

# A Day in the Gode

The Introduction<sup>1</sup> to **Himalayan Herders**

By Naomi H. Bishop



**Melemchi Village is in the clearing at the bottom of the frame. The pastures are smaller clearings on the surrounding mountainsides.**

The rain had been falling all night. Outside, the *zomo* shift position, occasionally brushing the stone walls of the *pathi* where the family sleeps. *Zomo* are cow-yak hybrids, large dairy animals that thrive in Himalayan pastures between 2134 and 4000 meters altitude. There are 16 *zomo* and one large bull in this herd, all sleeping standing up in the muck that accumulates at these high altitude shelters from the daily traffic of hoofstock and people. Twenty-one sheep and goats are safely under a shelter of tree boughs attached to the outside wall of the *pathi*, while the chickens and baby *zomo* calf sleep inside with the family. A Tibetan mastiff dog is chained to a stake nearby ready to bark at the sound of any intruder; last week, he was attacked by a wild pig and barely escaped with his life. Now that the National Park is here, no one can kill the pigs and they are wreaking havoc on the fields, forest, and even the herding families in their isolated pastures.

At first light, Chenga rises from her pallet of wool blankets and, blowing through a foot long piece of bamboo, rekindles the embers of the previous night, starting the hearth fire that burns continuously, providing warmth, food, and light for her family of five. Her husband, Tandu, is also awake. Like everyone else, he has slept in his clothes and immediately steps outside through the open doorway to check on the herd. The sun

---

<sup>1</sup> **Himalayan Herders** is written as a conventional ethnography. The Introduction, in contrast, is an evocative description of a day in the life of a Melemchi herding family, based on a composite of many such days and many such families. The names used are not the names of an actual Melemchi family.

has not yet risen high enough over the mountains to reach them with its warm rays. He wears his home-woven wool jacket that provides rain protection as well as warmth, but walks barefooted. The best forage is gone, and he is tired of the mud surrounding the *pathi*; he has laid out boards to walk on near the doorway but the continuous trampling of hooves, the frequent monsoon rain, and the ground leeches that congregate near herds and moisture have made him decide to move on. Today he will leave early with a load of supplies to check out his next pasture. He is lucky - his grandfather owned excellent pastures, which are his to use. Few of his brothers still herd today, so he has a choice of pastures and can move whenever he wants.



At 5:30 a.m., Chenga and her oldest daughter Putali are already making butter from yesterday's milk. Fourteen of the *zomo* are in milk now. After only a day, the milk has begun to turn to yogurt and is churned in a large wooden barrel three feet high and two feet in diameter - the two women alternate pulls on opposite ends of a thick leather strap which is wound around the churn paddle. By 7:30, two large balls of butter are in the wooden bucket in the corner and the leftover whey has been put into a large pan and is heating over the fire. While Chenga makes cheese from the whey, Pruba Doma, their thirteen-year-old daughter, takes the sheep and goats out to graze away from the pasture clearing. She will stay with them, bringing them back in the evening.

No one notices the rain; life goes on regardless of the weather. Summer pastures are usually wet - either from rain or the perpetual mist and clouds which hover on the high slopes. Life inside the *pathi* is dry and warm. When the sun shines, the light filters in through the woven bamboo mats, creating a reddish glow. A thick bed of juniper boughs forms the floor. As the family moves through their daily routine, the boughs are bruised, releasing a sweet fragrance. The fireplace is against a wall, with room to sit around it on three sides. It is just a depression in the ground; deep enough to create a draft when pieces of wood are arranged over it like spokes. Cooking pots rest on an iron tripod over the fire. The family sits, eats and sleeps around the hearth, on wool blankets or calfskins. A similar mud fireplace exists in houses in the village; in fact, except for dairying chores, domestic life in a village house isn't much different from life in a *gode*, the local term for the movable shelters constructed by herding families. In both places, life is lived on the floor, and the hearth is its center. Living in a *gode* is not like "camping out"; it is where people live their lives and raise their families.

Tandu finishes his last cup of butter tea with *tsampa* (toasted barley flour) mixed in to form a dough, and sets out with a sixty-pound load of household supplies in a basket on his back, held on by a tump-line or rope around his forehead. Still barefoot, he will climb for three hours up to Pangkharke pasture, deposit the supplies and check out the pasture and his *pathi*. The descent will be quick without a load and he expects to be back within five hours. Meanwhile, it is time to milk the *zomo*. The sun has finally reached the pasture, and the *zomo* are warm and ready.



Chenga puts a leather bag of salt around her neck, grabs her leather thong and wooden milking bucket, and steps outside. The black *zomo* is waiting just outside the door. She leans down to tie its back legs together with the thong and then, tucking the back of her skirt tight against her legs, she squats down next to the udder, rubbing it with some of the milk scum left on the side of the milking bucket. With long, smooth movements, she pulls down on the teat with her thumb and forefinger, alternating hands as the milk flow begins. Five minutes later, she is finished; she unties the *zomo*, and whacks it on the rump as it runs off. She returns to the *pathi*, pours out the milk, and sets out again, this time with a calf skin in her hand. Putali follows her with a pan of whey. Chenga approaches a black and white *zomo*. This *zomo* needs to smell the skin of her dead calf in order to let down milk. Chenga lets her smell it and then sets the skin on the

ground with the pan of whey on top of it. The *zomo* drinks the whey as Chenga ties its legs and begins to milk. When she is finished, she feeds the *zomo* salt from her pouch. All *zomo* are given salt during the months of lactation, because "salt makes the food taste good in the mouth so they eat more, just like with people. The more they eat, the more milk they produce."

For the next hour and a half, Chenga milks *zomo*, each requiring a slightly different technique or special treatment. One *zomo* needs her vulva massaged to stimulate urination before she can be milked. Another *zomo* can't give milk without her live calf to stimulate milk let-down. This is the calf that lives in the *pathi* with the family. Calves are only kept if the mother needs them, since they compete for milk with the herder. Chenga brings the calf out at milking time and lets it nurse for about 45 seconds before she ties it up near the mother's head where the mother nuzzles and licks it while being milked. Chenga leaves some of the milk for the calf.

The big gray *zomo* is a "man beater", and only Tandu and Chenga can go near her. "Man beaters" are unreliable, attacking people, especially strangers, with upward strokes of their sharp curved horns. The gray *zomo* is a good milker and besides, they paid a lot of money for her, so they keep her but handle her with caution.

Once all the milk is collected, the *zomo* are encouraged to move away from the *pathi* and graze. Putali or her sister Purba Diki chase them out and stay with them as they forage on the steep slopes and forested areas around the pasture. Chenga squeezes the morning's fresh cheese into ribbons, which are laid on a bamboo mat. The mat is placed above the fire on a rack, and within a day or two the cheese will be dried into hard, sour, smoky-tasting *chiurpi*, eaten by all Himalayan high altitude herders whatever their ethnicity. *Chiurpi* is the quintessential trail food - light, portable, good to suck on, full of fat and protein, and it lasts forever. It can be ground into a powder and mixed with *tsampa* (barley flour) and water as well.

There is always a lot to do in a *gode*. Chenga walks to the nearby river and carries back water, puts the next day's supply of fire wood up on the rack to dry out, cleans out the animal droppings from the *pathi*, and cuts fodder for the animals who don't go out to graze. Pinzo arrives looking for butter. He has walked up from Melemchi village; this is his third stop for the day. The other two *gode* had no butter. Since so many people have given up herding and gone to work in India, it is getting hard to find butter, even in summer time when production is at its peak. It is not like it used to be; even twenty years ago, Melemchi herders had so much butter they put it in tins and carried it to Kathmandu to sell. Chenga agrees to sell Pinzo some, but first she offers him butter tea from the pot that is always on the fire. "*Shey, shey* (drink, drink)," she urges as she leans forward with the pot, waiting for him to take the customary first sip. Three refills are obligatory, so Pinzo takes a big slurp, proffering the cup for topping-off.

While Pinzo fills her in on news of the village, Chenga stands and begins to churn another pot of tea, her second of what will be probably ten pots for the day. She has already boiled some new tea leaves with the old brew, and strained it into the thin

cylindrical wooden tea churn. Adding butter, rock salt and a pinch of baking powder, she braces the churn with her foot and plunges up and down repeatedly to mix the emulsion. Finally, she pours it into the teapot and, from there, into Pinzo's cup. The monsoon clouds have risen from the valley floor and, while they visit, it begins to rain. Finally, Chenga wraps a ball of butter in leaves for Pinzo, sending along a bag of *chiurpi* as a present for his wife and son, and Pinzo departs.



When Tandu arrives in a torrential downpour, Chenga is spinning wool, using a spindle-top as she turns fluffy wool fibers into a single strand. Tandu reports that several streams were running so high that he had to wait for the rain to subside in order to cross over them. However, the pasture is in good shape and he saw Pemba, who will be moving up as well in the next day or two. Chenga is pleased to hear that they will be sharing the pasture. Pemba's wife is her sister and it will be nice to have another family around, especially since she and Tandu will have to go down to the village in another week and begin to till and fertilize their *changda* fields. Even though the girls can manage the herd alone, having Pemba's family there will allow Chenga and Tandu to stay in the village for a few days to complete the work.

Tandu decides to go down to Melemchi and bring back their eleven-year-old son, Norchung, who is living with Tandu's mother while he attends the village school. He will be needed for three days to help move the *gode*. A *gode* move is a lot of work, requiring about eight adult loads. Even if you can get friends to help, it takes more than a single day. Men carry the rolled up bamboo mats (one load) and the butter churn (one load). The rest of the equipment, supplies and personal belongings are divided into basketloads to be carried by Chenga and the two older girls. The younger children carry small baskets and lead the baby animals. On the last day, the herd goes along. Bells are tied on the *zomo* so they can hear each other and be heard as they move through the forest. Tandu takes the lead, with the family following after the *zomo*, who usually move quickly in anticipation of new forage.



**Moving the *gode*. Following one of the *zomo*, the heavily-laden wife brings one of the eight loads up to the new pasture. Boys living in *gode* in 1971 often wore only a shirt. (1971)**

Tandu leaves for Melemchi. He hurries down the trail with light steps, hampered only by the two lambs he is dragging behind to sell. When he reaches the village, he goes to the house of the government schoolteacher and asks permission for Norchung to be excused. Permission is granted and he and Norchung leave the lambs and depart immediately, in order to get up to the pasture before dark. Normally Tandu would have picked up some *tsampa* and other supplies from his house in the village. Houses are used to cache food, enabling *gode* families to travel light. Since he is moving the *gode*, Tandu will wait on resupplying until after the move.

At the pasture, the *zomo* have returned for mid-afternoon milking. The mist is heavy, but there is no more rain. Chenga finishes milking and walks among the herd with a drop spindle, spinning two strands of wool into the yarn she will use to weave jackets and blankets. Putali, the oldest daughter, makes another trip to the river for water while Purba Diki scrubs pots behind the *pathi*, using ash from the fire and sandy dirt. Pruba Doma returns with the flock of sheep and goats, and begins to settle them for the night. Tandu and Norchung arrive from Melemchi just as it is turning dark. They have some potatoes from the village, which Chenga boils, serving them with *marza*, a paste of fresh ground chilies, garlic and salt. She reports on the four people who stopped in to buy butter; all but Pinzo went away empty handed. Chenga is saving their butter for butter lamps and *torma* for a Buddhist ritual the family will sponsor when they get close to the village. Butter lamps and figures made of *tsampa* flour and butter are a crucial part of most Tibetan rituals, as is butter tea for all the participants. Tandu announces that Zangbu is back from India; it looks like he must have done good business there since he arrived with porters carrying an Indian-made airtight stove. Later he tells Chenga that

Zangbu plans to bring *them toljung*, the ritual bottle of beer used to arrange a marriage, when they come down to prepare their fields. Zangbu's son Dorje wants to marry Putali, who at eighteen is definitely marriageable. This would be an arranged marriage; if the parents give their permission by accepting the *toljung*, the girl is grabbed by the boy and his friends without her knowledge or consent. Chenga and Tandu think the match would be good for Putali. There would still be two daughters to help at the *gode*, and by marrying a Melemchi boy, Putali would remain attached to the village and available to help them easily.

In the darkness, a small oil lamp made from a discarded tin can provides light for the family to get ready for the night. The sheep and goats have already settled on the other side of the wall. The chickens are under their basket in the corner; the calf is lying down on the juniper branches. Outside, the Tibetan mastiff is chained to a stake. Plates and cups are set in the corner to be washed in the daylight and bedding is laid out around the fire. As the rain begins to fall, the *zomo* stand in the darkness.



**Citation:**

Bishop, Naomi H. 1998. **Himalayan Herders**. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers. Retrieved from the World Wide Web: <http://www.cda.ucla.edu/faculty/bishop/HHBook/intro.pdf>