

# Yaks

Daniel J. Miller

Yaks are found from Afghanistan to Western China, from the subtropical southern slopes of the Himalaya in Nepal and Bhutan to the taiga forests of Mongolia. Man could not live on the "Roof of the World" without yaks. Numerous Central Asian tribes like the Kirghiz, Kazaks, Mongols, Tibetans and Sherpas depend on the herding of yaks for survival in some of the most inhospitable and scenic environments in the world.



*Female yak hybrid crosses called chauri in Nepali being milked in the Langtang Valley.*

The long hair that the yak is famous for is used for making ropes, blankets, pack bags, and even tents. Yaks also provide a fine inner wool that is spun and woven into clothing. In parts of Nepal and Tibet, yak herders still live year round in yak tents. Tough, proud herdsman, who still wear their hair long in braids in the old style, can be seen spinning yak wool with drop spindles as they take care of their great shaggy beasts. Young boys, running barefoot across alpine meadows while herding yaks, use yak hair sling shots that sound like rifle shots. Women with sunburned faces the color of good bourbon and wearing the family's wealth in beads of coral, amber, and turquoise sit for hours at back strap looms weaving yak hair blankets.

Female yaks are important milk producing animals. Yak milk, which is extremely high in butterfat content, is used for making butter and cheese. In many regions of Nepal yak butter is made by churning milk in large wood barrels. A pole with paddles on one end is placed in the barrel of milk and spun by two herders pulling on leather straps. They sing a "Butter Making Song" while churning to maintain a steady rhythm. In Dolpo, the region of Nepal to the north of Dhaulagiri Himal, nomadic herders make butter by using an old yak hide sewn together like a barrel. It is filled with milk and rocked back and forth until butter forms.



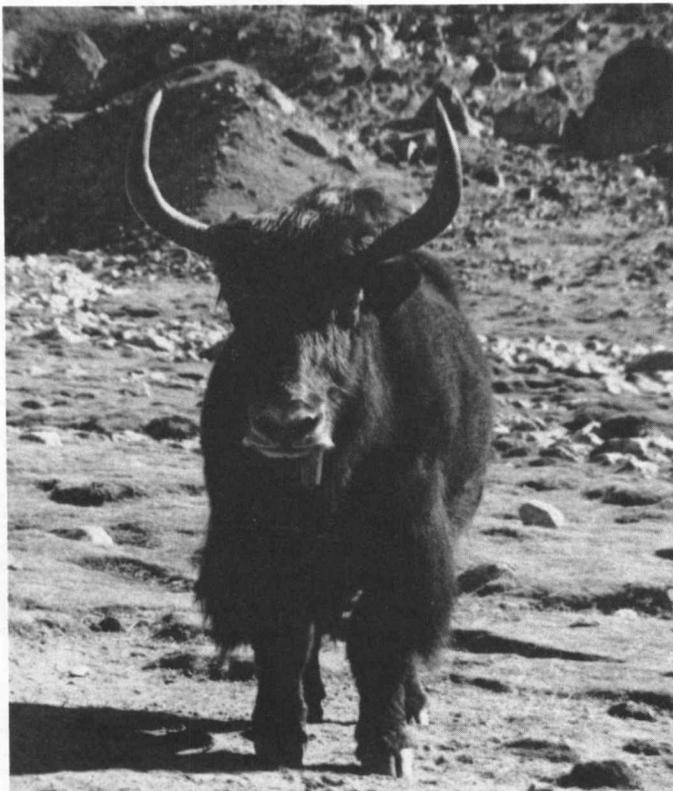
*Wooden barrel used to churn milk into butter.*

Large quantities of yak butter are used in making "Tibetan tea," a tea brewed with butter and salt. Butter is also used for burning butter lamps in Buddhist temples and large caravans of yaks carrying butter from pasture lands to monasteries were common sights in Tibet. In Nepal at elevations of 16,000 feet, cheese factories established with Swiss technical aid produce cheese from yak milk that is sold in Kathmandu to tourists. A traditional kind of cheese is made by herders from buttermilk and dried in the sun, which enables them to keep it for months without spoiling. Both butter and cheese are traded or sold for grain and other goods that herders require.

Yaks are also beasts of burden and are used for plowing fields and carrying loads. In many parts of the Himalaya enormous quantities of grain from the mid-hills are taken to Tibet on the backs of yaks in large caravans and traded for salt and wool. Yaks are surer footed than horses and easily negotiate 17,000 foot passes with 150 pound loads. Climbing expeditions in the Himalaya would never even make it to their base camps if yaks weren't available to transport their gear.

Yak hides are used for making boot soles, ropes, and in many parts of Tibet yak hide coracles are still used to cross large rivers much as Indian tribes on the Upper Missouri River used buffalo bull boats. White yak tails used to be an important export item from Tibet. They were used to make Santa Claus beards. Yak tails are still important in rituals among the Newar people of Kathmandu, Nepal. Yaks are even on the five rupee note of Nepal.

Not only are yaks used as the sustenance of life, but they are also linked closely to the cultural and ritual activities of



Yak used for packing supplies to Mt. Everest base camp at elevations of 18,000 ft.



Mature yak bull.

Elaborate ceremonies are also held during the summer to dedicate certain yaks to the local mountain gods in ritual sacrifices so that the mountain deities will look favorably upon the villagers and insure plentiful harvests.

During one of the Nepal-Tibet wars in the late 18th century when the Gurkhas, as the Nepalese troops are known, had invaded Tibet and were starving for lack of food, the Hindu priests with the Gurkhas pronounced the yak to be species of overgrown deer. This allowed the hungry Nepalese soldiers to kill and eat yaks since they were no longer considered sacred as cows were according to their Hindu religious beliefs.

Yak herders still relate legends on the origin of yaks and believe that yaks originated from one of three sister cows that lived in the mid hills of the southern Himalaya. Because the cows were hungry for salt one of the sister cows volunteered to go to Tibet in search of it. Knowing it would be cold in Tibet one of the sisters gave up her coat of hair to the one going north in search of salt. The cow that went to Tibet in search of salt found lots of salt and decided to stay there and became the yak. The cow that gave up her coat of hair went further south where it was warmer and became the water buffalo.

The yaks, *Bos grunniens*, is taxonomically closely related to the tropical members of the genus *Bibos*, the banteng and gaur. Domestic yaks are descendants of wild yaks captured and domesticated thousands of years ago in eastern Tibet. Wild yaks are still found in Tibet and they are huge. Wild yaks have been reported reaching a height of six feet at the shoulders and weighing 1,800 pounds! Domestic yaks are much smaller with the males reaching heights of five feet at the shoulders and weighing up to 1,000 pounds. Female yaks are smaller and have a gestation period of 258 days. Female yaks give about one liter of milk a day.

During the Pleistocene era yaks were found in Alaska along with mastodons and saber toothed cats. Even now in Alaska and Montana yaks can be found at rodeos where they have a reputation of bucking good cowboys off before the buzzer.

There is a real need for more research on yaks, Central Asian grazing systems and yak grazing behavior so that the productivity of yaks and yak hybrids can be increased. ●



Yak hybrid crosses being used as draft animals.

herding societies. In the Langtang Valley of Central Nepal when the yak herds are brought to the summer pastures in early June, there is an important festival. Yaks are outfitted with bells and colorful tassels. Even the horns of yaks are shined with butter. Each family's belongings are packed in bamboo baskets and people and yaks join in a colorful procession to the summer grazing lands. Homemade alcoholic beverages are consumed in large quantities and people sing and dance until late in the night for a couple of days. Offerings are made to the monks in the nearby temple and juniper branches are burned as incense to the mountain gods. For months now the people tending the herds will be away from the villages and their families.