

MORE THAN YURTS: TENTS OF THE HIMALAYAS

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THE DRY GRASSLANDS OF NORTHWEST ASIA provide pasturage for a number of nomadic peoples. The Mongols, Manchus and Tibetans, in particular, while becoming military and political powers at various times, never abandoned nomadic ways. This is a look at their tents.

The characteristic dwelling of both Mongol and Manchu is of course the yurt or ger. Even some Tibetan nomads use the yurt though only for the tribe's 'god house' or for important guests.

The typical Tibetan shelter is the black tent, *sBra-gur*. It strongly resembles the black tent of the Arabs, and may have come to Tibet from Persia. Now it is part of Tibetan identity. Mongol tribes who have moved into Tibetan territories have taken up the black tent and become known as black shelter people, *sBra-nag-ba*.

The *sBra-gur* is the best documented of the tents covered in this article, thanks to the efforts of various ethnologists. Like the Arab black tent, it is a rectangle of black cloth supported by a number of poles. Its exact shape varies by region, adapted by pole arrangement.

The cloth of the *sBra-gur* is woven from the belly-hair of the *mDzo* (domesticated yak) preferably pulled rather than shorn. The hair is spun by both men and women, then woven by the women into narrow lengths. Sewing the tent is done by the men. The *sBra-gur* is made in two sections, each being one yak-load. The sections are held together by loops and horn toggles, except for a length in the roof over the fire, where an arrangement of cords leaves a gap 2' wide and several feet long for a smoke-hole or *gur-gLad*. A cloth flap covers this gap in bad weather. Each year, two lengths of cloth are added to the middle of the tent, so as the cloth ages and wears it moves to the edge and the tent is continually renewed. The cloth is heavy and tightly woven, and the oily smoke of yak-dung fires increases its natural water-proofing. The *sBra-gur* is supported by two interior poles (*ber*) 6-7' tall, sometimes with a ridgepole

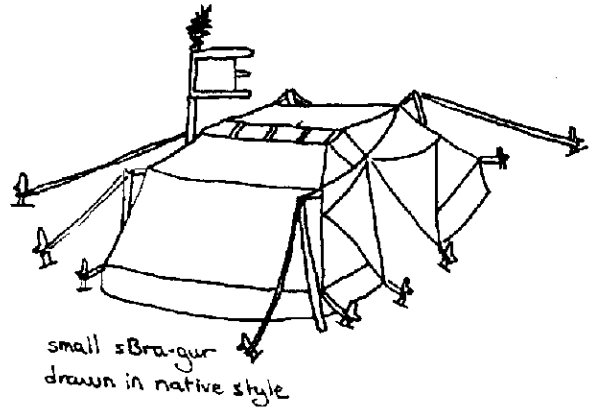
between them, and by guy-ropes at the corners and sides of the roof which are stretched over 6' exterior poles (cham) and then pegged to the ground. Shorter interior poles may be used at the corners for more support. The walls may be stretched outward and pegged at the bottom, or may hang straight down like curtains. While the ropes are yak-hair and are made by the nomads, the wooden tent-poles and heavy iron pegs (phur) must be bought or bartered for. Poorer families may anchor their tent walls with boulders.

Like the tent-cloth, the space inside the sBra-gur is divided. The right-hand side (as you enter) is the men's side and where guests are entertained. The altar is in the far right corner and storage bags and boxes are stacked around the walls. The left-hand side is the women's side, where the kitchen gear, food, and fuel is kept. In the center is the hearth, where the family comes together. Besides the boxes, bags and utensils, the furnishings are low tables and bolden; cushions about 3 feet by 5 1/2 feet, for sitting and sleeping, covered by khaden (carpets).

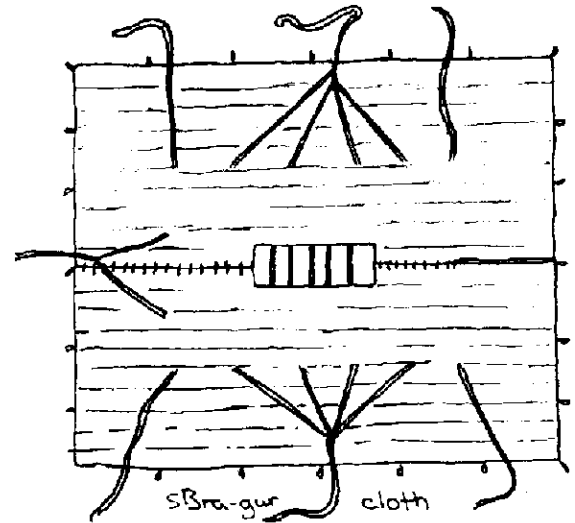
In addition to the primary shelter of ger or gur, all three nomadic peoples have simple wedge tents, often with a belled end, used for extra storage or travel. The Mongols call theirs maikhan and the Manchus mai-han. The Tibetans simply rank them among the dWu-gur, sleeping tents.

The dWu-gur is made of yak-hair cloth that is not considered good enough for the home tent. It is a

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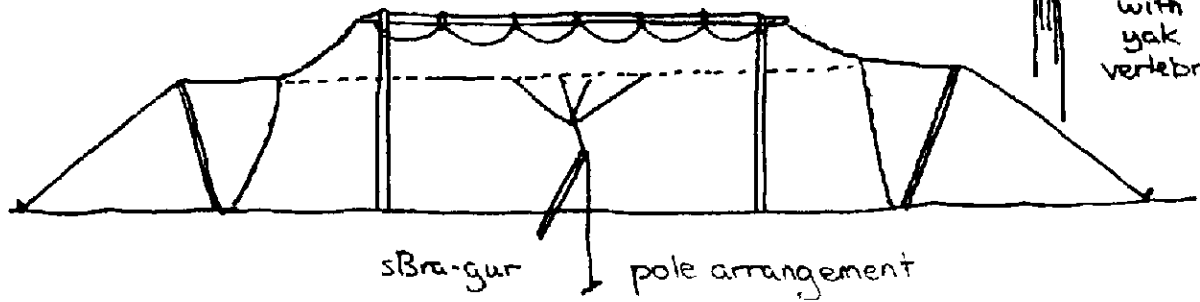
small sBra-gur
drawn in native style



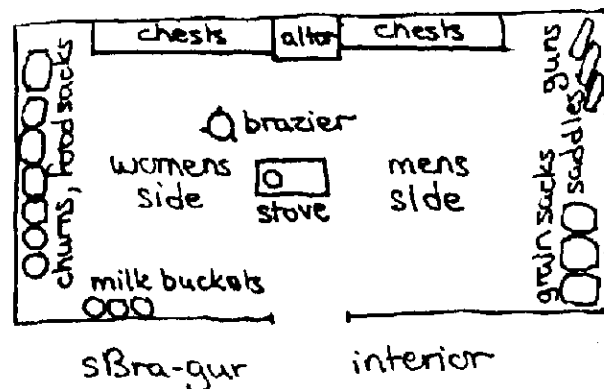
sBra-gur cloth



pole topped with yak vertebra



sBra-gur pole arrangement



sBra-gur interior

low wedge tent similar to a pup-tent, used by herders who are sleeping with the herds or on the edges of the tribe's encampment.

The **maikhan** is made of cotton cloth, blue or black outside and lined with white. The supports are two poles, called bagana or shuvuu, with metal or bone rings at the tops to hold the ridgepole (nuruu). The simplest maikhan are no more than a length of cloth stretched over the ridgepole, used for storage or for shelter by the very poor. The more comfortable version has a sod-cloth (khaiaavch) to keep drafts from blowing under the edge, and belled ends. The interior may be separated by triangular curtains (shanaa) at the front and back. Although no ropes are shown in the illustrations I have found, the vocabulary refers to the main ropes running along both the front and back edges of the tent (gol), and the two ropes running to the ground from the front and back of the ridge of a tent (samsaa). Samsaa may be extra ropes to anchor the tent in bad weather, but more likely both gol and samsaa run through sleeves sewn along the edges of the maikhan cloth and provide the loops for pegs.

The maikhan is usually decorated with traditional motifs applied in white. Even the open storage tents have some design along the ridgepole, possibly serving as reinforcement as well as decoration.

The **Manchu mai-han** is the same structure as the maikhan, but not decorated. It can be made of dark or light cloth, cotton or linen, and is lined with blue linen (samsu). The ridge-

pole is called son and the supporting poles tura. The size of a mai-han varies considerably, from a trader's tent for one man to tall military tents. The large troop tent was belled only at the back, perhaps so that two tents could be joined at the doors in bad weather.

The Tibetans use a decorated cloth tent for festivals and picnics. Similar tents are used in Bhutan and Nepal. During the short Himalayan summer, even settled families take their ras-gur (cotton cloth tent) to the public parks and gardens to camp, eat, drink,

gamble, sing and watch wandering entertainers. Wealthier nomads keep a ras-gur for this season and use the sBra-gur as a kitchen tent. Those who cannot afford to buy or rent a full tent hang decorated cloths between trees to serve as walls and roof, so the garden (lingka) becomes a huge many-roomed tent itself.

The **ras-gur** is made of white cotton canvas and decorated with painted or applied designs usually in blue, sometimes also black or red. The roof is edged with a gathered fringe of blue cloth. The more luxurious may be lined and have gauze windows.

Characteristically, the ras-gur has a large fly, the gur-thog, also decorated. The gur-thog is often quartered by blue strips of cloth which reinforce the sleeves for guy ropes.

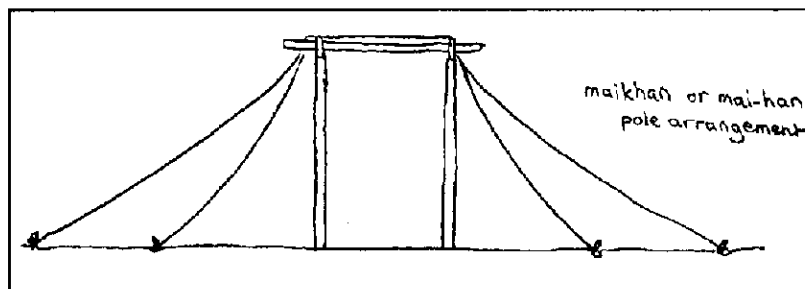
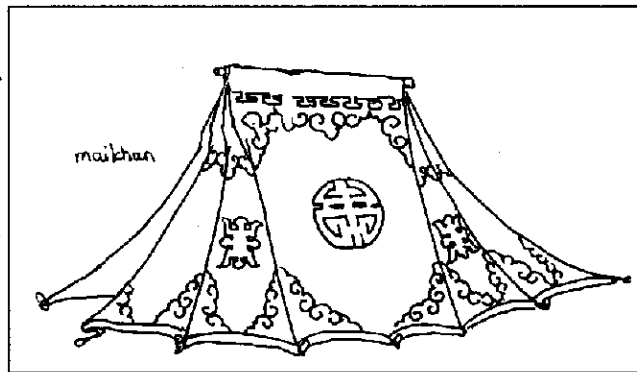
The shape and size of the ras-gur vary considerably. It may be a wedge tent, a wedge tent with belled ends, or a wall tent. Generally it has a ridgepole and two support poles. The wall tents may have interior corner poles, or external poles and guy ropes, as the sBra-gur does. I have seen one photograph which appears to be of a centerpole wall tent, the roof and walls being separate pieces.

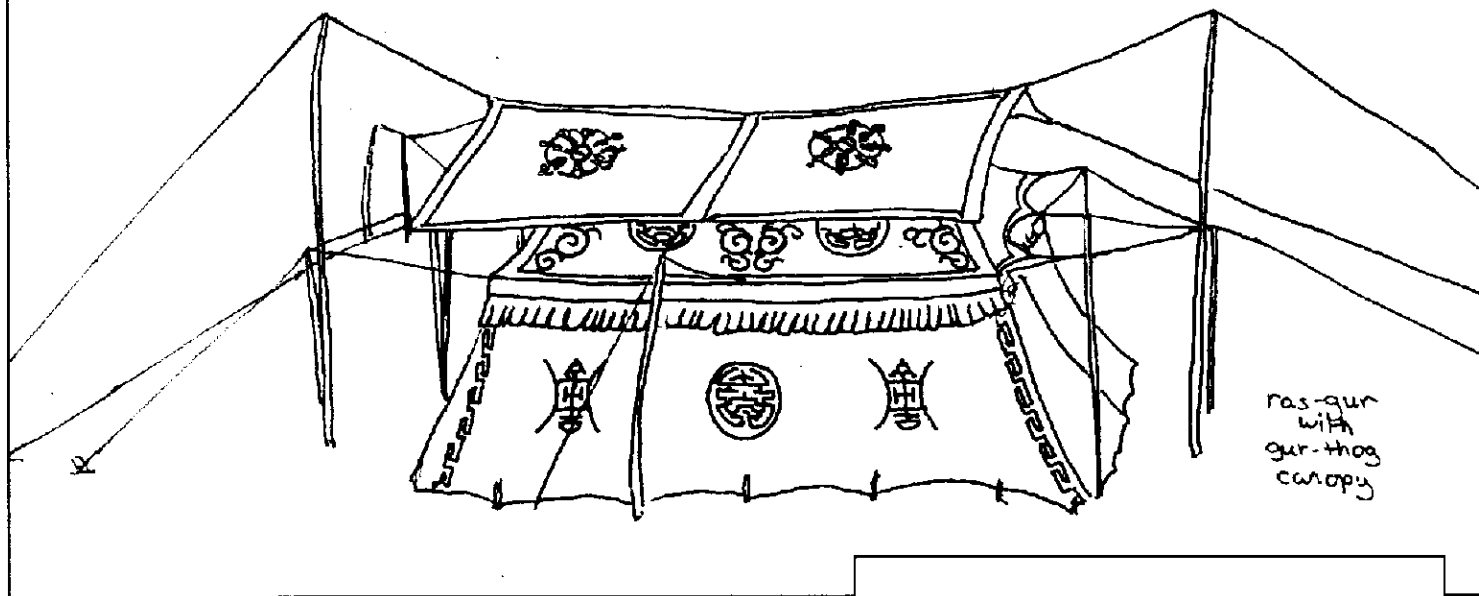
The decorations applied to the maikhan and the ras-gur are traditional folk-art and religious motifs,

chosen apparently more for aesthetic reasons than particular significance. Among the most common are the stylised Chinese character for

'long life', sometimes surrounded by five bats (a motif found in Chinese folk art, particularly carpets), the Buddhist symbols of the endless knot and the wheel of the law, and border designs of knotwork, vinery, and clouds. The Mongols use more vines and animal motifs, such as deer. One source claims that Nepalese tents were marked with clan and family emblems, but I have not been able to find an example of this.

Because of the strong sunlight in the thin atmosphere of the Himalayas, canopies are often used to



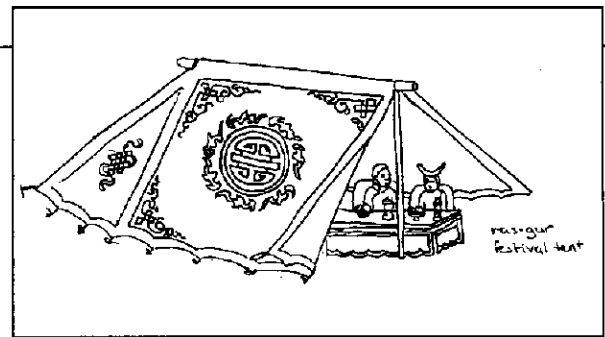


shelter both audience and participants in outdoor events. The Mongolian canopy or **asar** is of black or dark blue cloth, like the maikhan, and ornamented with white applique. It is supported by a ridgepole and two endpoles, four corner poles, and side poles as necessary. The shape is that of a hipped roof, with a gathered fringe around the edge. The asar can be enclosed by fabric walls to become a full tent. The Manchu asari resembles the asar in structure, but is usually white, with dark applique. The designs are less ornate foliates in the corners and on the ridgeline. My single example of a Nepalese canopy is shaped like the asar, with the fringe decorated like a Tibetan tent, a strip of blue cloth with white diamond cut-outs above the gathered fringe.

The Tibetan canopy, **lding-gur** (suspended tent), is usually a simpler affair, similar to the gur-thog. It consists of a square or rectangle of white cloth, quartered by strips of blue cloth and decorated with the wheel or knot, supported by guy ropes and tall exterior poles. The asar shape seems to have been used, but not commonly.

The most ornate tents are those belonging to monasteries and used for special ceremonies. Both Mongol and Tibetan lama's tents have the same design; a tall wall tent supported by a ridge pole and two interior poles, open along the side rather than the end. The **Peacock Tent**, which is kept for the reception of a new Dalai Lama in Lhasa, is 15 feet tall (with a canopy above that) and covers 100 square feet, and is made of yellow satin with a yellow silk lining. These tents are heavily appliqued with the wheel motif and vinery, covering most of the cloth. The interior is carpeted and has low thrones for the officiating lamas.

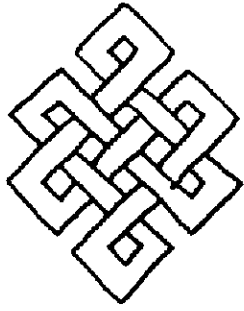
The **monastery tents** can have a cloth-walled



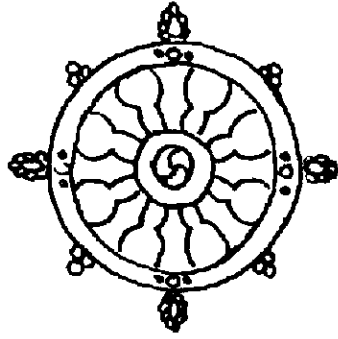
courtyard added for large gatherings of monks and lamas. The courtyard walls are topped with fringes and often decorated. The gateway is sheltered by a curtained framework. A large festival encampment may use a similar courtyard for entertainments or privacy, and cover it with a lding-gur.

Generally, encampments have no formal layout. Festival encampments seem to be first-come first-placed, with space for performances marked by canopies, and merchants grouped together. Nomad families may set up in facing rows, or in a rough circle around an important family, depending on terrain and weather conditions.

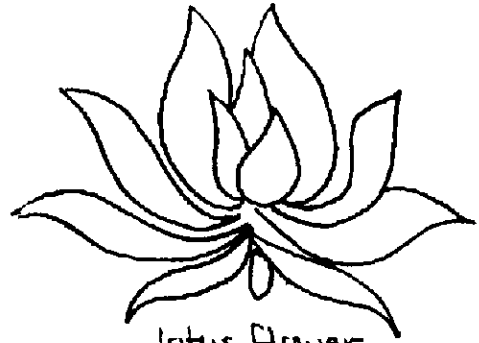
The exceptions are military and state encampments. Mongols and Manchus arranged their military camps in a circle, with the outside marked by fabric walls or ranks of small tents. The ger of the commander or official was central, usually with an open space in front of it for ceremonies, and flanked by the tents of his staff. Tibetan nobles and officials spent a large part of their year on inspection tours, living in large encampments. The Tibetan layout was square, with three or four concentric ranks of tents surrounding the central tent of the commander or king. It is interesting, though perhaps not significant, that the great camps and the characteristic yurt of the Mongols are both round,



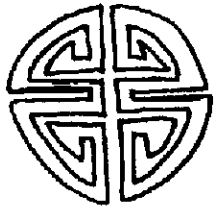
endless knot
Buddhist



wheel of the law
Buddhist



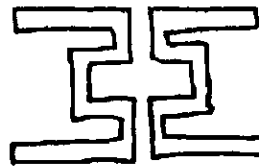
lotus flower
Buddhist



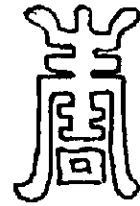
round 'shou'
longevity



long 'shou'
longevity



'fu'
happiness



long 'shou'
longevity

and the great camp and the sBra-gur of the Tibetans are both square or rectangular.

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