

Dismemberment and meat distribution among Tibetan hunting communities

Toni Huber

Hunting is the most persistent known mode of human subsistence on the Tibetan plateau. Thus, it is hardly surprising to discover that the hunt is associated with a rich set of ideas and cultural practices in Tibet, some of which have proven archaic roots. However, for a variety of reasons, the world of Tibetan hunters remains barely known or understood outside of their own ranks. In this paper I will present basic research on two related features of many Tibetan hunts, that is, the dismemberment and meat distribution systems that together mark the point at which dead game animals are appropriated by and enter into the social world. These activities are heavily circumscribed by a variety of rules and rites. The actual performance of dismemberment and meat distribution are found to be completely unlike those idealized forms of “creative dismemberment” (Macdonald 1980) known only from Tibetan textual sources in which the body parts of the animal are correlated with social divisions. It is rather the case that during actual hunts certain types of “play” can be introduced to randomize the outcome of the distribution economy. In marked contrast to frequent appeals about the “uniqueness” of Tibetan culture, I conclude, using comparative data, that the ways in which Tibetans process game meat have many similarities to both neighbouring and very distant societies in which hunting is also practiced. The research results were obtained among nomadic populations of central Amdo and the western Changthang.