

CASE STUDY ONE

THE LIFE OF NOMADS IN GOLOG

In the year 1900, a loyal subject of the Tsar, Captain P. K. Kozloff, led an expedition across the deserts of northern Tibet and into the lush pastures of Golog (Ch: Guoluo), a Tibetan prefecture with an area of 78,444 square kilometres. A *Gologpa* (person of Golog) said to him:

You cannot compare us Golog with other people. You obey the laws of strangers, the laws of the Dalai Lama, of China, and of any of your petty chiefs. You are afraid of everyone; to escape punishment you obey everyone. And the result is that you are afraid of everything. And not only you, your fathers and grandfathers were the same. We Golog, on the other hand, have from time immemorial obeyed none but our own laws, none but our own convictions. A Golog is born with the knowledge of his freedom, and with his mother's milk imbibes some acquaintance with his laws. This is why we have ever been free as now, and are the slaves of none – neither the [Mongolian ruler] Bogdokhan nor of the Dalai Lama (Kozloff 1908: 526).

These mobile bands of pastoralists, free to roam through an unfenced land, were loyal only to their clan leaders and to the lamas of the nearest major monastery, who supplied these proud people with mediators to resolve disputes. A recent anthropologist of Golog, Fernanda Pirie, explains:

[...] the monastery sent monks to be their *gowa* for periods of three years. The main tasks of these officials were to approve the headmen of the smaller groups, the *repkor*, and to arrange for monks to carry out religious rituals in the area, but principally to 'sort out the problems' among the nomads, by which they meant resolving cases of theft, fighting and killing. It does not appear that any substantial taxes were levied, although the nomads offered substantial tributes of butter, wool and meat to the monasteries (Pirie 2005: 84).

The *gowa's* (headman) ability to resolve conflicts was not because they were monastic, although the nomads of Golog, despite their quarrelsomeness, were known as devout Buddhists. A *gowa* headman, respected by the nomads, did not win their support by authority because these people had little respect for any authority outside of the clan. Instead, the skilful *gowa* was respected for his clear-headed equanimity, persuasive rhetoric and use of

logic, reason, fairness and compassion in winning over stubborn and hot-headed antagonists. These are the skills of *rigne*, part of the classic Buddhist education in ways of leading others towards a more spacious and accommodating outlook on the path to awakening. Pirie observed in his fieldwork that the power exercised by these mediators is primarily persuasive. The *gowa* also faces precariousness and difficulty in the processes of mediation (Pirie 2005).

Robert Ekvall, an anthropologist in the 1920s and 1930s who was born in Tibet to a Christian missionary family and lived there for decades, reported on the spirit of independence of the "people of the black tents", as the Golog call themselves:

The village organization is generally an informal one. Among the farmers there is a tendency to have a properly chosen headman; but among the nomads, although there is usually one person in the encampment who is known as the headman by right of his influence, it is seldom that he has been chosen formally. Some of the tribes – notably some of the smaller ones – have no chief; all matters of policy are decided by a council of elders somewhat analogous to the encampment council. The members of this tribal council have no special title but are also known simply as the *rgan-po* (the aged ones) nor is participation determined by any formal election; by common consent the leading men of each encampment attend. There are also tribes who have no chiefs but are ruled by the lamaseries to which they belong. In such a case, the lamasery, through its leaders, acts as ruler for certain tribes (Ekvall 1939).

Ekvall's description, from over seven decades ago, of highly autonomous self-governing clans remains largely true even today, with two significant and costly exceptions. First, the monasteries of Golog are now rigidly excluded from playing a constructive role in conflict resolution and they are not permitted to infringe on the prerogative of the State to administer justice. Second, the central authorities have broken their promise of long-term land lease allocations to the Golog nomads.

Many of the Golog leases have been revoked or restricted by new regulations that ban grazing for several consecutive years, which deeply undermines nomadic livelihoods.

Although not too far from lowland China, Golog has until now been a world far away from thick, smoggy, lowland air and booming cities. Golog is a large prefecture in Amdo (Ch: Qinghai) province, ruled from the distant city of Siling (Ch: Xining), far to the north. To Tibetans, these high pastures are among the best countryside areas for nomads. It is a naturally fertile, rolling green landscape that receives sufficient monsoon rain to feed turbulent mountain rivers, as well as maintain lush pasture. Like all Tibetan grasslands, winters are intensely cold, and agriculture is only possible in a few valleys.

Golog prefecture is one of the most authentically Tibetan areas of the Tibetan Plateau, in the sense that the population of non-Tibetan immigrants is small. China's most recent census, in 2000, shows the Tibetan population of Golog as 126,000, with only 9,000 Han Chinese and 3000 of various other ethnicities (China population census 2000: 637, 687). This means that local leaders are usually Tibetan, and they try to balance their official task of transmitting and implementing central directives with respecting the knowledge and way of life of the nomads.

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Like many other pastoral societies, the socio-political structure of Golog is made up of *rukor*, or encampments, a pooling of 35 families – sometimes less, sometimes more – to jointly manage herds, risks, decisions, labour and production, based on accumulated knowledge of local conditions. The term *rukor* refers to the people who live alongside one another and herd their animals on collectively held tracts of grassland (Levine 1998) and usually consists of close relatives. *Rukor* are mutual aid associations, ensuring that every household member receives all possible help from others in times of adversity. There is also a unique way of compensating for the weaknesses of specific families: A household rich in livestock but poor in workforce cooperates with one that has surplus workers but inadequate herds. In these ways, the ties of kinship and neighbourhood reinforce each other.

For example, in Washu Serthar in the Karze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, adjacent to Golog, the Tibetan anthropologist Losang Gelek reports that the people herd livestock together in a unit of five or so tents and households (Gelek 1998). This *rukor* varies greatly in size depending upon the local environmental, demographic,

political and social circumstances. Social insecurity, as in many societies, encourages people to form a larger *rukor*.

Both the strength and weakness of Golog – and other small, flexible, mobile, stateless societies – is their intense loyalty to others within the clan, and disdain for outsiders. Amazingly, the social organisation of the nomad clans and tribes has survived the bloody conquest by the People's Liberation Army, collectivisation, destruction and the imposition of centralised authority based in remote lowland cities. The highly democratic *rukor* tent-circle internal governance of these nomads has, quite remarkably, survived into the 21st century, and has been noted in many anthropological fieldwork studies.

Like the *rukor*, the larger group called *tshowa* was widely found among ethnic Tibetan pastoralists. The *tshowa* is a unit of socio-political structure that has maintained its importance through to the present day. *Tshowa* traditionally included several hundred households and controlled large tracts of land, which were independently utilised by constituent encampments (Levine 1998). A *tshowa* can have between 10 and 30 *rukor* or encampments (Gelek 1998). The members of the *rukor* work together on various herding tasks that provide risk insurance, either by sharing or rotation.

The Golog people were traditionally known for being fiercely independent, submitting neither to Lhasa nor Beijing until overwhelmed by the full force of modern warfare in the 1950s. Chapter one (Nomads and Grasslands) describes the many laws and regulations now governing nomadic life, including the policies of fencing and sedentarisation. These policies attempt to curtail nomadic mobility, limit family and herd size, and turn nomads into poor ranchers that are restricted to fixed allocations of fenced land.

Chapter one also details the history of statist interventions which, in the 1960s and 1970s, went to the extreme of total collectivisation of nomads, their herds, land and private property. This was followed in the 1980s by the opposite extreme, where each household was separately responsible for their own animals and a fixed, unalterable allocation of land was leased from the State. The nomads' traditional *rukor* (or *repkor*) tent-circle stands somewhere in between these two extremes. *Rukor* have made a comeback wherever township and county leaders in Golog have been willing to accept the system. After all the years of failed Chinese policies, it has become clear that the *rukor* is the most suitable community-based organisation to bring about sustainability.

For now, however, the *Gologpa* must obey the new laws of China's "green governance", a set of regulations imposed from above that have already, as chapter one reports, divided the whole of Golog into three zones: Areas where the number of animals must be reduced by 50 per cent; areas where grazing is banned altogether for three to five years, leaving nomads without herds or livelihood; and areas where both herds and nomads are removed altogether. No part of Golog is exempt, even though the prefectures of Golog and neighbouring Yushul (also subject to the same bans and exclusions) are the biggest producers of yak meat in the Amdo province (CSB Qinghai Statistical Yearbook 2006: table 11-21, 240). China's new laws have been devastating for Golog.

These current regulations exacerbate the extensive degradation in Golog, already the result of decades of Chinese policy which drove the grasslands too hard, built up herd numbers by collectivising production, took decisions out of the hands of experienced nomads and reduced the availability of meat to nomads in order to quickly increase the national herd size.

A report by the scientist Dillard Gates, who assessed the Golog grasslands in 1996 for the European Union, is alarming:

In extensive areas the ecological collapse of the soil/vegetation complex is imminent or has already happened. This ecological degradation is the result of decades of extensive plant utilization, by too many animals over too long of a period of time. The present rangeland degradation problems were brought about by disruption of the traditional nomadic herding system and central government programs intended to increase livestock numbers and production of livestock products.

The excessive stocking rates were simply manifestations of the pressure from central government to increase production of livestock goods. The disruption to the traditional nomadic system of grazing, and the establishment of permanent villages and townships, has contributed to the rangeland degradation problem (Gates 1996: 1).

China's latest "green governance" policies also declare that pastoral nomadism and watershed conservation are incompatible. Although Golog produced 21,500 tonnes of yak meat in 2005, China is willing to sacrifice much of this production, most of it consumed locally, to the national goal of conserving China's main river sources by excluding nomads from their pastures. Golog is not well

connected to the main urban markets of Amdo (Ch: Qinghai) province, and since 1997 Amdo has produced more pork than beef (CSB Qinghai Statistical Yearbook 2006: table 11-21, 240).

Although the economy of Golog is almost entirely pastoral, intensive pig farming close to Amdo's urban centres have made the grasslands largely irrelevant. Golog today accounts for less than 12 per cent of Amdo's total meat production.

Managing the yak herd of Golog, a task that involves 1.2 million animals, is the sole occupation of a population in a prefecture with more land than Belgium and Switzerland combined, and suited to no other livelihood. Yet this herd is converted into only a small amount of meat annually because China has now decided the whole of Golog must serve Beijing in quite a different way – as part of the Three Riverheads Programme, protecting the sources of the Machu (Yellow River), Driчу (Yangtze River) and Zachu (Mekong River).

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This is a sign of what is to come all over Tibet. China's new "green governmentality" decisively puts watershed protection first, and nomadic livelihoods second. This assumes that a choice must be made between the two. Participatory co-management, for both conservation and sustainable livelihoods, has been ruled out completely by the Chinese, although it is a more skilful alternative.

Two Chinese professors of the Tibet Academy of Agricultural Science in Lhasa stated:

Ecological effects and benefits are to receive top priority while the livelihoods of farmers and herdsmen and local economic development shall be equally considered. Such measures as providing food, cash, and pasture seed subsidies are to be taken to solve the problems brought about by the project to farmers and herdsmen. Herdsmen will be encouraged to cull and sell livestock to increase the off-take from pastures. Farmers and herdsmen will also be persuaded to raise less or no livestock that require long periods of grazing (Zhao and Chen 2004: 87).

The overall effect of these policies on the nomads in Golog and adjacent areas is troubling, as fieldwork reports reveal. In 2005, Michelle Nori reported the following from Yushul, which is adjacent to Golog:

The overall picture is of an increasing amount of herding households subsisting in critical conditions. Decreased pastoral productivity increases households' need for income and pushes for seeking alternative livelihood sources out of the pastoral system. Poor households are forced to get closer to towns to seek for income-generation opportunities, to allocate their labour force out of their livestock production, to shift their seasonal movements according to labour and market opportunities. These factors insert them into a vicious circle, which is likely to expel them from pastoralism to other kinds of livelihoods. The current situation on the ground is therefore of a huge number of herding families with limited livestock resources, low livestock productivity, high levels of indebtedness and limited options to tackle any of these problems. All this leads to increasing levels of vulnerability and poverty. The new Government of China 3RHP [Three Riverheads Programme] is likely to provide another brick to this wall, by further inducing herding households to out-migrate pastoralism towards urban-based livelihoods. It is already clear that in some areas pastoralists are selling out parts of their herds fearing the 3RHP with its destocking principles (Nori 2004: 50).

The nomads of Golog and Yushul were the first to experience these statist intrusions that curtail or completely halt their livelihoods, reducing them to marginal poverty. The rest of Tibet must follow, according to professors Zhao and Chen of the Tibet Academy of Agricultural Sciences. Meat production in the future will

no longer make extensive use of large areas of Tibet, but will be "scientifically" concentrated in small areas close to cities. Professors Zhao and Chen declare:

Transform grassland agriculture. Pen-feeding or semi-pen-feeding with concentrated feed as supplementary feeding, wherever possible, is to be encouraged. The animal husbandry sector will be reformed and optimised. The goal is to form a pattern of breeding on pasturelands and fattening in farming and semi-farming areas. In order to protect pastures, the amount of livestock on hand will be scientifically regulated. In recent years, in order to improve the productivity and living conditions of farmers and herdsmen, the government has supported projects of ecological migration, herdsmen's settlement, and drinking water supplies. To be out of the plight of poverty and be affluent is the dream of human beings (Zhao and Chen 2005: 87–89).

As is already happening to the once-free nomads of Golog, the formerly autonomous nomads of the whole of Tibet are to be fenced, regulated and compulsorily emigrated to distant new towns, in the name of grassland restoration and watershed protection. The nomadic way of life is being stopped so that grass re-grows. The more skilful alternative would be to invest in grassland repair, with nomads and officials working together to achieve the Beijing leadership's goal of "The Harmonious Development of Man and Nature".

