



# Food for Thought

## September 2009

### Shem Women's Group

#### Tibet

*I saw 'to give birth to a girl or a boy is the same' on the walls of the houses on the way to the project site. I was very happy and enthusiastic to see it since I am one of the gender program officers and it is also very meaningful to me.*

*– Lhamotso Hlamo, Shem Women's Group, Gender Program Officer*



### AUGUST'S EDUCATIONAL THEME: TIBETAN NOMADIC POVERTY

The nomadic areas of the Tibetan Plateau in Western China have a small human population that is widely spread across physically isolated locations. Animal husbandry remains the primary source of income, employment, and livelihood for Tibetan Nomads, and a flourishing livestock sector is necessary to reduce poverty. Due to the heavy economic reliance on herding sheep and yaks at high elevations, Tibetan nomads are very vulnerable to climatic changes and natural disasters. Devastating winter storms are an annual reality, and overgrazing by animals has worn down the rangelands. Widespread poverty in the nomadic and semi-nomadic areas of Tibet has inhibited livestock

development and the modernization of marketing systems for products such as wool and mutton as well as the ability of those in the nomadic areas to grasp new economic opportunities.

Forms of poverty in the Tibetan nomadic areas vary. While many of the poor nomads, both individuals and households, generate a mix of income sources, others--especially the elderly, disabled and women-headed households--have to rely on family and government support. The per capita income in Tibet is about half that in China. The proportion of the rural population living below the poverty line in Naqu Prefecture of Tibet, which was hit hard by a severe winter in 1997/1998, is about 40 percent.<sup>i</sup>

### WOMEN'S ROLES AND THE WIDESPREAD LACK OF ELECTRICITY

Rural Tibetan nomads are severely limited by the lack of electricity. Barriers created by this deficiency are innumerable, particularly to women. Lack of electricity impacts the workload of women and determines their leisure time. Starting work as early as four or five a.m., a Tibetan woman's day consists of routine work, from feeding the family and caring for the livestock to daily house chores. In the evening, she can hardly attend to any work under the dim light of kerosene or butter lamp. Therefore, she has to complete

### Fast Facts

**70-80%** of Tibet's villagers are illiterate.

Approximately **50%** of the children in the villages attend school.

Tibetan nomads make a living on the livestock, by herding yaks and sheep on the high mountains and selling some to earn money.

University tuition is **5,000 to 7,000 RMB** (\$732 to \$1,025) a year.

Families with students in universities need to borrow money from their relatives and friends to keep them in school.

her work during the day time and lacks leisure time for resting or attending social activities. Opportunities for community activities are limited by lack of electricity as well.

Two of the main issues resulting from this problem are the heavy work burden on women and restricted educational opportunities for girls. Lack of electricity and labor necessity are the main reasons for low enrollment of female students in school. Girls usually have to help their mothers with daily house chores and care of the livestock before it gets dark. As girls have no time for study, their school attendance is very low. Even those who are enrolled in school have little time to study. The status of women and girls in their communities is lower than that of men and boys, and their schooling is considered less important.

### **DANGERS OF LIVING IN DARKNESS**

It is often not possible for women to complete their work before nightfall, and caring for livestock after dark can be very dangerous for them. Sometimes livestock is lost during herding when they have not been driven home before dark. The women may have to milk their yaks and feed the lambs, bucks, or baby yaks in limited light.

One woman was blinded by a yak's horn when the animal stuck its horn into her left eye as she was trying to tie the yak to its line. Without funds for medical treatment, she lost sight in the eye. The villagers live in terror of such accidents. Even though they take care to avoid them and they occur only during the nighttime, usually, villagers continue being terribly wounded by livestock due to lack of light.

### **APPROPRIATE APPROACHES: SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTIONS**

Shem Tibet focuses on increasing the well-being of people in impoverished communities by providing access to basic needs such as water, fuel, electricity, health care, and basic education. They fulfill their mission by training educated Tibetan women to design, implement, and manage sustainable grassroots development projects that will successfully alleviate the problems that their communities face.

Through Shem's project development (specifically, the work of Shem project managers Gawangjyid and Wenzhuoma) many of the hardships of the nomadic women in Jatsa Village and Cuozhou, Jiajia, and Duojsia Townships will be met with the receipt of solar-powered electric generators. The gift of these generators will accomplish the following goals:



*Shem Women's Group members*

#### **Improve the social role of women in the nomadic community**

Sufficient supply of bright light at night allows women to do work at night that formerly had to be done during the day time due to inconvenience of working at night. With solar electricity generating panels they will be able to participate in some social and religious activities during the day time instead of working. The women's work load will be less tensely scheduled.

Shem project officers also help to change villagers' perceptions of women's capabilities and intellect. Several officers have mentioned villagers' positive observations about their gender in project evaluations.

#### **Improve the literacy level among the nomads, especially among the girls**

The overall enrollment of the nomads will be increased since they will have more leisure time as a direct result of having this electricity resource. This project will reduce the labor requirement for the children; it will allow them more time for study, especially the young girls since their mothers will have more time to work safely.

The academic performance of those girls who are enrolled will also be improved since they will have sufficient time to study.

### **Improve access to information and lines of communication**

With solar-generated electricity panels the nomads will be able to listen to radio, thus, accessing the world outside their communities. They will be better informed about world events.

### **Improve the health condition of the nomads**

This project aims to improve the health condition of the nomads by provide them with a clean living environment. The women and children, who are always working around kerosene in smoky kitchens, are vulnerable to lung diseases and eyesight problem. This project will reduce the high risks of these women and children.

### **Improve safety around animals**

With electricity, the nomads will be able to avoid dangerous situations and to ensure safety in caring for animals.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- *Shem Women's Group members develop and manage projects for villages similar to their own. How does their first-hand knowledge of the issues impact the projects and how does it affect villagers' perceptions of gender?*
- *Tibetan imagery usually leads to thoughts of Buddhist monks and the Dalai Lama; what are your impressions now that you have learned about the daily lives of Tibetan women?*

## **VOICES**



Jamyangtso is 30 years old and the single mother of two young children. Their lives are economically dependent on herding yaks. Most of the time they move to remote areas with neighbors or relatives to look for good places to herd the yaks. Her family used to rely upon candles for light; she is not sure how much she spent buying candles, but many were needed, especially in summertime when they had to get up in early morning. When her family was herding in remote areas, she was not able to leave the kids and go to town to buy candles, so she asked neighbors to buy candles for her. Jamyangtso always worried whether the neighbors would be back that day or might forget. She is very excited about the solar panel; from now on her family will have light like their neighbors when they go to remote areas where there is no electricity.

Sixty-year-old Samtso is from Duowa Village. She had hoped for a solar cooker, but the family was not able to provide one. Now she is really happy to have finally gotten one.

*As the mother of the family, I am always cooking for the family and fuel is a big concern for me. For cooking fuel, we are using wood, dry grass, and yak dung, and I need to cook three times every day. I need to go collect yak dung three or four times every day. Also after September, several village women must get together and go far away to collect wood, and it takes almost twenty-seven hours to collect nine bundles of wood. I am not*



sure exactly how much fuel we could save because of the solar cookers, but I am sure that a lot would be saved, since we can boil water and cook lunch and dinner with the solar cooker. And I don't need collect fuel as before. So to have a solar cooker in the family is like have a daughter-in-law in the family.

## MEETING RESOURCES



### BOOK CORNER

#### *Non-Fiction:*

**Heavy Earth, Golden Sky: Tibetan Women Speak About Their Lives**, Edited by C. Michelle Kleisath, 2008. This unique collection of life stories written by contemporary Tibetan women gives us a special look into the hearts and minds of today's young Tibetans. The writers hail from impoverished farming and nomadic communities across the Tibetan plateau in China's Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu provinces. In their stories, the writers take us through their difficult childhoods—often marked by debilitating poverty—and into their early adult lives, where they came together to study English with teacher Michelle Kleisath, founder of Shem Women's Group, at Qinghai Normal University in Xining, China,

**Sky Burial: An Epic Love Story of Tibet**. Xinran (and translators), August 2006

It was 1994 when Xinran, a journalist and author of *The Good Women of China*, received a telephone call asking her to travel four hours to meet an oddly dressed woman who had just crossed the border from Tibet into China. Xinran made the trip and met the woman, called Shu Wen, who recounted the story of her thirty-year odyssey in the vast landscape of Tibet.

In the haunting *Sky Burial*, Xinran has recreated Shu Wen's journey, writing beautifully and simply of the silence and the emptiness in which Shu Wen was enveloped. The book is an extraordinary portrait of a woman and a land, each at the mercy of fate and politics. It is an unforgettable, ultimately uplifting tale of love, loss, loyalty, and survival.

**Women in Tibet: Past and Present**, Janet Gyatso & Hanna Havenik, July 2004

This volume explores the struggles and accomplishments of women from both the past and present-day Tibet: queens from the imperial period, yoginis and religious teachers of medieval times, Buddhist nuns, oracles, political workers, medical doctors, and performing artists. Most of the essays focus on the lives of individual women, whether from textual sources or from anthropological data and show that Tibetan women have apparently enjoyed more freedom than women in many other Asian countries.

**Journey Across Tibet: a Young Woman's Trek Across the Rooftop of the World**, Sorrel Wilby, foreword by Dalai Lama, November 2001. In this inspiring story by a woman "who has few equals, on the trail or on the printed page" (*National Geographic*), Sorrel Wilby hikes 1,900 miles across Tibet alone. When she befriends some Tibetan nomads, her trek quickly evolves from a daredevil adventure to a journey of self-discovery and personal revelation.



## SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS SHOPPING

All things Tibet - prayer flags, scarves, anything you can think of, really.  
<http://www.dharmashop.com/index.mgi>

Tibetan hot sauce  
<http://www.globalexchangestore.org/Tibetan-Hot-Sauce-p/fd5522.htm>

## DINING WITH WOMEN RECIPES

DFW also focused on Tibet in our work with One H.E.A.R.T.; please visit these links to previously published documents containing more Tibetan recipes.

<http://www.diningforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/oneheart4-08pdf.pdf>

<http://www.diningforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/mconeheartjune07.pdf>

### Tibetan “Tsampa Burgers”

This dish uses two of the staple crops of Tibet, barley and mushrooms, usually made into a soup. Tsampa is toasted barley flour; this recipe offers a way to enjoy a flavor very similar to the traditional without the many steps involved in making it by hand, and the ingredients are easily available. These burgers are moist, a little crunchy on the outside. Serve with hot sauce or with momo dipping sauce. Makes about 12 – 14 patties.



1c Quaker quick barley (available in a box at any supermarket)

1 scallion, thinly sliced

1 clove garlic, minced

6-8 shiitake or other mushrooms

1 small carrot, grated

2t fresh ginger, minced

2½ T tamari or soy sauce

¼ t paprika (hot or mild)

ground black pepper

pinch cayenne (especially if not using hot paprika)

Ghee or a mixture of butter and a light flavored oil

Place barley on a cookie sheet and toast in a 325-degree oven for 10-15 minutes or until very lightly golden. Cool. Process in food processor until coarsely ground, about 15 seconds. Set aside. Keep processor handy as it will be needed again. In a medium saucepan, bring just under 2 cups of water and 2 tablespoons of tamari to a boil, slowly add barley while stirring, reduce heat, cover, and simmer 10 -12 minutes. Remove from heat and let sit 5 minutes. Remove barley from the pan to facilitate its cooling. Set aside. Place mushrooms in processor and pulse to finely chop them; add scallion, garlic, ginger, carrot, black pepper, paprika, and cayenne. Pulse a few times to combine. Add cooked barley and remaining ½ teaspoon of tamari and pulse a few times more to combine well. Heat a couple of tablespoons of ghee or butter/oil mixture over medium to medium-low heat in a large skillet. Moisten hands and form the mixture into 2½-3-inch flat patties. Cook for 10-12 minutes per side or until slightly firm and dark golden brown. Undercooked, they will be mushy and nearly impossible to turn, so please be patient.

### Tibetan Pork and Spinach Stir-fry

Adapted from a recipe in *Beyond the Great Wall* by Alford and Duguid, Random House/Artisan, 2008 (Thanks, Shannon, for letting me borrow it!)

Though yak meat is by far the most traditional meat in Tibet, pigs are raised for their meat there, especially in the Gonbo region, east of Lhasa. The recipe calls for the spice often used in Tibetan cooking, Sichuan pepper, which is very difficult to find here in the U.S. If you are able to find some, just use a little black pepper as I did and enjoy this simple dish over rice. It may also be made with beef, but remove the beef before you add the spinach, and then add it back in at the end of cooking to warm. Easy and quick. Serves 2.

½ pound pork tenderloin

4 – 5c fresh baby spinach (just under ½ pound)

1T lightly flavored oil (I used grapeseed)

2t minced ginger

2 thinly sliced scallions

¼ t Sichuan or black pepper, coarsely ground

½ t salt (or less to taste)

¼ c water

Thinly slice the pork and then cut into small pieces, about 1 x 1 ½ inches. Set aside.

Wash and drain spinach. Set aside. Heat a large wok or skillet over medium-high heat and add oil, ginger, scallions, and pepper. Stir-fry for about 30 seconds. Add the pork and ¼ teaspoon of the salt and stir-fry for about a minute or until it has changed color. Press the meat against the side of the pan to brown it a little in this step. Add the spinach and toss it around to wilt it. Once it starts to wilt, add the water and a touch more salt and stir-fry until the spinach is cooked--another 30 seconds to a minute. Place in a shallow bowl and serve with rice.

### Tibetan Ratatouille

This recipe is from the cookbook *Beyond the Great Wall* by Jeffrey Alford and Naomi Duguid.

- 2 long or 4 short Asian eggplants (about 1 pound)
- 2 to 3 medium tomatoes (¾ to 1 lb) or substitute 2 cups canned tomatoes
- 2 scallions
- 2 T peanut or vegetable oil
- 1 T minced garlic
- 1 T minced ginger
- 2 t salt
- ¼ t ground Sichuan pepper
- ½ to ¾ cup broth
- 1 T soy sauce



Trim the stems off the eggplants. Cut lengthwise into long narrow slices; then cut these crosswise into 2- to 3-inch-long strips. Set aside. Cut the tomatoes into thin wedges or chop canned tomatoes into coarse dice. Set aside. Trim the scallions lengthwise into ribbons; then cut into 1½- to 2-inch lengths. Set aside. Mince the scallion greens; you should have about 2 T. Set aside.

Place a large wok or skillet over high heat. When it is hot, add the oil and swirl to coat the bottom of the pan. Toss in the garlic and ginger and stir-fry briefly. Add the eggplant and stir-fry for a minute; press it against the hot sides of the wok (or the bottom of the pan) to try to scorch all surfaces. Add 1t of salt and stir-fry for another minute; then add tomatoes. Stir-fry for two minutes or until the tomatoes are softened. Add the scallion ribbons and stir-fry to mix. Add the Sichuan pepper and the remaining 1t salt and stir-fry another minute. Add ½ cup of broth and continue to stir-fry until it comes to a boil. Cover and boil hard for 3 minutes; then uncover and stir. Cover again and cook for another 2 minutes. Uncover, stir, and taste the eggplant for doneness. Cook a little longer if necessary. Stir in up to ¼ cup more broth if you like a more saucy texture. Add the soy sauce and the minced scallion greens, stir, and taste for seasonings.

Serves 4 as a side dish, 2 as a main course with rice and a side dish. I did not have Sichuan pepper, but it was still very tasty. I served it at room temperature as it was a hot day, and I did not want a hot rice/veggie dish. I did not add all the broth as I was not serving it over rice, but the garlic/ginger broth would be delicious over rice.

### Tema (String Beans with Potatoes)

Adapted from *The Lhasa Moon Tibetan Cookbook* by Wangmo and Houshmand, Snow Lion Publications, 1999

This is a vegetarian version of Tema tang Sha, a slightly spicy Tibetan staple made with beef (or yak in Tibet, but we make do with beef here) instead of potatoes. If you would like to make it that way, just cut about a pound of a tender cut of beef, maybe top round, into thin strips and add to the pan when the potatoes would have been added in the version given below. An easy recipe either way, and, once again, all the ingredients are readily available at any supermarket. Who knew Tibetan food could be so readily accessible? Serves 4 – 6.

1 lb. string beans	2 or more cloves garlic, minced
2 – 3 large red potatoes	½ t paprika
½ small red pepper, thinly sliced (optional)	1-inch piece fresh ginger, minced
1 small onion, diced	1 jalapeno chili, diced
1-2T light flavored oil (I used grapeseed)	1 plum tomato, chopped
	1 - 2t tamari or soy sauce

Cut the beans into 1½-inch pieces. Cut the potatoes into pieces about the same size as the beans, like skinny French fries. Heat oil in a medium-large skillet over medium to medium-high heat and sauté the onion a few minutes until softened; then add the ginger, garlic, and paprika. Cook, stirring constantly, for another minute. Add the potatoes, jalapeno, and tomato and stir-fry until the juice from the tomato has evaporated, 2-3 minutes. Add the string beans and a few tablespoons of water and continue to cook, stirring frequently, for another 8-10 minutes, depending on how well done you like your beans cooked. You may need to add a bit more water. When the beans and potatoes are tender, stir in the tamari and the red pepper.

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<sup>i</sup> Miller, Daniel. "Poverty Among Tibetan Nomads in Western China: Profiles of Poverty and Strategies for Poverty Reduction," Paper prepared for the Tibet Development Symposium, Brandeis University, May 4-6, 2001.