau at an elevation of 3,970 metres, 30°17'29" N, 101°38'20" E, in Lhagang township, Dartsemdo (Ch. Kangding) county, Kanze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China.
- 3 Apart from its official delegation as a village (Ch. *cun*) in the Chinese administrative system, Dora Karmo is part of a larger community of nomads known as Nalungma (Tib. Nangs langs ma), made up of four 'villages'<sup>2</sup>. Until 1950, Dora Karmo was a relatively autonomous nomadic enclave under the rule of various local kings, the most powerful being Chagwa Gyalbo (Tib. Lcags la rgyal po)<sup>3</sup>. This line of local Minyag kings reputedly claimed the entire area of Dartsedo (Tib. Dar rtse mdo), Rangaka (Tib. Ra rnga kha), Lhagang (Tib. Lha sgang, Lha dga'), and parts of Dawu (Tib. Rta 'u) under the state of Chagwa (Tib. Lcags la). While older nomads of Dora Karmo recalled a tax obligation to this local king prior to 1950, they often did not pay the required taxes and were not subject to enforcement or retribution.
- 4 Simultaneously, the nomads of Dora Karmo were, and still are, part of the religious administration of Samgye (Tib. Seng ge) monastery, the local monastery that belongs to the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Nomads sent their male children to study as monks in the monastery, paid tributes and alms in the form of butter, yoghurt, and cheese, and attended monastery festivals and teachings at the monastery. As Richardson (1984, pp. 1-2) has pointed out, "ethnographic Tibet" operated on a far more diverse political basis than simple allegiance to the rule of Lhasa. Nevertheless, even as the area of Dora Karmo and other parts of Eastern Tibet functioned independently of Lhasa in their political functions, they were pulled back into the orbit of Lhasa through the gravity of Buddhism<sup>4</sup>.

Map of Sichuan Province, with detail of Kanze (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture



Chandra Jayasuriya, Cartographer, *The University of Melbourne*

Photo 1. Yaks in spring



Gillian G. Tan (March 2006, Minyag Dora Karmo)

- 5 In Tibetan, Dora Karmo means ‘the circle of white rocks’. The entire area of Dora Karmo is regarded as sacred among local Tibetans of Lhagang, a fact underscored by the symbolism of the name in Tibetan. ‘Do ra’ (Tib. *rdo ra*), the circle of rocks, is pure and nurturing, characteristics indicated by ‘kar’ (Tib. *dkar*), which means white, and ‘mo’ (Tib. *mo*), which could signify that the rocks are regarded as feminine. Furthermore, nomads of Dora Karmo regard themselves as keepers of a divine site who carry out activities of forest and wildlife protection. For the past hundred years, it has been the place where revered local Buddhist lamas and practitioners have come for meditational retreat and, to this day, it is the refuge of a number of meditating lamas.
- 6 The following ethnographic account is based on my fieldwork in Dora Karmo conducted during 2006. In an article that deals with changes in Dora Karmo, it would be disingenuous to not acknowledge that changes have continued to unfold since my fieldwork in 2006, nor admit that my relationship to the field has also altered. To some extent, the diachronic concern is addressed in the fourth section, where I write about observable changes in 2010. But in another way, ethnographic accounts are located outside conventionally historical categories, or what Hastrup has called “the ethnographic present”, reinvented through a critical postmodern gaze (1990). This ethnographic present, Hastrup writes, ‘is a narrative construct that clearly does not represent a truth about the timelessness of the others. We know they are as historical as anybody in all possible ways. But the betweenness implied in fieldwork, and the fact of the ethnographer’s sharing the time not *of* others but *with* others, makes ethnography escape our ordinary historical categories’ (1990, p. 57). Explicit to this ethnographic present is the lived intersubjective space, which Hastrup calls a ‘world’. These worlds are self-defining social spaces that generate their own realities (Ardener 1989). I bring this to attention in order to highlight how the ethnographic present refers not only to time but also to place. In a large area such as the Tibetan plateau, communities of nomadic pastoralists differ in as many ways as they share similarities, with respect to local histories and politics, daily herding practices, dietary habits and present engagements with change. This account describes my experience with one community and does not intend to capture or represent essential truths about Tibetan nomads everywhere.
- 7 During my fieldwork in Dora Karmo, I lived with a household, first in their winter house, a single-storey mud-and-stone structure with one room for baby animals and one room for people, and then, as they moved to progressively higher elevations and back down again with their animals, in the black tent. This black tent is called *ra* (Tib. *sbra*) and differs from the physically modified black tents, or *na tsang* (Tib. *nag tshang*), of nomads further north and west in the regions of Zachukha (Tib. Dza chu kha) and Derge (Tib. Sde dge). These modifications pertain to the number of external and internal poles, the *na tsang* has a greater number of internal poles and few external poles than the *ra*, as well as the general size and comfort : the *na tsang* is larger than the *ra* and will often have a built stove of crushed rocks and water with a metal chimney that allows smoke to be funneled out more efficiently than in the *ra*.

Photo 2. In a black tent



Gillian G. Tan (May 2006, Minyag Dora Karmo)

Photo 3. Preparing the black tent



Gillian G. Tan (May 2006, Minyag Dora Karmo)



- 8 The family with whom I lived comprised the head, an elderly man of around 60 years, his two adult daughters and the younger daughter's husband, *magpa* (Tib. *mag pa*). Households of related kin will generally have winter houses, or will camp, within close proximity to one another. The nomads of Dora Karmo are dispersed across a large area of grasslands and interact most frequently with those other households of related kin<sup>5</sup>. The family with which I lived owned slightly over a hundred head of yaks (Tib. *g.yag*, *Bos grunniens*) as well as ten horses, males and mares, and two large Tibetan mastiffs. Tibetan mastiffs are not usually used for herding<sup>6</sup> and are kept primarily as guard-dogs that protect the herds from thieves and wolves. This composition of animals is typical of almost all households in Dora Karmo. Unlike most other nomads on the Tibetan plateau, nomads in Dora Karmo do not herd sheep, due to an outbreak of rinderpest that decimated the entire sheep population fifteen years ago. The size of yak herds varies significantly between households. The limit for the size of herds is influenced by the ability of households to purchase or acquire more yaks and their skill in managing the existing herd. Among the features of skilful management are the abilities to breed resilient animals, to stave off illness and disease, to access fertile pastures, and so on. However, there is also a correlation between the size of the herd and the number of able-bodied nomads, particularly females, in the household. The presence of infirm or weak nomads in the household will have a negative impact on it by increasing the number of mouths to feed<sup>7</sup>. Wealthy households<sup>8</sup> will almost always have several good workers and few dependents.
- 9 The yak is an animal that is adapted for life in the extreme high-altitude conditions of the Tibetan plateau. Wild yaks are mainly found in the northern part of the plateau, in the Changtang area of the Tibet Autonomous Region. Domesticated yaks are found all over the Tibetan plateau and comprise the major, sometimes sole, portion of a Tibetan nomad family's herd of animals. Yak refers to the male of the species, the female being called a *dri* (Tib. 'bri). The gestation period for a yak is around thirty-six weeks, or nine months (Wiener 2003). The domesticated animal lives to an age of around twenty years. Females of the species may start breeding at three years of age. In Dora Karmo, names for yak calves of different ages are as follows. In the first year, they are called *we'u* (Tib. *be'u*). By the age of fifteen days, these young yak calves are able to eat grass, although they continue to suckle until over three years old. Suckling is encouraged because it prolongs the milk production of the *dri*. In the second year, they are called *yaruh* in the Dora Karmo vernacular, in the third year, *yasum*, and in the fourth year, *sozhe*. The young are not given names; the process of naming begins only after they have had their first young or when they have passed four years of age.

Photo 4. Loading the first move



Gillian G. Tan (May 2006, Minyag Dora Karmo)

- 10 In addition, nomads of Dora Karmo will herd *dzo* (Tib. *mdzo*). The *dzo* is a hybrid between either a male yak and female cow<sup>9</sup> or a male bull and female *dri*. Female hybrids, or *dzomo* (Tib. *mdzo mo*), are more desired than males because of their ability to produce milk. Thus, they are highly prized, sometimes even more than *dri*. As a breeding animal, however, the *dzo* is less valuable because the offspring of a *dzo* and a yak, called *aku* in the Dora Karmo vernacular, is a stubborn animal. I was told that an *aku* is the most difficult of the herd. If the herd goes up the mountain, the *aku* will always head down. If the herd comes down, the *aku* will go up. They are difficult, temperamental and unpredictable. Males *akus* are killed at birth to avoid potential disturbance to the herd and also because they are not used for breeding.
- 11 Nomads of Dora Karmo trade the dairy products of butter and yoghurt for other dietary items, most importantly for their staple grain, *nei* (Tib. *nas*), a kind of highland barley. *Nei* is first roasted, then stone-ground into a flour called *tsampa* (Tib. *rtsam pa*). From the flour, a variety of food is made, the most common being a paste of *tsampa*, tea, butter and hard cheese that is prepared in the individual bowl that each Tibetan nomad carries. *Nei* is acquired from farmers in the neighboring agricultural valleys, including Rangaka. Trade takes place either in nearby Lhagang town, about a two-hour horse ride from Dora Karmo, or Rangaka, about a four-hour horse ride away. The summer months see the most plentiful milk supply, with the household where I lived producing approximately two large metal pots<sup>10</sup> of fresh milk each day. By contrast, female yaks are able to produce just enough milk for their calves in the winter and there is excess milk only for a ladleful of fresh milk for the morning and evening tea.



- 12 A variety of dairy products are made from milk, primarily with the purpose of storing the excess for winter. The predominant form is butter, although yoghurt, *chura* (Tib. *phyur ra*) a hard desiccated cheese, and *api*, a soft curd cheese, are produced in Dora Karmo as in many other nomadic areas on the plateau. Yoghurt is made only in the summer months when there is plentiful supply of milk. Butter and *chura* are mainly made in the summer and stored for consumption in the cold winter.
- 13 In addition, a particular type of cheese called *zhorshi* is made in Dora Karmo. This cheese is unique to the Lhagang area and I have not come across it in any other nomadic region, in Kham at least. Making *zhorshi* is extremely labour-intensive work: the household I lived in, with around 40 lactating *dri* in the summer, only produced approximately half a litre of summer *zhorshi* throughout the summer, and a small round of approximately 250 grams of winter *zhorshi* at the end of the year. To make *zhorshi*, branches of a shrub called *langma*<sup>11</sup> (Tib. *glang ma*) are cut and stripped of the bark. These pliable branches, which are white underneath the bark, must be cut during the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar<sup>12</sup> otherwise the milk will not 'stick' to the branches. These branches are then placed in wooden buckets that are used for milking. After each morning's milking, the milk is poured out as usual into large pots. The branches in the wooden buckets remain untouched. Eventually, after each milking in and pouring out in the daily production of milk products, residual milk clings to the branches, building up to form a spongy coating on the branches. This is the initial stage of the *zhorshi*.

Photo 5. Making *zhorshi*



Gillian G. Tan (September 2006, Minyag Dora Karmo)

- 14 When enough residual milk has stuck to the branches, the soft and spongy coating is collected from the branches and placed in a pot. This coating is then boiled for one to two hours before it is taken off the heat and placed in a bottle or jar to cool. The product is

summer *zhorshi* and it remains fairly runny through the heating and storing process. As the summer progresses and the *langma* branches have been through several processes of making *zhorshi*, another type of *zhorshi* is produced, which is made by placing summer *zhorshi* into the stomach of a yak calf, where the natural rennet helps produce a winter *zhorshi*. It is a brown-grey, firm cheese with a distinct aroma and texture. Because of its small quantities from labour-intensive work, the cheese is eaten only occasionally at home and served only to respected guests.

## Pastoral movements

- 15 Because yaks constantly graze, the search for fresh pastures dictates the movements of Dora Karmo nomads. In this article, I use 'nomad' to refer to nomadic pastoralists, the group of people who rely solely on their animals for subsistence and who necessarily move to graze the animals.<sup>13</sup> In Tibetan, the equivalent word carries a similar association; the *drogpa*<sup>14</sup> (Tib. *'brog pa*) are a group of people who move between regular places in the Tibetan grasslands with their yaks and other animals. These places constitute not only the grazing sites for certain seasons, but also carry specific meanings and histories.
- 16 At the end of the winter season, allowing for a period of time in the spring for animals to regain some strength and for the new-born calves to become stronger, the nomads of Dora Karmo begin to move with their herds, from lower to higher elevation and then back again<sup>15</sup>. The timing of these moves is calculated by the local Nyingma monastery – Samgye Monastery – in consultation with community elders.

## Diagram of nomadic movements of Dora Karmo

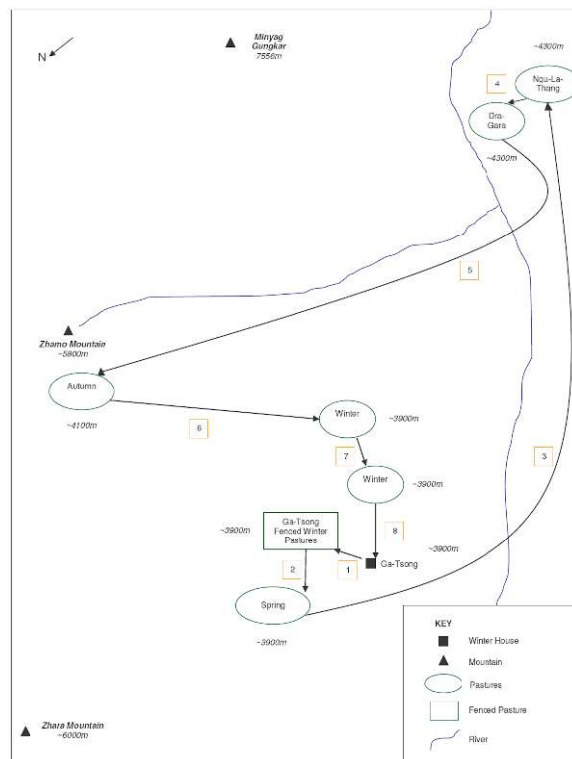


Figure not to scale (please see precise details in the article)  
(1 cm : 250 m)

Gillian G. Tan

- 17 In 2006, the first move out of the winter dwelling occurred on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May in the Western calendar, or the third day of the fourth month in the fire-dog year. The timing of this move not only varied from year to year but also varied among households, with some choosing to move on the specified day and others waiting for better weather. In this first move, the nomads do not venture far, mainly because the animals have been weakened from a harsh winter and cannot move far. Some households move no more than fifty metres from their winter dwellings ; others move slightly further but no more than two hundred metres from their winter dwellings.
- 18 The second move occurred on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June, or the sixteenth day of the fourth month. The nomads moved from fenced winter pastures to spring pastures, less than a kilometre away.
- 19 The third move, which is also the big move from spring to summer pastures, occurred on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July, or the thirteenth day of the fifth month. The summer pastures of Nalungma<sup>16</sup> are called Ngula Thang (Tib. Ngu la thang), which is locally understood to mean 'the crying grasslands'. These summer pastures are located at an elevation of around 4 300 metres and are the highest point that nomads of Dora Karmo move to and remain at before proceeding down to the autumn pastures and finally returning to their winter pastures.
- 20 The fourth move occurred on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, or the fifteenth day of the sixth month. Nomads moved from Ngula Thang to pastures called Dragara (Tib. Sgra mgar ba, or Brag mgar ba), about five kilometres from Ngula Thang and at around the same altitude. Here

they usually stay approximately fifteen days. The pastures are named after a strange formation of rocks on a small hill that creates the sound of an ironsmith's hammer when the strong winds blow past and through it.

- 21 The fifth move occurred on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, or the first day of the seventh month. The nomads moved to their autumn pastures, at the foot of Zhamo mountain. This place was the site of their caterpillar fungus<sup>17</sup> gathering activities in the spring. The autumn pastures are located at an elevation of around 4 100 metres, and are approximately ten kilometres from Dragara.
- 22 The sixth move occurred on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September. The tent moved back to one of the grazing areas of their winter pastures.
- 23 The seventh and final move occurred on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, or the seventeenth day of the eighth month. The nomads moved to pastures near their fenced individual pastures, and returned to their winter houses in early November.

## A brief history of changes, and its effects, in Dora Karmo

- 24 Starting from the 1950s and ending in the early 1980s, the Chinese Communist party reorganized nomadic communities in Eastern Tibet first into cooperatives and then into collectives that aimed to banish individual ownership. Prior to this reorganisation, Tibetan nomads lived in black tents with one family household occupying each tent. Several families usually moved and camped together, mainly for security reasons (Ekvall 1968, p. 28). In Dora Karmo, this household structure has not changed, though houses have now replaced tents through winter. The most significant change resulting from this reorganisation was the reassignment of herds from individual (family) ownership to collective ownership. In Dora Karmo, every two nomads were assigned one animal<sup>18</sup> to tend and look after. Milk products, such as butter, yoghurt and cheese, were placed into the collective and nomads were graded according to how much individual labour they provided. Numbers would be given to them by the head of the collective and, based on these numbers, nomads would be given more or less food and other necessities. The collective building in Dora Karmo was constructed over thirty years ago to store the butter, yoghurt and cheese that the nomads produced. During this time, nomads also lived in the building.
- 25 In Dora Karmo, this way of living and working lasted until the early 1980s, or 'about twenty years ago' as many people told me. The general consensus among older nomads and Tibetans was that life during that time was 'very difficult'. One older woman said, 'then, we didn't have enough to eat most times and we would go out to look for mushrooms [to supplement the diet]'. This period corresponded with the famine that came on the heels of the Great Leap Forward and with the bitter times of the Cultural Revolution.
- 26 Following the disbandment of the collective system in the early 1980s, herds were reallocated to individual households according to the numbers of people per household. A certain allotment of *mu*<sup>19</sup> of grasslands was also distributed to households on the same basis. This land was divided into fenced pastures for the animals and an allotment for the construction of winter houses. Fenced pastures modified the way Dora Karmo nomads had grazed in the past because, to some extent at least, it placed a 'stop' on the

movements of animals, and in consequence, to the movements of nomads. This 'stop' is one of a series of measures proposed by the Chinese government under the *si peitao* policy (Ch. *si pei tao*, or 'four that form a complete set'), which as Yeh has summarized (2005, p. 15), includes 'fencing of twenty of thirty hectares of the most productive rangeland for grazing during late winter and spring ; construction of barns for livestock ; construction of homes for nomads at the winter pasturage site ; and planting and fencing of small plots of annual forage for hay around the winter settlements'. Whereas in the past, the entire area of relevant pastures was open to common grazing, subject to certain customs of coordination and alternation, the fences marked out areas of the grasslands as belonging to individual households, areas where other households could not graze their animals.

- 27 In Dora Karmo, these fenced areas were located in the winter pastures but a significant portion of these pastures was still open to common grazing. In turn, fenced pastures were incorporated into the households' customary rotations of the winter pastures. Thus, nomads of Dora Karmo continued to graze the pastures of their past in much the same way as before, reinforcing Yeh's comment that under *si peitao* policy, there were not many dramatic changes in nomadic lifestyles as a result of the program<sup>20</sup>.
- 28 The winter houses of Dora Karmo were introduced at the same time as the fences, and built on land allotted to individual households. Households in Dora Karmo have two domains of dwelling : the winter house and the black tent. Household structures have altered as a result, with older nomads staying in the house all year round and younger nomads taking the animals out during the spring, summer and autumn months. In terms of interactions with the winter house, younger people tend to use it as they do the black tent in summer months, coming in when they need to cook, eat, tie up the young calves or retire for the night. The exception to this is when the weather is extremely cold ; otherwise, most of their time is spent outside. Older nomads, on the other hand, spend most of their time either in the home or the surrounding area within the low stone and dung walls. Many pass their time spinning large or small prayer wheels and chanting under their breath.
- 29 Houses have not only become part of the way of life for the nomads of Dora Karmo, but some nomads have used the settled dwelling pattern of winter houses as a way to gain some degree of manoeuvre within decrees, altering the exact dates of pastoral moves in this way : when a decree is made about the approximate date of a pastoral move, particularly from the spring to summer pastures, some households will send the younger members of their family to take the stronger animals to the summer pastures first. By going one or two days before the rest of the herd, the stronger animals are able to graze the freshest summer grass. The younger nomads, usually men, are able to take the black tent and set it up while other members of the family, mainly the elderly and the majority of the herd, remain behind in the winter house, according to the decree. In this way, Tibetan nomads of Dora Karmo have appropriated this 'stop' to their movements by using it as an alternative domain of dwelling so that they can maximize the pastures for their animals while remaining within the acceptable bounds of the decrees dictated by convention.
- 30 Through the winter, yaks in Dora Karmo graze primarily on the winter-spring pastures. Over twenty years ago, each household was provided an allotment of pastures corresponding to the number of people in the household. These individual pastures are fenced. The rest of the winter pastures are not fenced and are open to collective use. In the winter pastures, there are approximately five separate grazing areas for the

household I lived with, including the fenced individual pastures. There is no fixed system of rotation within the winter pastures, although households will never allow their herds to graze in the same area on consecutive days. There is a structure of regularity to grazing patterns that is tacitly understood among households in close proximity. The practice depends on where the animals grazed the previous day as well as which household is already at the pastures in the morning. As Dako told me, 'we just go out in the morning and if Jhon-la or some other family is already in the area, then we just go another way. But we never graze on the same pastures as yesterday'.

- 31 This account of Dora Karmo nomads thus far has described my experience with this community at an everyday level. At the time of fieldwork, more recent government policies, such as *tuimu huancao* (Ch. *tui mu huan cao*, 'retiring pastures, returning grasslands'), had not been implemented. Furthermore, this account has not brought in larger contextual issues, such as loss of income as a result of the loss of a way of life, supplement to income through caterpillar fungus, encroaching migration of Han Chinese into towns located in the grasslands, such as Lhagang, and enforcement of nine-year compulsory education on nomad children. While these issues are undoubtedly important, and I will speak directly to those that relate to Dora Karmo, I also found that other issues did not figure in the rhythms and conversations of everyday life in Dora Karmo. This is not, however, to assert that they are not important elsewhere. Indeed, as others such as Ekvall (1968), Miller (1998), Yeh (2003) and Pirie (2005) have observed, conflicts have occurred due to the Chinese state's severe spatial and social reorganisation of communities on the Tibetan plateau.
- 32 An increasing number of works describing conflicts among nomads as a result of disputes over caterpillar fungus boundaries (Lama 2007, Liang 2011, Sulek 2009, 2010) corroborates my own such observations in Dora Karmo, thus suggesting that conflicts caused by caterpillar fungus are on a dramatic rise. Moreover, the complete settlement of nomads through relocation into county-level and township-level towns in some parts of the Tibetan plateau has created a set of problems, such as increased tensions between newly-settled nomads and the original local population. There are also the as-yet-uncertain effects of newer policies, such as *tuimu huancao*, which includes three tiers of removing nomads and their animals from pastures, **1)** where grazing is permanently banned, **2)** where grazing is stopped for a few years, or **3)** where grazing suspended seasonally. Yeh (2005) and Bauer (2005) have suggested that the trope of environmental protection embedded in *tuimu huancao* is, in fact, a form of green governmentality that allows the Chinese state to extend governance over Tibetan nomads.
- 33 This policy has not yet been implemented in Dora Karmo although it is impossible to know what the future holds in this regard<sup>21</sup>. Certainly, there have been efforts, on the part of international development organizations, to pre-empt these measures by creating pastures that are co-managed. Co-management, or joint management, is a way to share and manage the grasslands and its resources among government, scientific experts and local users. Typically, the government provides administrative as well as legislative assistance in managing the grasslands, scientific experts advise on ways to protect, conserve or improve management of the resource, and local users contribute their traditional knowledge of and methods of control over the resource. The inclusion of all actors in co-management creates an equitable system that ultimately conserves the grasslands for future generations.



- 34 In Dora Karmo itself there was an attempt by an international development organization to implement a co-managed rangelands project, by supporting nomads through two kinds of activities : 1) conduct a participatory meeting that would result in an agreement over co-managed pastures, and 2) create a nature reserve that would protect the grasslands from ‘development’, namely from being taken over by government policies to either settle nomads into houses, or build infrastructure on the grasslands. Therefore, the organisation brought together local nomads and government officials to a co-management meeting so that everyone involved would, it was hoped, agree to create a co-managed nature reserve. Another project had been implemented among nomads in Northwest Qinghai Province<sup>22</sup> with great success and a similar model was hoped for in Dora Karmo.
- 35 Yet this model of a nature reserve was also encouraged because the organisation wanted to fulfill its own objectives to protect wildlife on the Tibetan plateau. In its view, a nature reserve would have successfully addressed all the criteria of 1) protecting a portion of grasslands from unwanted development that would push out nomads from their grazing pastures, 2) protecting a portion of grasslands from poachers who would further threaten wildlife in the area, and 3) achieving certain targets so that the organisation could demonstrate to its funders that it was working successfully.
- 36 Nonetheless, this plan rested on two assumptions that did not play out in reality. The first was that, at the time, nomads in Dora Karmo were not in danger of being pushed out from the grazing pastures so they did not feel any imminent threat. Moreover, a nature reserve would have placed a portion of grasslands outside the range of their usual lucrative activity of caterpillar fungus gathering. The second was that nomads would be persuaded by the rhetoric of ‘protecting’ space in order to conserve wildlife. In international development plans, grasslands are the vessel that contains precious and beautiful animals in the same way that abstract space is the ‘neutral, pre-given medium, a tabular rasa onto which the particularities of culture and history come to be inscribed’ (Casey 1996, p. 14). Nomads, however, interact with their pastures in a different way. For nomads, the grasslands are not an abstracted space, but a lived place that they interact with by moving through it and with it ; places that are shared through the continual creation of histories and names. The fact that they interact with these places in this way has allowed them, traditionally, to patrol the area and observe the wildlife in their environment. A cordoned-off space that would be a nature reserve worked according to a logic that was different from that of nomads, and this — among others — was one reason that the project never took off in Dora Karmo.

## Present movements

- 37 When I returned to Dora Karmo in the summer of 2010, I was glad to learn that the family I had lived with had added two new members to the household, a little boy of three years and a baby girl of six months. They were living in their black tent in the winter-spring pastures and were not planning to move this year to Ngula Thang, the summer pastures, because a few baby animals had become sick there. Indeed, to avoid the spread of the disease, village leaders had issued a law (Tib. *khirms*) that prohibited grazing in the summer pastures.

- 38 Material changes continued to occur in Dora Karmo. Motorcycles<sup>23</sup>, which had been introduced earlier in the late 1990s, are now accompanied by mobile phones (with accompanying mobile reception) and electricity. However, material objects such as motorcycles and mobile phones remain solely in the male domain. Sales of caterpillar fungus have given Dora Karmo nomads unprecedented access to cash income, but such a lucrative source of income has also brought about accompanying social issues, such as increased fighting, deaths and revenge feuds. Over-confidence in the continued harvesting of caterpillar fungus has also influenced some nomads to sell their wealth, symbolized in the herd (Tib. *nor*), and this household strategy of 'putting all of one's eggs in one basket' may eventually prove perilous. Expanding infrastructure has meant that there is now a paved road to Dora Karmo. The road opens up possibilities for a growing number of Han Chinese tourists to visit Dora Karmo as they do for the Golden Stupa complex in Lhagang. As far as I know, nomad males who own a motorcycle use this road, although older nomads still choose to ride their horses to Lhagang along a different route. A commercial airport has been built just 26 kilometres away. Dora Karmo nomads do not use this infrastructure and, as with other newly constructed airports on the Tibetan plateau, the Kangding airport services only those wealthy enough to afford its 2 000 rmb<sup>24</sup> return ticket.
- 39 Even though the most extreme versions of recent settlement policies had not yet affected Dora Karmo<sup>25</sup>, nevertheless, a great change had occurred due to the construction and running of a large boarding school for nomad children, initiated by Khenpo Dorje Tashi (Tib. *mkhan po Rdo rje bkra shis*), an incarnate lama who was himself born in Dora Karmo. I have written specifically about Khenpo Dorje Tashi as a modern incarnate lama (Tan 2010) and how, as both a human and divine member of this community, he is regarded as an instigator of change and his actions are viewed as authoritative (Tan 2009b). For this reason, he — more than government officials or international development practitioners — had been able to effect changes in Dora Karmo by building and running a primary-level school that currently houses close to 1000 nomad children from around Lhagang township.

Photo 6. Horses at the horse race



Gillian G. Tan (August 2006, Minyag Dora Karmo)

Photo 7. Nalangma horse race



Gillian G. Tan (August 2006, Minyag Dora Karmo)

- 40 When the local education bureau of Dartsedo County called a meeting of the eighteen village heads of Lhagang administrative township to discuss a long-standing issue, namely how to meet the official policy of providing compulsory nine-year education to children of nomadic communities, the village leaders decided that the boarding school should be in the grasslands, not in town, and the person they entrusted with this responsibility was Aku Dordra, also known as Khenpo Dorje Tashi.
- 41 Dorje Tashi is an influential incarnate lama in Dartsedo County. In the mid-1990s, he founded a welfare school in Lhagang town that has grown to be a success story, well-publicized in the Chinese media and well-regarded locally. It was this achievement that was foremost in the minds of the village leaders when they requested that he manage a school for their children: if he could raise funds for and manage a welfare school that currently boasts magnificent facilities, attracts a dedicated staff and produces students who proceed to elite middle schools in the big towns, then, they thought, he could do the same for their children. The request was made, and accepted, at the end of April 2006.
- 42 The school teaches a government curriculum in Tibetan language in the classroom. However, as the institution is also a boarding school, formal education is supplemented by on-going teaching in life education, including personal hygiene, discipline, kindness to others and to strangers, and working together. In addition, Dorje Tashi has continuing plans to maintain a small herd of yak and *dri* for the school in order to both supplement the children's diet and reinforce the basic skills of nomadism, such as herding and milking. These grand ambitions are still to be fully realized, but the sheer number of students at the school is a testament to the trust that local nomads place in this incarnate lama. The only provision from the government is teachers' salaries as well as a small stipend per year for each student. The remaining, and considerable, cost of housing, feeding and providing for the children falls on the shoulders of Dorje Tashi and his team of highly efficient disciples and supporters.
- 43 The school is presently in its third year of operation, although it continues to evolve, grow and adapt as Dorje Tashi envisions and authorises different types of changes for the children in his care. Its presence in Taraka (Tib. *Rta ra kha*), which had housed earlier community gathering points, such as the prayer-wheel house (Tib. *stong skor*) and cooperative building, has undoubtedly influenced nomads here in more fundamental ways than policies on sustainable grazing rotations and practices. They are not called to imagine a future modernity because it is already present in their midst. They have begun to accept it because the school is working well and it is directed by someone they know and trust. As Phalko said, bouncing her little toddler on her lap, 'Now he'll go to school, Aku Dordra's school, that is good'.

## Conclusion

- 44 Due to national government policies, international development plans, modernizing influences, and the will of a local incarnate lama, unprecedented changes have affected the lifestyles and pastoral movements of Tibetan nomads in Dora Karmo. Policies that redistribute herds and grazing lands, alter nomadic dwellings and settle nomads either temporarily or permanently have greatly influenced how nomads live in Minyag Dora Karmo. Modernising factors that combine both the cash acquired from sales of caterpillar fungus with access to material goods and services, such as motorcycles and mobile

phones, means that nomads of Dora Karmo presently have more 'things' than ever in the past. Nevertheless, these things have come at the cost of increased conflicts over caterpillar fungus boundaries. For some households, confidence in the continued harvesting of caterpillar fungus has precipitated a possibly-rash decision to sell their herd, or wealth, in order to move to towns. Furthermore, because nomads in Dora Karmo now have houses in which to store and keep these things, both their means and ends of accumulation continue to expand. Finally, an influential local lama has brought about unprecedented structural changes to the community, calling into question the sustainability of a lifestyle when children are sent to a boarding school for a better, yet fundamentally different, way of life. How nomads of Dora Karmo will continue to adapt their lifestyles and evolve their nomad practices in the light of these changes remains to be seen.

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## NOTES

1. A note on orthography : I have used a roughly phonetic system of Tibetan transcription. The modifications have followed the pronunciation of Tibetan nomads of Dora Karmo (Kham dialect) as well as considerations of how a non-Tibetan speaking reader might produce the words. Where appropriate, the Wylie system of Tibetan transliteration is provided in parenthesis.
2. 'Villages' is a direct translation of the Chinese word *cun*, which is the lowest level of the formal administrative divisions of the Chinese state. Under this system, Nalungma is comprised of Dora Karmo 1, Dora Karmo 2, Shangmalung (Tib. Bya ma lang) and Sashukar (Tib. Gser chu kha).
3. Samuel (1993, pp. 66, 73) refers to the state of Chagla and its capital, Kangding.
4. This echoes Tambiah's 'galactic polity' (1992), first applied to Tibet by Samuel (1993, pp. 61, 144).
5. In spite of this, communication in the form of news and gossip is extensive and spreads quickly. As is often the case, however, such information may be distorted and exaggerated.
6. During the big move from spring to summer pastures, however, the dogs play a role in keeping the herd together. Refer to Ekvall (1963) for more on the role of the dog in Tibetan nomadic society.
7. Nonetheless, Tibetan nomads will never talk about their family structure in this way and will care unstintingly for any ill relative.
8. Markers of wealth in Dora Karmo are found in the size and health of the herd, also called *nor* (Tib. *nor*), and manifest within the household in less tangible ways. Whenever I went into the home of a wealthy household with a Tibetan person from outside the community, that person would look around and comment that it was wealthy. When I probed them on how they knew this, they said, in English, 'See the wood there, and the size and number of poles ? Also there is lots of barley in the corner. And they offered us fresh butter, and meat.' Slowly I came to associate the orderliness of some spaces and the constant supply of fresh butter, meat and treats in some homes as the visible indications of a wealth otherwise roaming the grasslands.
9. The species of cow and bull is *Bos taurus* and *Bos indicus*, or *huangniu* in Chinese. The household I lived with did not indicate precisely which species was mixed for their sole *dzomo*, whose name was Galuh and treated much like a household pet.
10. A very rough approximation of the size of these pots is 20 litres, which means a production of about 40 litres a day for 40 milked *dri* during the peak of summer.
11. Namkhai Norbu rinpoche (1997, p. xiv) lists this as *Salix thamsoni*.
12. The corresponding month in the Western calendar will vary from year to year because of the differences in alignment between the solar and lunar cycles, but this was approximately May in the year of my fieldwork.
13. This is the primary, albeit specific, use of the word 'nomad'. Australian aborigines are often described as nomads, although they are not pastoralists.
14. For a more detailed discussion, refer to Ekvall (1968, pp. 21-22).
15. For a more detailed and deeper sense of these movements, refer to Tan 2009a.
16. Recall that Dora Karmo is part of a larger community of nomads traditionally referred to as Nalungma.
17. Caterpillar fungus, or *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*, is known in Tibetan as Yartsa gunbu (Tib. *dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu*, literally, 'summer grass, winter worm'). Local nomads call it 'bu' (insect or worm).
18. This information was provided to me by an elderly man in his late seventies who has lived in Dora Karmo all his life. It was confirmed by my companion, a teacher at the Sichuan Province Tibetan School, who was with me at the time of the interview.

19. *Mu* is a unit of measurement used in China and converts to approximately 666 square metres or 1/15<sup>th</sup> of a hectare.
20. In fact, Manderscheid (2001) has commented on a subsequent ‘revival’ in nomadism in Dzamthang, located in Ngawa (Tib. Nga ba, Ch. Aba) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province under that program.
21. A recent communication with Nicola Schneider on 12 July 2012 reveals that new houses are being constructed in the Taraka (Tib. rta ra kha) pastures of Dora Karmo, as of November 2011. It remains unclear if these are being constructed as part of the *tuimu huancao* policy.
22. The organization did not disclose the location of this project.
23. Motorcycles have greatly expedited travel and communication on the pastures but they have not been used in any direct interaction with the animals, such as in herding.
24. As of November 2012, RMB 1 *yuan* is equivalent to USD 0,16. Thus, RMB 2 000 *yuan* is approximately USD 320.
25. Refer to footnote 25.
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## RÉSUMÉS

Cet article décrit les “nomadisations” et la culture matérielle d’une communauté nomade de l’Est du Tibet (Kham). Il s’intéresse aussi à la manière dont ces nomades s’adaptent aux changements entraînés, non seulement par les politiques gouvernementales nationales et les plans de développements internationaux, mais aussi grâce aux efforts d’un lama local.

This article describes the pastoral movements and material culture of a community of nomads in Eastern Tibet (Kham) and how they negotiate changes brought about not only by national government policies and international development plans, but also by a local lama.

## INDEX

**Thèmes** : bouddhisme, changement, élevage, nomadisme

**Population** Khampa, Tibétains

**Keywords** : nomads, pastoral movements, lifestyles, international development, Buddhism, change, breeding, nomadism

**Mots-clés** : nomades, nomadisation, mode de vie, développement international

**Index géographique** : Kham, Tibet, Kanze, Ganzi

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