

WILD TERRAINS IN MONGOLIA & TIBET: LAND, ANIMALS, PEOPLE
Wild Environs: Land, People, Animals - Interconnected Relationships
By Sarah E. Braddock Clarke

For centuries human beings have used animal hair/fleece to spin yarn to then make into cloth - the animal continues with its life. Materials to clothe can be found in all sorts of wild terrains from the steppes, sierras, tundras and plateaus of the highest mountains to the arid plains of deserts. The animals in such remote and often fragile conditions have learned to adapt to fluctuating temperatures – in some cases from tropical to sub-polar. They have double-layer coats where the outer ‘guard’ hairs keep debris and the weather out while the inner ‘down’ hairs or ‘under-fleece’ keep the animal warm. It is this under-fleece that is collected usually by hand-combing, shearing or gathering the clumps of hair after the seasonal moult. The resulting fibres are eco-friendly, possessing many advantageous properties, being breathable, lightweight, insulating and weatherproof.

The people who benefit from the animal hair/fleece are often nomads and their life and important traditions are constantly under threat. Furthermore the animals themselves can find themselves at the mercy of poachers who covet their valuable coats. Global-warming with its rapid industrialization and land degradation is potentially altering the life of wild animals - over-grazing by domesticated sheep, goats and cattle can lead to desertification, forcing the wild or semi-wild animals into ever-more remote areas. In Mongolia intensive farming of the Hircus goat for its prized cashmere is often at the cost of the yak.

A new wave of ethical designers has recently stepped in to the global arena. Tengri is a luxury yet sustainable fashion label that is designed in London and made in UK/USA using Mongolian yak fibre. This 100% natural, undyed textile is hand-crafted from these semi-wild animals living in central Mongolia’s remote and isolated mountainous Khangai region. Few other animals could survive its high altitude of a rarified atmosphere and a harsh climate of severely cold winters where temperatures plummet well below zero. Nancy Johnston is the CEO who founded Tengri in 2014. After living with nomadic herder families in Mongolia she now works closely with them to ensure their community and traditions are kept alive by actively promoting yak fibre and engaging in fairtrade/fairshare business. She thinks in the long term about the Mongolian environment - its people, its traditions, its ecology and is directly involved in conservation and ethical business. The name Tengri signifies the sky god that protects humans and the beauty of the earth.

Living above the snowline at a high altitude the yak characteristically has a thick coat with shaggy, long hair – almost to the ground. The dense, woolly, soft down hair is generally used in textiles - yaks produce this at the onset of winter as an extra layer of protection to insulate from the bitter cold. Yak fibre has many inherent properties that make it desirable and it is often compared to cashmere. It is lightweight, strong, soft, warm, breathable, lustrous, elastic, hypoallergenic, does not tend to pill and resists odours and water. Once a year when the animal naturally moults the fleece is obtained by hand-combing the yak as gently and

humanly as possible. No animal is harmed and the lives of the nomadic people are improved.

By being undyed the yak fibre is not subjected to bleaching/dyeing chemicals and the wonderful variety of the natural colours of the yak hair take precedence. These range from the deepest blacks through browns and greys to pure white and even (but rarely) gold. By keeping the Tengri label small and using British manufacturers the spinning, knitting and tailoring processes are easier to oversee on a daily basis. Nancy Johnston originally trained as a social worker and has teamed up with Italian knitwear designer Carlo Volpi to make knitted sweaters, trousers, shorts, coats and accessories - scarves, beanie hats and gloves.

Norlha Textiles also use the wonderful look, feel and inherent properties of the yak fibre - from the plateaus of Tibet, one of the most remote environments and most fragile ecosystems on our planet - known as the 'Roof of the World'. The name of the company is taken from the Tibetan phrase for 'wealth of the gods' - a word that the nomads also use for their yaks.

Kimberly Yeshe, founder/director (background in anthropology and Buddhism) and her daughter Dechen Yeshe, CEO (background in Asian Studies and film) launched Norlha Textiles in 2007 with the aim of promoting the use of yak fibre for the luxury market and of providing employment for the local Tibetans. Nomadic herders from the grasslands are pleased that they no longer have to kill their animals for their meat, but instead can work in the yak fibre factories at the source of the raw material.

The Norlha Textiles atelier is situated at 3,200 miles above sea level in the small village of Zorge Ritoma in northeastern Tibet's Amdo region - the 'Land of Snows' inhabited by nomads, yaks and sheep. Their authentic textiles use the dense, soft under-fleece of the yak (called the 'khullu') that is typically collected when the yak is 2 years old and the fibre is at its best. This is spun, dyed (eco-friendly, azo-free dyes) and woven/knitted/felted/tailored - all by hand into exquisite products such as durable, lustrous, supple, snug and warm ponchos, capes, waistcoats, shawls, scarves, hats, gloves, throws and blankets of the highest quality. Their colours are inspired by the surrounding environment - bright reds, deep burgundies, fiery oranges and various shade of blue conjuring up the seemingly endless skies in this part of the world.

Working closely with the community and using sustainable methods they respect the traditions and heritage of the local people. In addition, their knowledge is global and embraces other cultures - the textile traditions in Cambodia, India, Nepal, Mongolia and Tibet. Dechen Teshi and her team learned silk weaving in Cambodia and travelled to Nepal to learn to weave wool. Simple hand-operated Indian looms imported from Nepal are used - leftovers from Britain's Industrial Revolution.

After presenting their products to Paris in January 2008, Tengri now supply several Paris fashion houses including Lanvin, Balmain and Louis Vuitton as well

as having their own brand. In 2015 Norlha Textiles also launched in the USA. The look is luxurious and enveloping - often simple but strong shapes where decoration is by way of bold stripes or chevrons.

French-born and architecture-trained in Milan, Denis Colomb worked on several fashion boutiques in Paris, New York and Tokyo during the 1980s and 1990s. After travelling to far-flung places such as the Far East and Nepal he became intrigued with Mongolian cashmere, reputedly the finest in the world and started to work with it in the early 2000s. Cashmere comes from the Hircus goat that seasonally sheds its extremely fine under-fleece. The fibre is ultra-soft and has tiny spaces within its structure that trap air to provide excellent insulation.

He founded his own label 'Denis Colomb Lifestyle' in 2004 with his wife - photographer Erica Lennard. They are based in Los Angeles, show four times a year in Paris and frequently travel to Nepal where Denis Colomb works with local artisans in small fair trade workshops.

Denis Colomb Lifestyle products are luxurious, super-soft scarves, wraps and clothing. Being hand-spun and hand-woven from cashmere they are featherweight and pack up small – ideal for global travel. They ensure the wearer stays comfortable and warm even in persistent air-conditioning. The range of garments and accessories impart a casual elegance and come in a striking monochrome palette or in a myriad of colours or are colour-blocked or tie-dyed or two-tone while some are also reversible. They often have geometric patterning such as thin/thick stripes, plaids, herringbone, chevron and zig-zag patterns that attest to his architectural beginnings. A variety of weights is also offered and blends such as cashmere/silk and cashmere/linen. Denis Colomb's impeccable quality products have a unisex appeal - desired by both men and women who adore their comfort, sensuality and high-end sumptuousness.

At Première Vision, Paris in September 2016 there was a definite move towards 'ultra-lightweight' and 'super-fine' textiles. The hollow inner core of most animal-based fibres teamed with open-structured weaves/knits enables the trapping of air to keep the wearer warm without adding bulk. The resulting ultra-luxe materials allows for beautifully fluid menswear/womenswear that can be layered without weight and volume.

More and more these days it is recognized that human beings have a moral responsibility to obtain such animal-based raw materials as gently and humanly as possible. Wild animals tend to be incredibly shy and contact can cause them distress. It is important that to obtain these luxury natural materials no cruelty and no harm is caused. The consumer of today is ever-aware and in-touch with the manufacturing processes involved in converting a raw material to the end product – from fibre to garment with 100% traceability/transparency in the supply chain. There is rising interest in where clothes are made, their provenance and support for those who lead alternative lifestyles in such described wildernesses.

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