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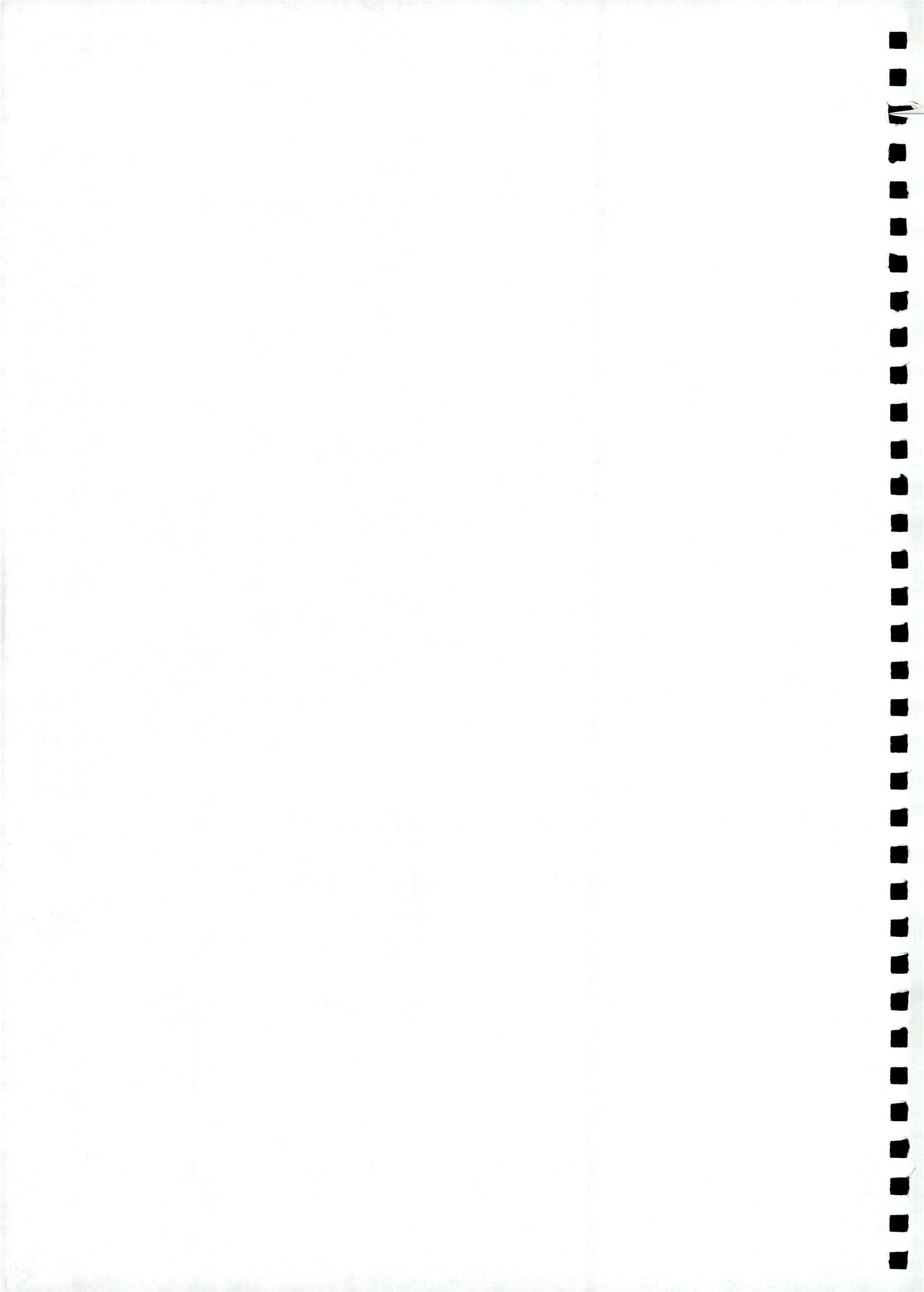
The Nomadic Existence of the Nepalese and
Tibetan Steppe Dwellers.

by

Naomi Jobson

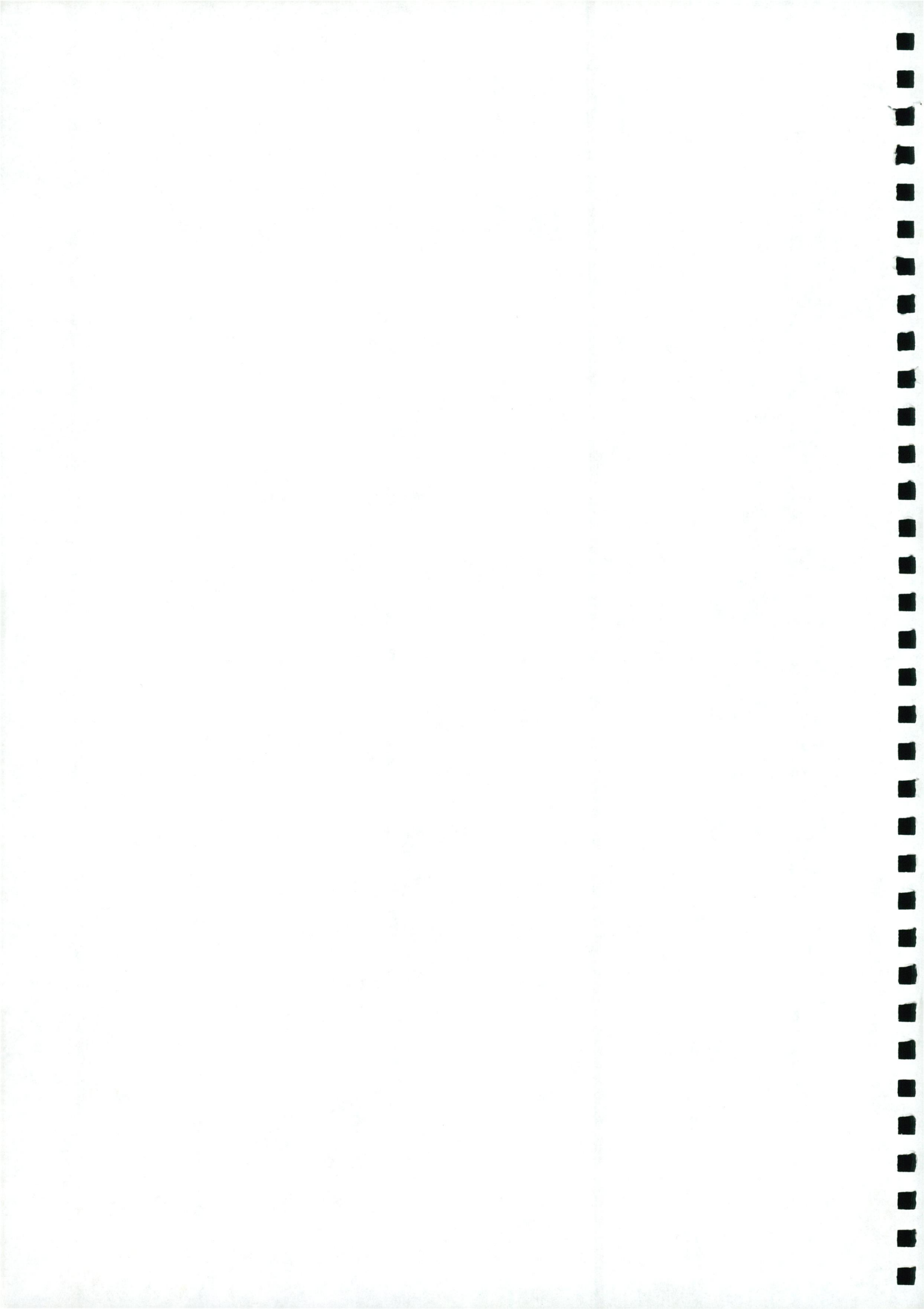
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1996



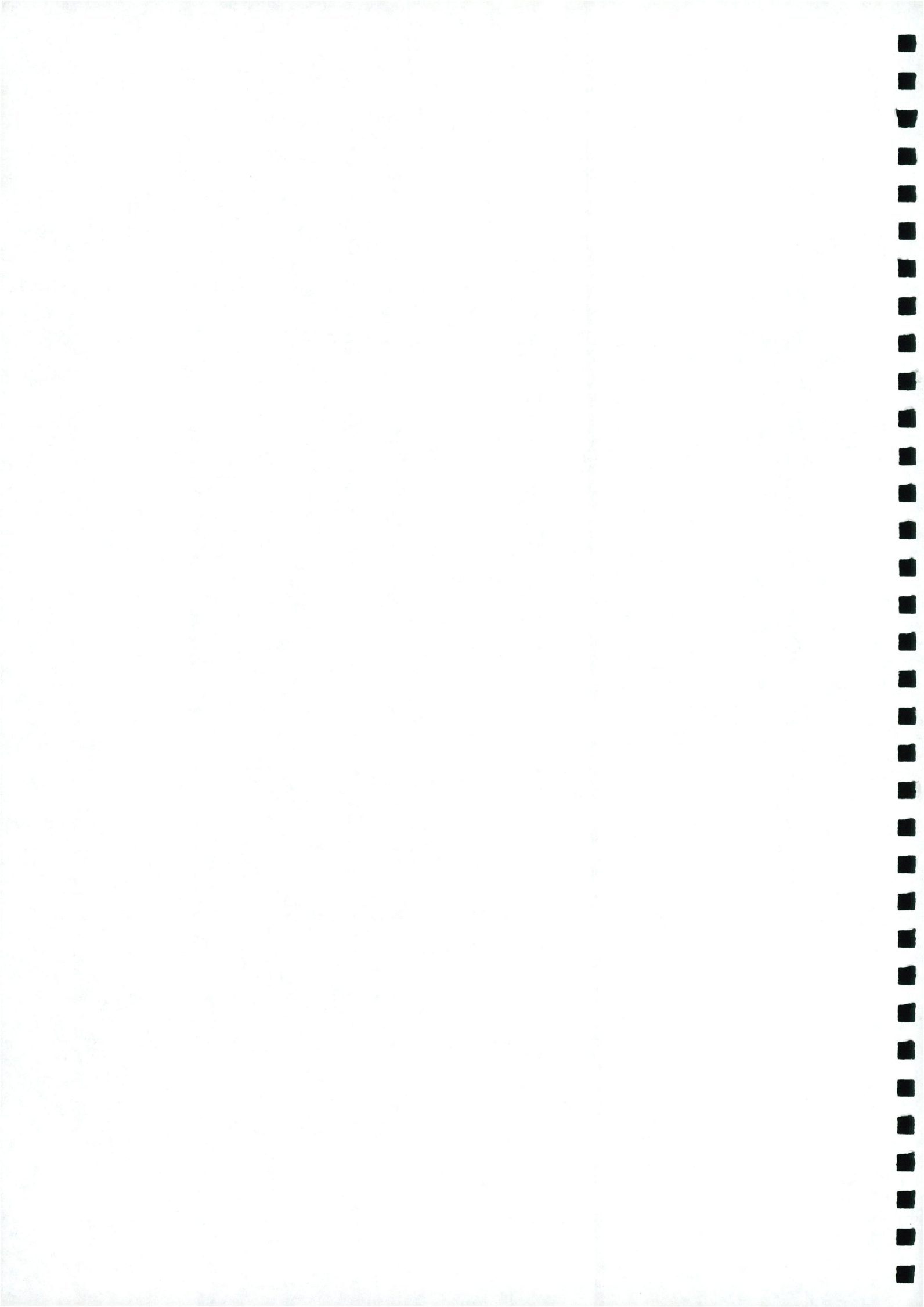
Acknowledgement

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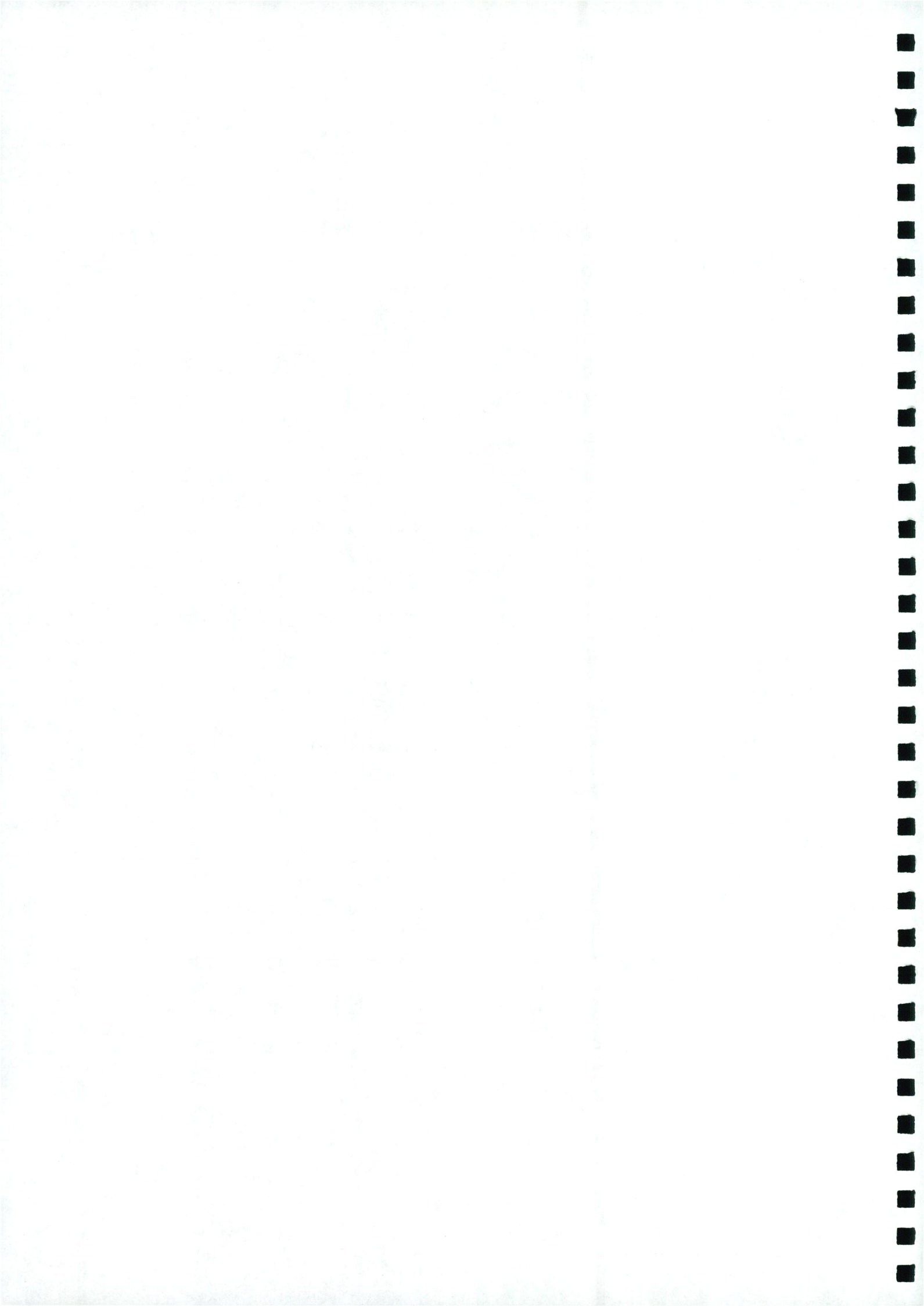
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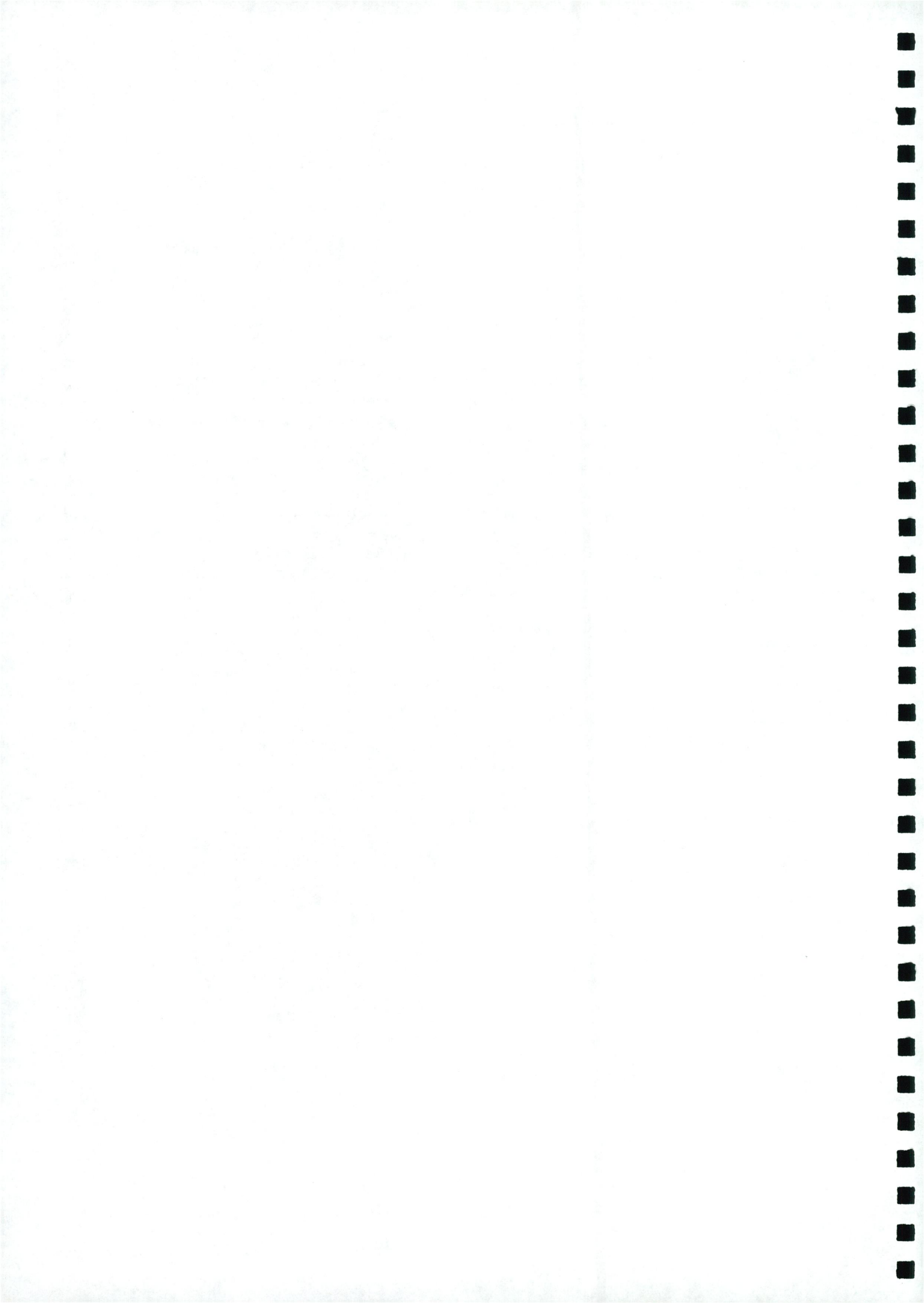


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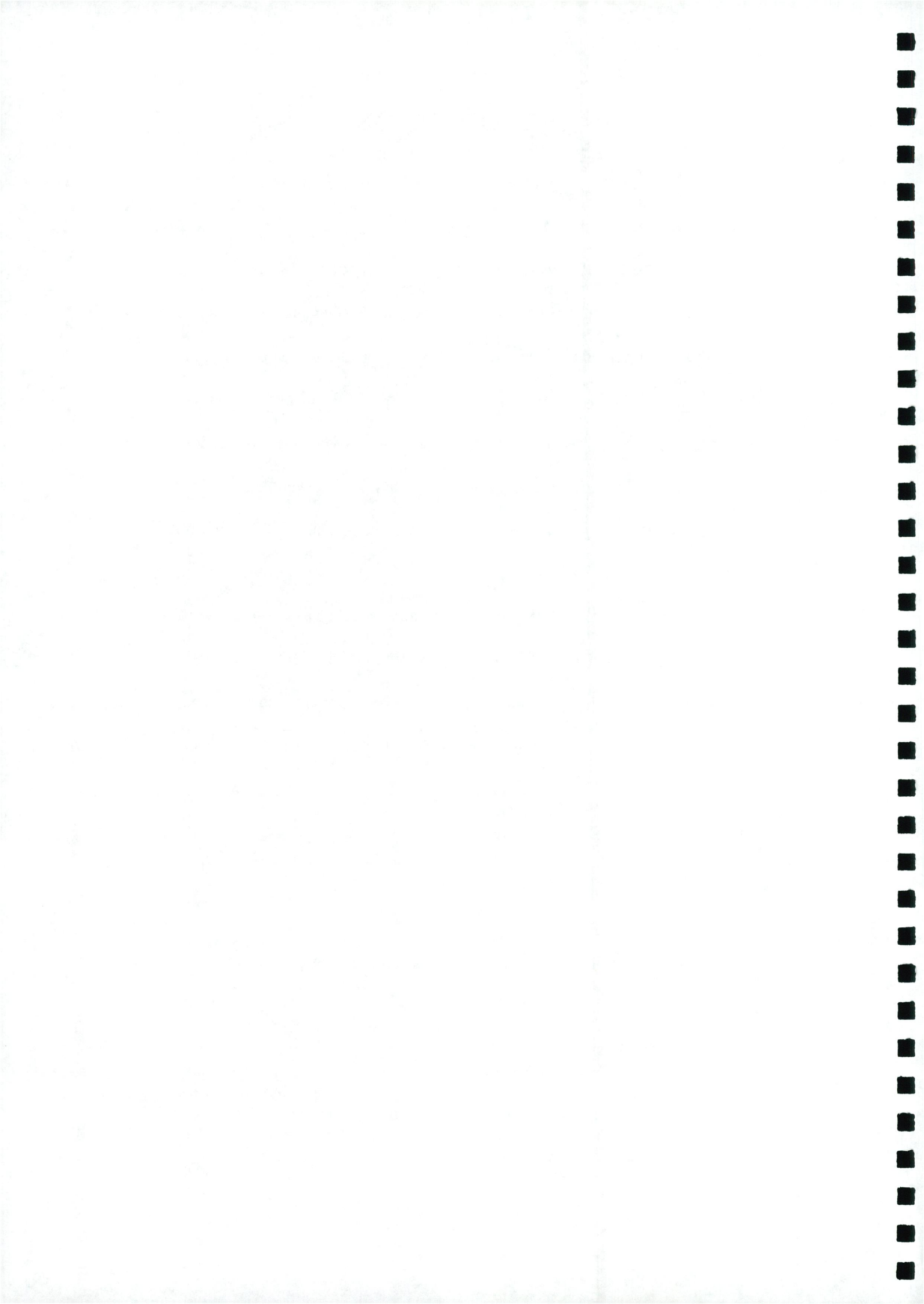


INTRODUCTION

The affinities I feel towards the more unconventional lifestyle of the nomadic tribes stem largely from my own easy-going and unrestrained childhood. Living on a farm surrounded by the mountains and overlooking the sea was, and still is, mostly an idyllic way of life. I have always had time to explore and discover new places and observe changes in the flora and fauna of my environment. Through this I have developed a wider interest in other peoples who are at one with their animals and the land on which they depend for survival.

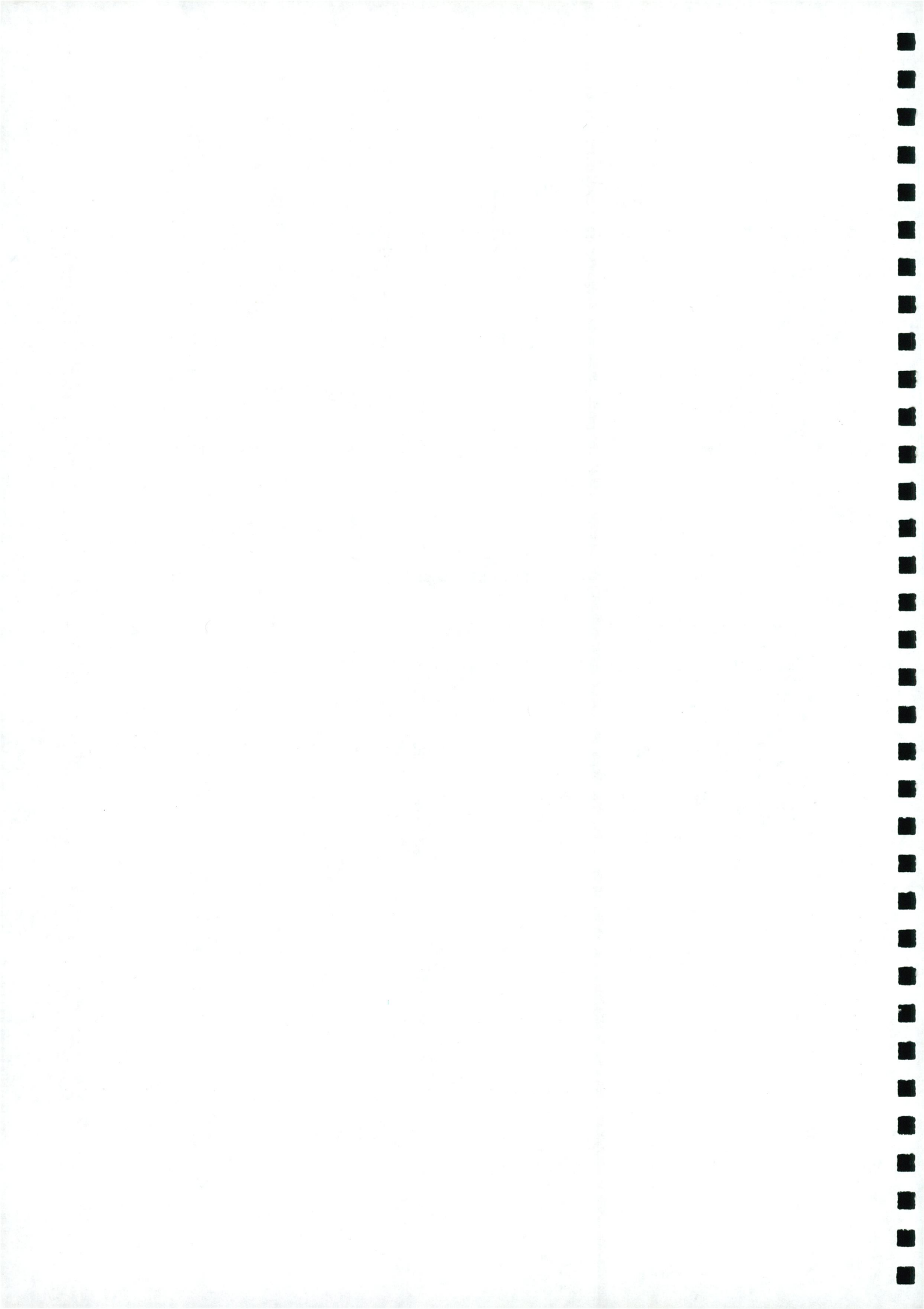
During the summer of 1995 my hopes became a reality as I found myself travelling with an Irish-Tibetan Buddhist, through the Himalayas, very close to the Tibetan border in North West Nepal. Here, for the first time, I was to encounter the nomadic way of life which is so prominent in this part of the world. My companion was a great source of help to me, with the origins of the peoples religion:

At last I found the nomads. Today while wandering down the main street in search of some food, I saw a group of people ahead of me. I could not believe that these were the nomads I had wanted to find, it was the last place I had expected to see them. With their dark weathered skin, long black hair and brightly coloured clothes, they stood far apart from the rest of the crowd. They had come to pray. As one half of the group stood talking around their bundles which had been piled up on the ground, the rest of them walked chanting in a line around the whirring prayer wheels. All around I could feel



their energy and strong presence. Their dress seemed smart: Women wore beautiful dark red woven skirts trimmed with saffron coloured bands at the base, while men wore thick dark trousers. Both had on felted jackets. Around their necks hung large chunks of amber, coral and turquoise, while in their hands they held dark sandalwood malas (Fig.1) which they moved along on string as they prayed. 'Om Mani Padme Hum', they repeated over and over: 'Hail to the Lotus in the jewel'. Their attention was completely focused on their praying and one could feel their devotion and peace. Excerpt from my diary, Dharmasala, August the 21st 1995.

Over the years I have read many journals of great travellers, who have experienced the lifestyles of the many different races scattered throughout the world. Although these sources of information have always intrigued me, it was not until experiencing this for myself that I now feel the compulsion to find out where exactly such people had come from? What kind of journey they had to get to their place of prayer? What had been in their bundles? How exactly did they exist?. A lot of my source material has been picked up personally through talking to people out their and questioning my own observations. Consequently my motives for writing a dissertation on these people are to satisfy my obvious curiosity which led me on such a wonderful journey of discovery.



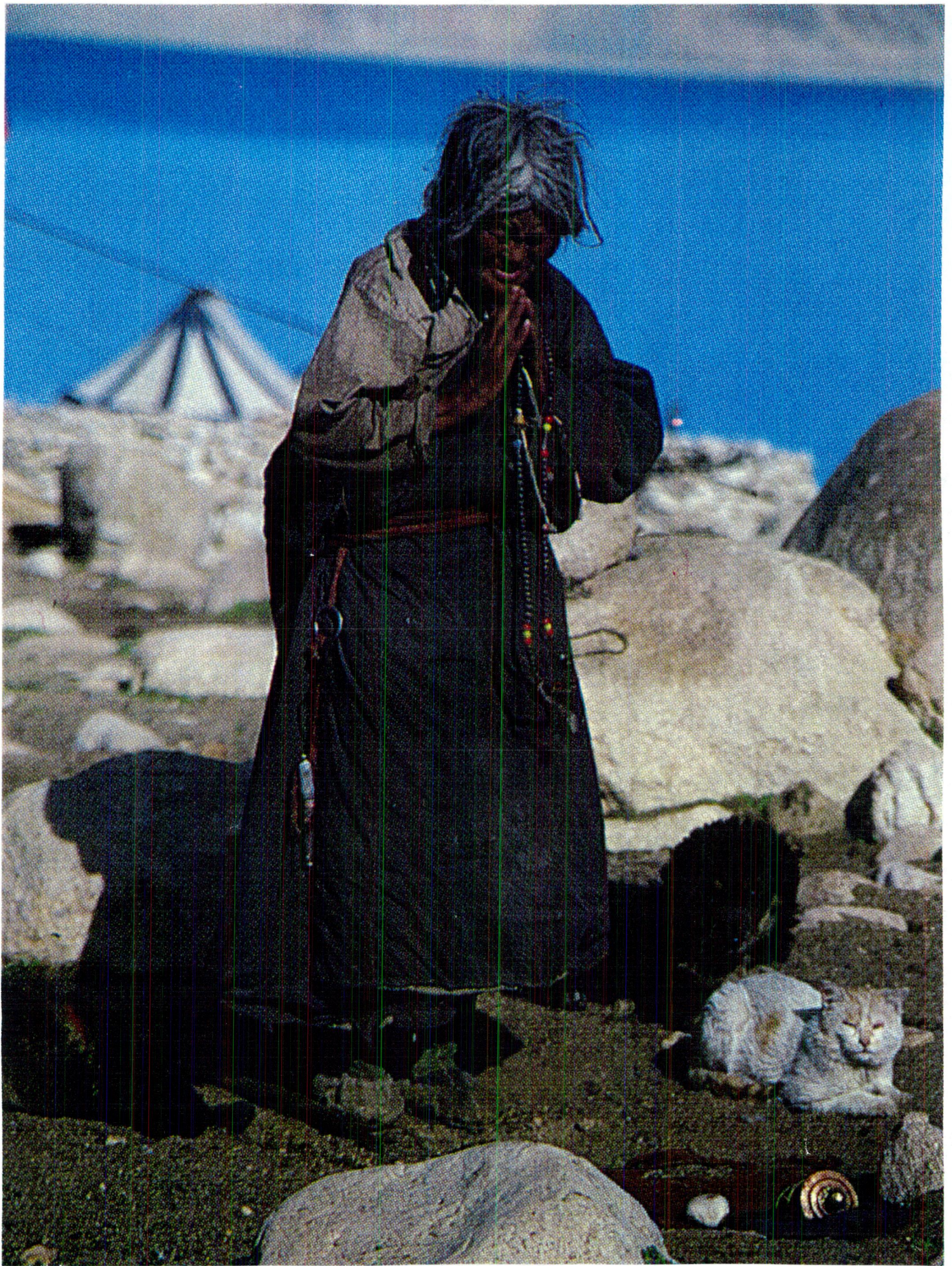


Fig.1 An elderly nomad praying with a mala.



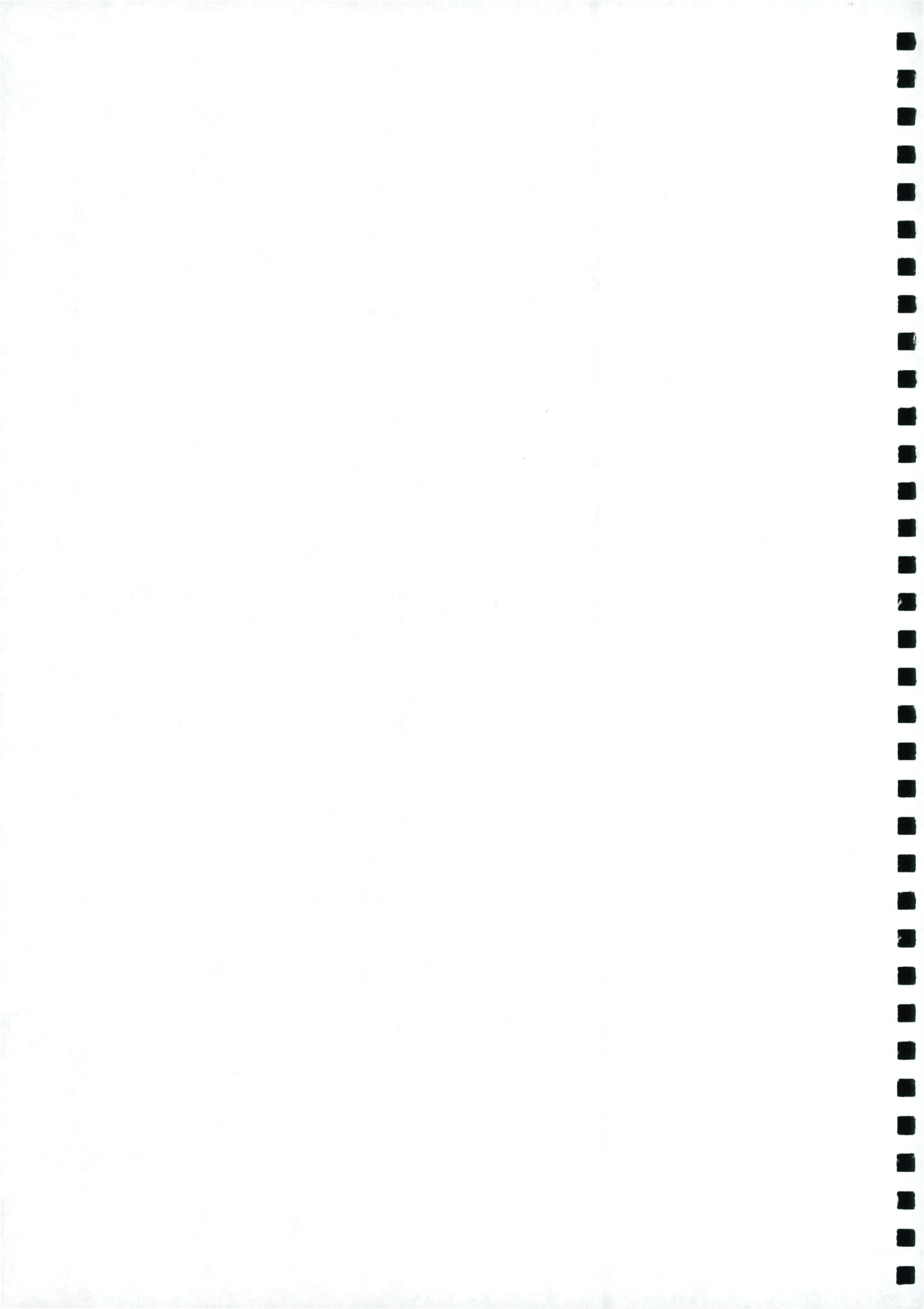
CHAPTER 1

NOMADS IN GENERAL

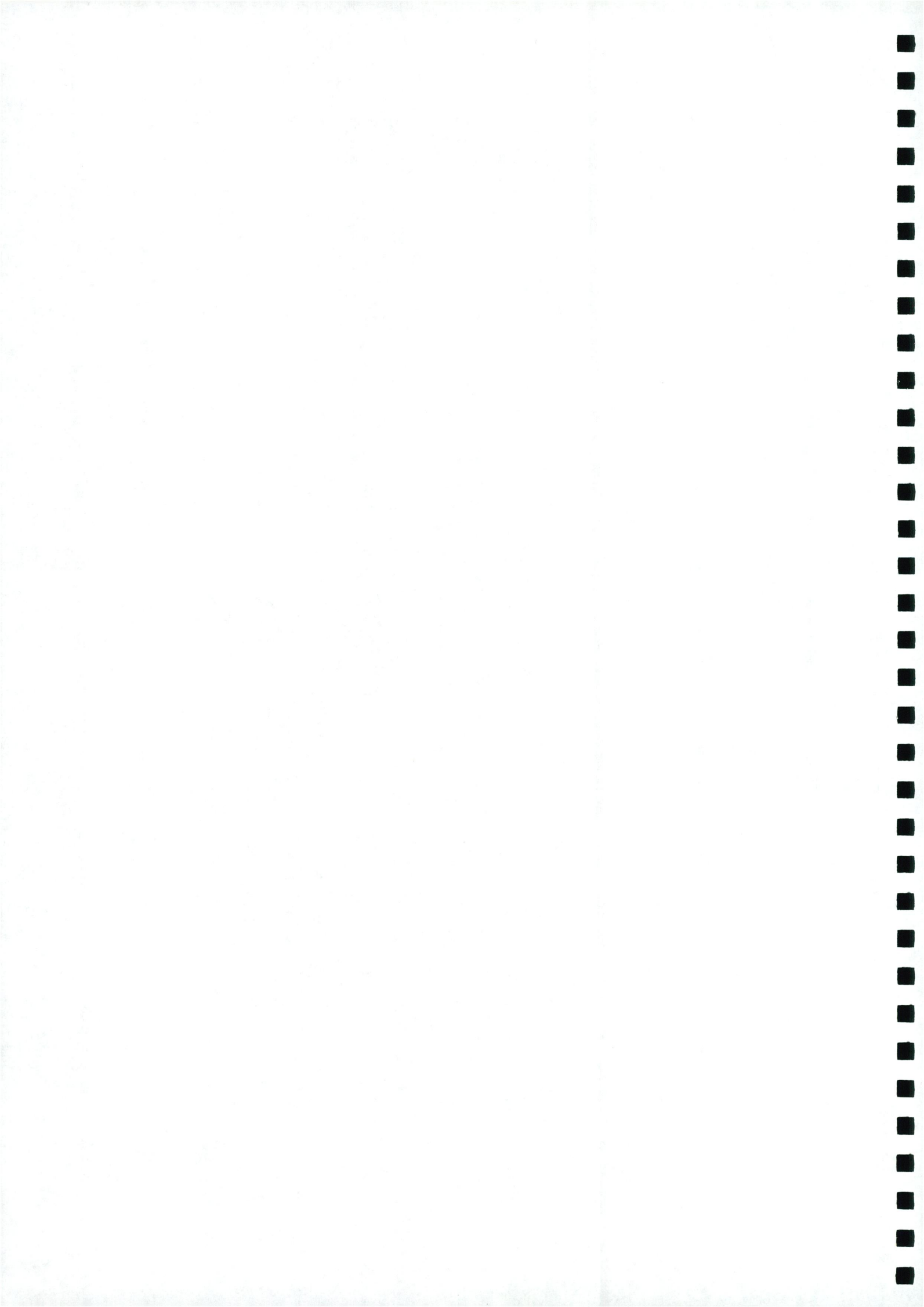
Perpetual movement was their creed, not simply to avert the bad consequences of sitting still, but as an end in itself. In their eyes man was born a migrant, settlement the perversion of degenerates, and cutting the soil to grow crops, murder (Chatwin,1989,p.197).

The origins of Nomadism are very hard to assess. The word Nomad derives from the Greek word 'Nemein' or 'roving for pasture'(Carmichael,1991,p.8). It is this very derivation which sets apart the true nomads from the other itinerant peoples around the world. This one characteristic shows that the movement of true nomads is not random. They do not just live roving lives, instead they move in search of new pasture and trade so that they can survive. Nomads are totally self-sufficient, they subsist merely by the produce of pastoralism, their livelihoods depend on the grazing of livestock.

The areas that are inhabited by nomadic pastoralists are widely separated across the globe, but they all share one important feature: they are all in areas that cannot support settled agriculture. They live in areas that are too dry, or too cold, or too hot, or too steep for profitable farming. It is because of their mobility that they are able to use the sparse resources of marginal lands in a way that settled communities could not. When their animals exhaust one pasture, they can simply move on to the next. Thus



the nomads are also not only marginal in an ecological sense, but they are also marginal both socially and politically.

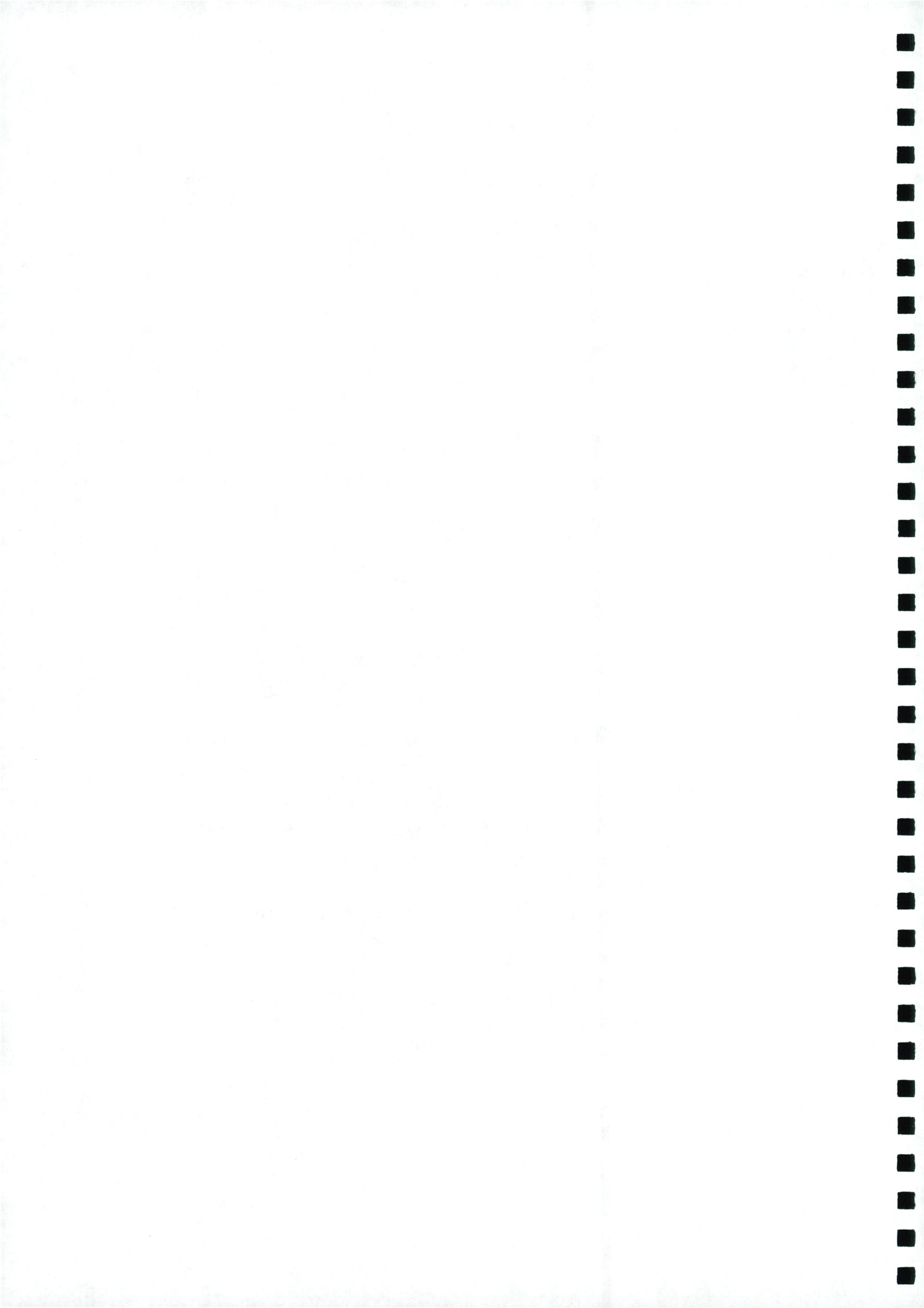


CHAPTER 2

THE BASIC BELIEFS OF THE PHALA AND DOLPO NOMADS

Twenty five centuries ago, the Buddha taught that life is an illusion and that life's desires lead to suffering; salvation, he said, required the destruction of all cravings. Death was not the answer, because death was followed by rebirth into another form of life. The goal was to escape altogether from the weary circle of existence to nirvana. Buddhists strive towards that goal not only by compassionate behaviour towards every living thing but also by such special observances as building shrines at the approach to every village, on every trail and at the top of many passes.

The Tibetans, among the most devoted and fervent upholders of the Buddhist faith, long ago intertwined the philosophical teaching of the Buddha with strands of Tibet's native religion, the Bon Po, to make a form of Buddhism that is particularly their own. Tibet contributed its own deities, potent forces residing in earth, air and water. These beliefs are now deeply rooted in the lives of the nomads of the Phala and the Dolpo-pa. The Tibetan form of Buddhism is distinguished not only by its followers' unshakeable devotion to the old local gods but also by its class of high priests, who are known as lamas. The Tibetans have a particular veneration for someone who teaches: "Without lamas," goes one saying, "there can be



no approach to enlightenment"(Chortlon,1974,p.24). Nomads make pilgrimages to monasteries and holy sites and travel to visit Lamas.

"Last summer," one of the Phala men told us, "traders from outside came and said they would pay high prices for snow leopard or lynx pelts. I wanted some extra money, so I bought two Chinese steel traps and baited them and killed two snow leopards, which I sold to the trader for a good price."But during the winter the man's wife, who had always been healthy, suddenly fell ill and died. "I now know,"the man said sadly,"that Dargo- our powerful Buddhist mountain-god protector- was angered by my slaughter of those animals for profit. He showed his displeasure by taking my wife from me." (Goldstein,1989,p.771).

This sad experience reinforces the religious sentiments of the nomads. The nomads of Phala and Dolpo share the very same beliefs. A Dolpo nomad was recorded to have said of the Phala nomads, "They are our people, we speak the same language, we have the same gods" (Summers,1993,p.17). Their beliefs have evolved from their understanding of the universe, the environment and their place within that environment. All living things are inhabited by a soul, and thus they believe that the killing of something that is equal to a human being is a sin, that will only result in bad karma. The main characteristic of their beliefs is one of great respect and awe for all that surrounds them and the understanding that the natural world is vital for life itself.

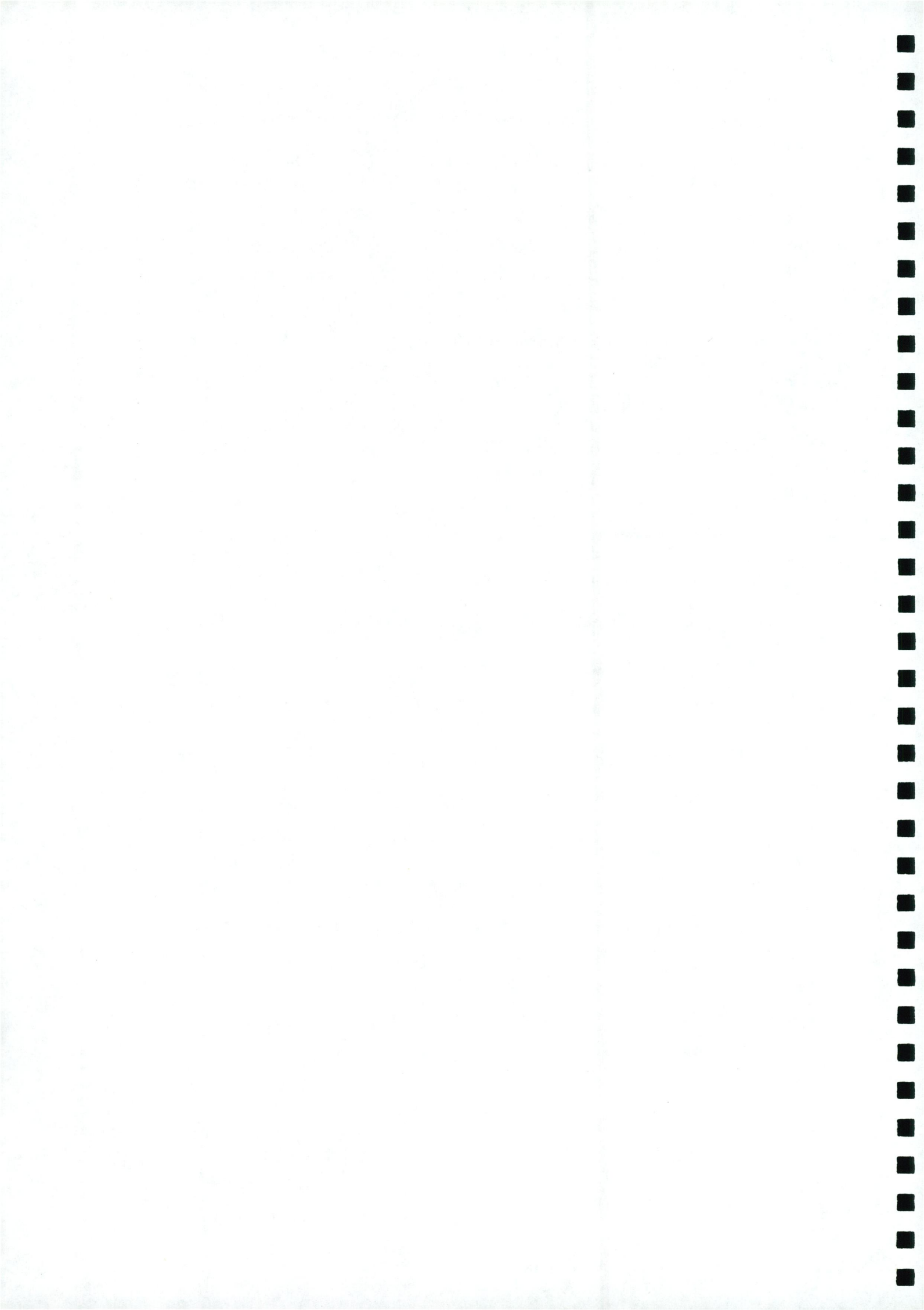




Fig.2 A small Gau.



RELIGIOUS ARTIFACTS

The nomads worship the mountain and nature spirits at every pass on long journeys by planting Prayer flags, placing another stone on an existing heap, and by circling a Stupa. They always carry with them a portable shrine or amulet container, known as a Gau, which will contain an image of the Buddha, or the owner's personal deity. Either fastened to the cross belt or hung around their necks, it is made in metal of two parts which fit together to form a box. The back is usually left plain and the front richly decorated with religious symbols.(Fig.2).

The saying or writing of invocatory spells and prayers counts as a credit that can cancel out sinful deeds and thus help to ensure that their next life will be a better one. The more times an invocation is repeated, the greater its efficacy; the nomads, therefore, inscribe on them various devices that, one way or another, multiply the force of a single prayer many times over. Slabs of stone carved with prayers are often heaped up or arranged in a wall or pile by the side of much frequented routes (Fig.3). Adding a prayer stone to the collection is an act of merit in itself, while walking past the stones is deemed to have the effect of intoning the formulae inscribed on each one of them.

The best method of offering prayers is with the aid of Prayer Wheels, in metal or wooden cylinders that may be rotated by hand, by wind or by

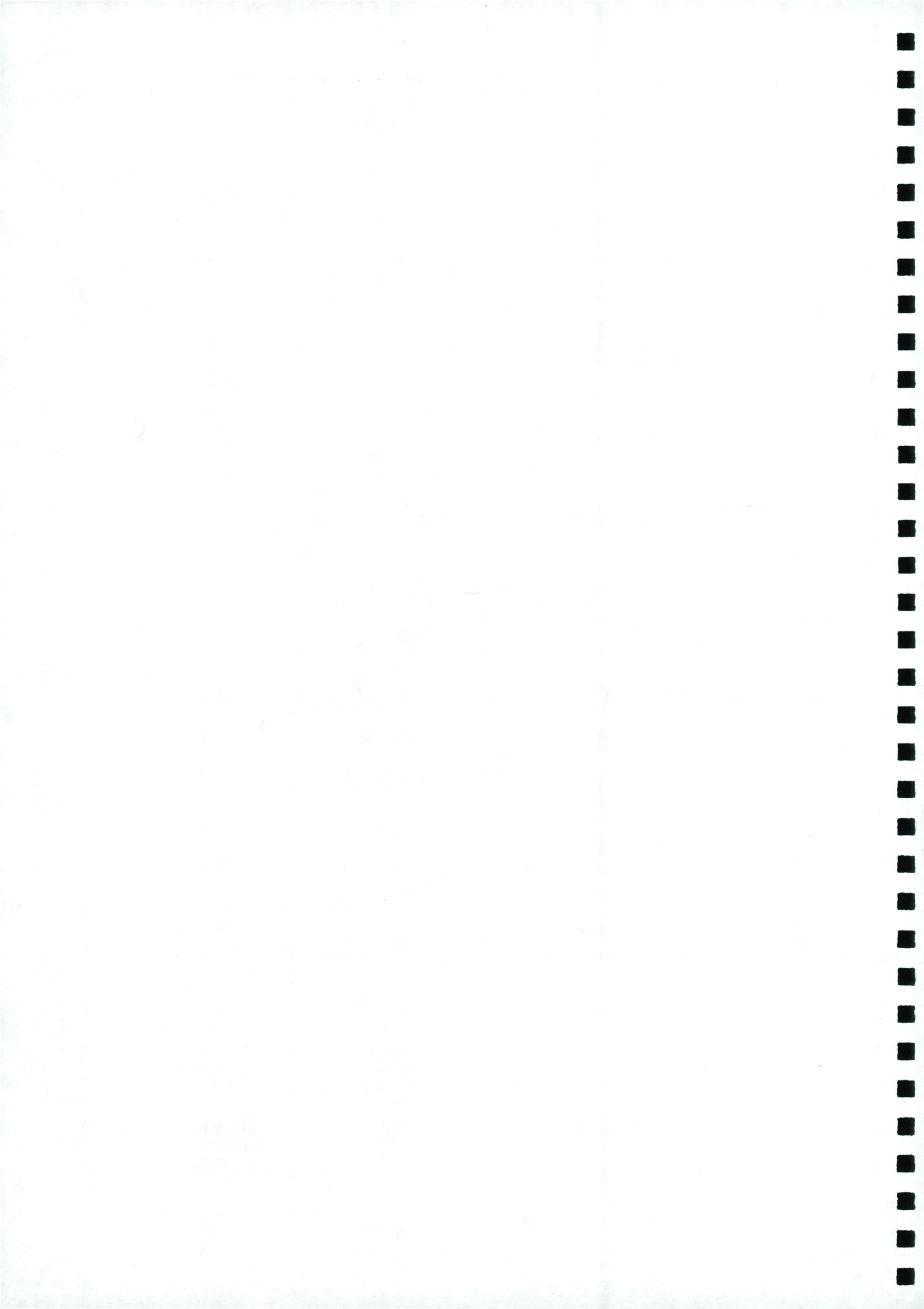




Fig.3 Slabs of stone carved with prayers.



Fig.4 Nomad spinning a hand Prayer Wheel, made in silver and copper.



water. They range in size from the small hand-held variety, which is the most common amongst the nomads (Fig.4), to huge drums fifteen feet high and ten feet in diameter (Fig.5). The invocations are carved or painted on the outside of the cylinder as well as chants being written on rolls of paper and coiled up inside the cylinder. Spun with the aid of a weight, a single spin of the wheel automatically repeats the invocations hundreds of times, thus accomplishing in seconds the equivalent of many hours of verbal recitation.

"Inside are scrolls of Buddhist Prayers," Sonam explained, "Each turn is a prayer spoken." Often throughout the day Sonam whirled a small prayer cylinder in his hand to while away time between chores. (Abercrombie,1978,p.338)

The Choten or Stupa (Fig.6) Buddhist shrines that literally mean 'supports for offerings' are cairn-like structures, and are the most prominent and ubiquitous symbol of Buddhism. They can have many different shapes and various symbolic meanings. They usually symbolize the mind of the Buddha.

Almost every nomad's home has an altar in a corner where they can worship their personal deities. A Thanka, a religious painting, usually on cotton that can be rolled up may hang behind the altar, also some small images made in wood or bronze. Butter lamps and little metal lidded cups, are placed in front of these images. Every morning the lamps are lit, water is poured into the cups, and aromatic herbs are burnt for the purpose of ritual fumigation, clearing the air of evil spirits.

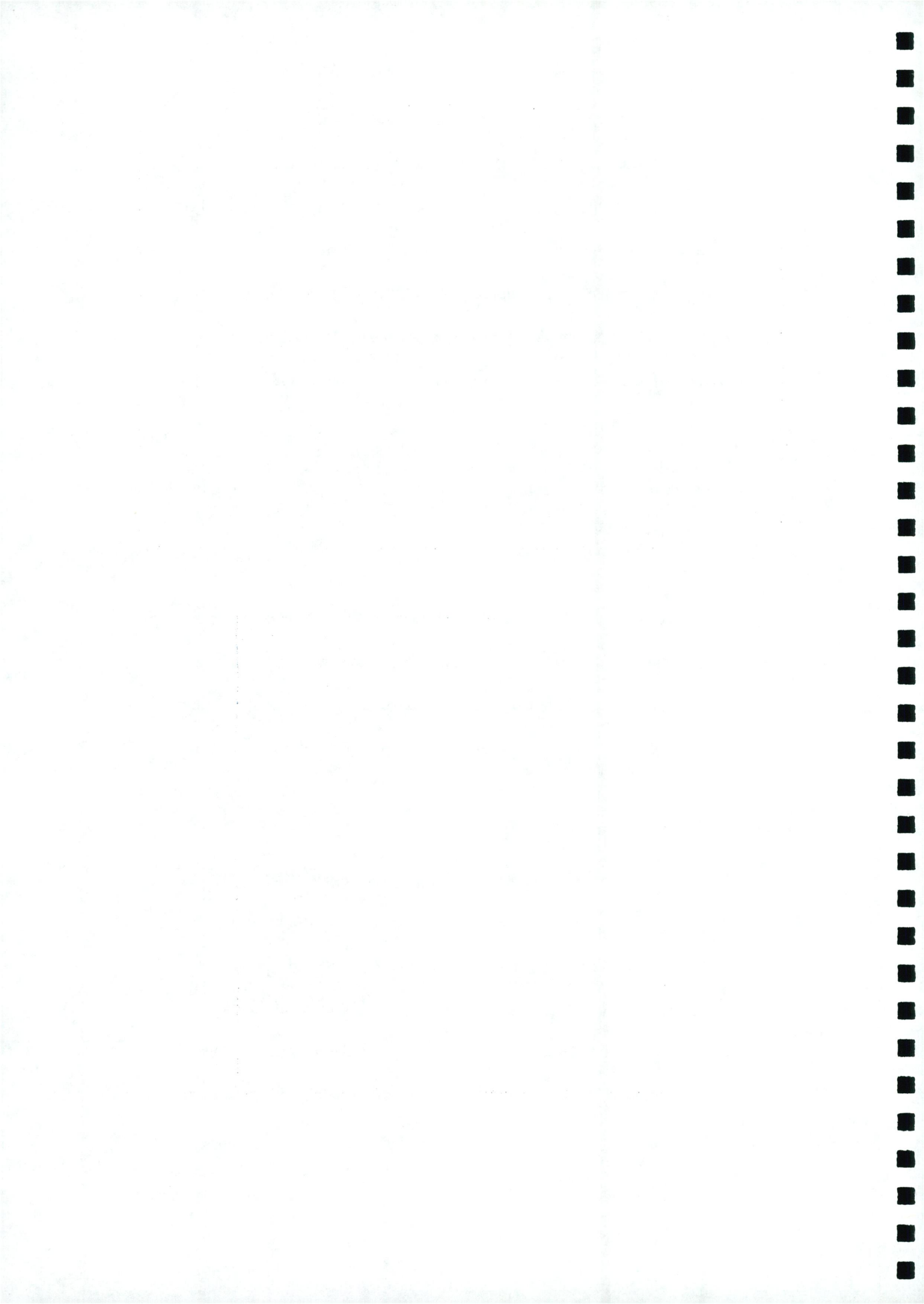




Fig.5 Large Prayer Wheel.



Fig.6 Choten and Prayer Flags.



CHAPTER 3

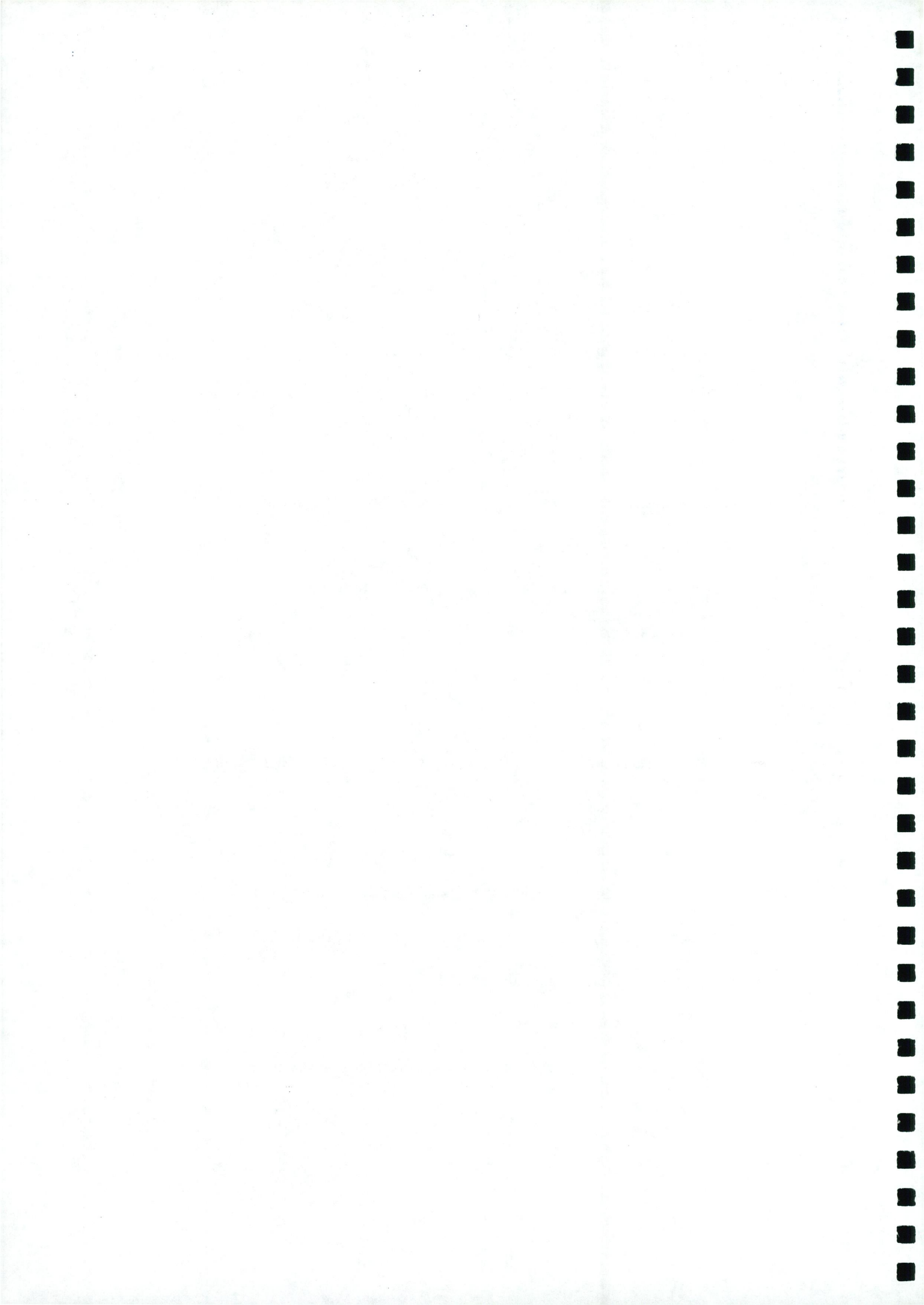
THE ENVIRONMENT

The sky will be my roof: the earth my bed
The grass my soft pillow
Like the clouds and the streams
I will traverse these immense deserts alone

EKAI KAWAGUCHI, A Japanese Buddhist, the first foreigner to visit Dolpo in 1880 (Valli,1995,p.11).

Such an immense desert is the Changtang. Located in Central and North Tibet, the Changtang contains two thirds of Tibet's landmass. The Western section of this Northern Plateau is covered with valleys and plains of varying sizes separated by twisting mountain ridges which transect the land.(Fig.7).

The American anthropologist Goldstein wrote about the Changtang, in his article in the National Geographic of 1989 as being, one of the remotest and highest regions in the world and is home to 500,000 nomadic pastoralists. Living for untold centuries at altitudes as high or higher than any other humans in the world, and inhabiting one of the world's harshest environments, Tibet's nomads have been able to extract from their environment a reliable source of food and products for their needs. Their traditional way of life has evolved from the circumstances in which they choose to live.



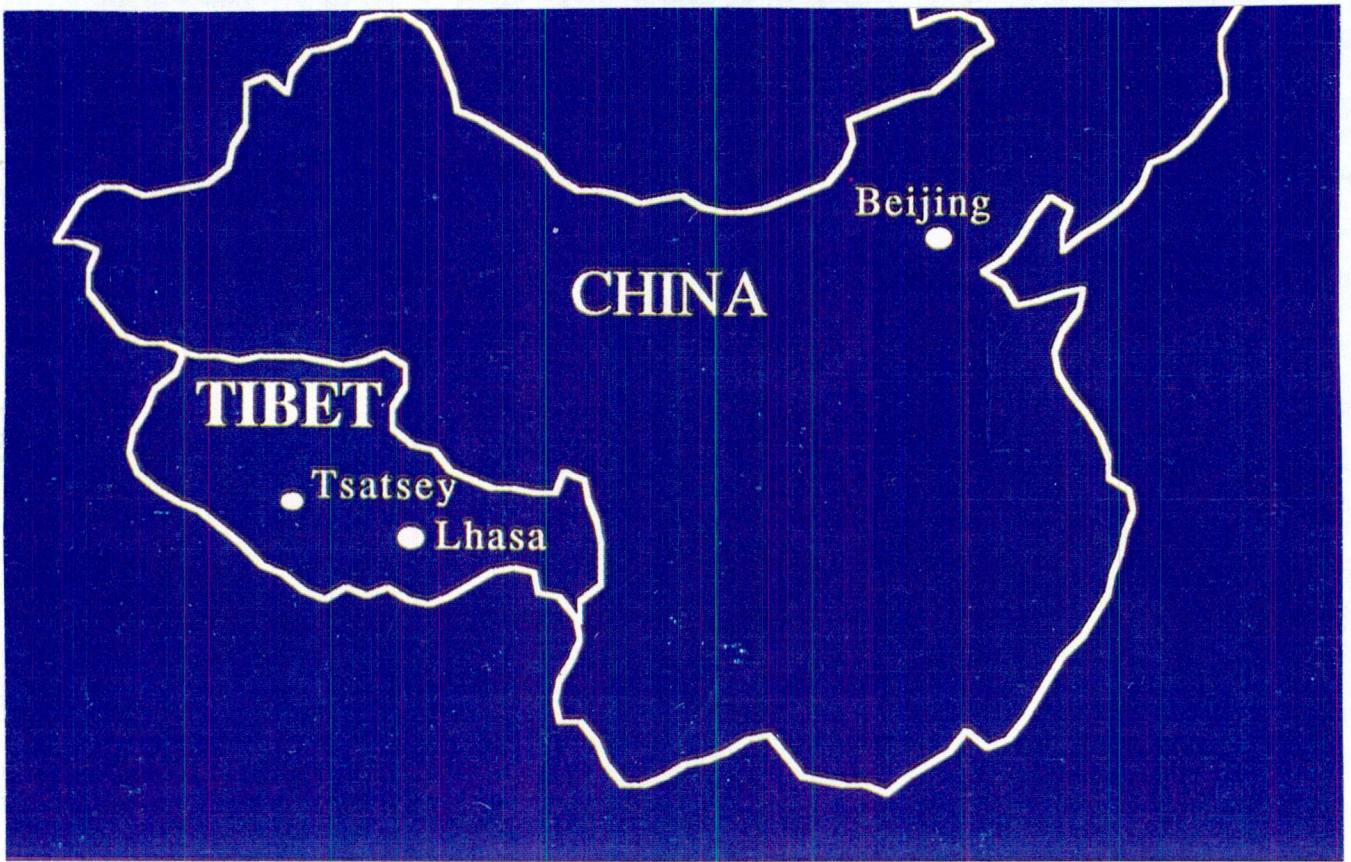
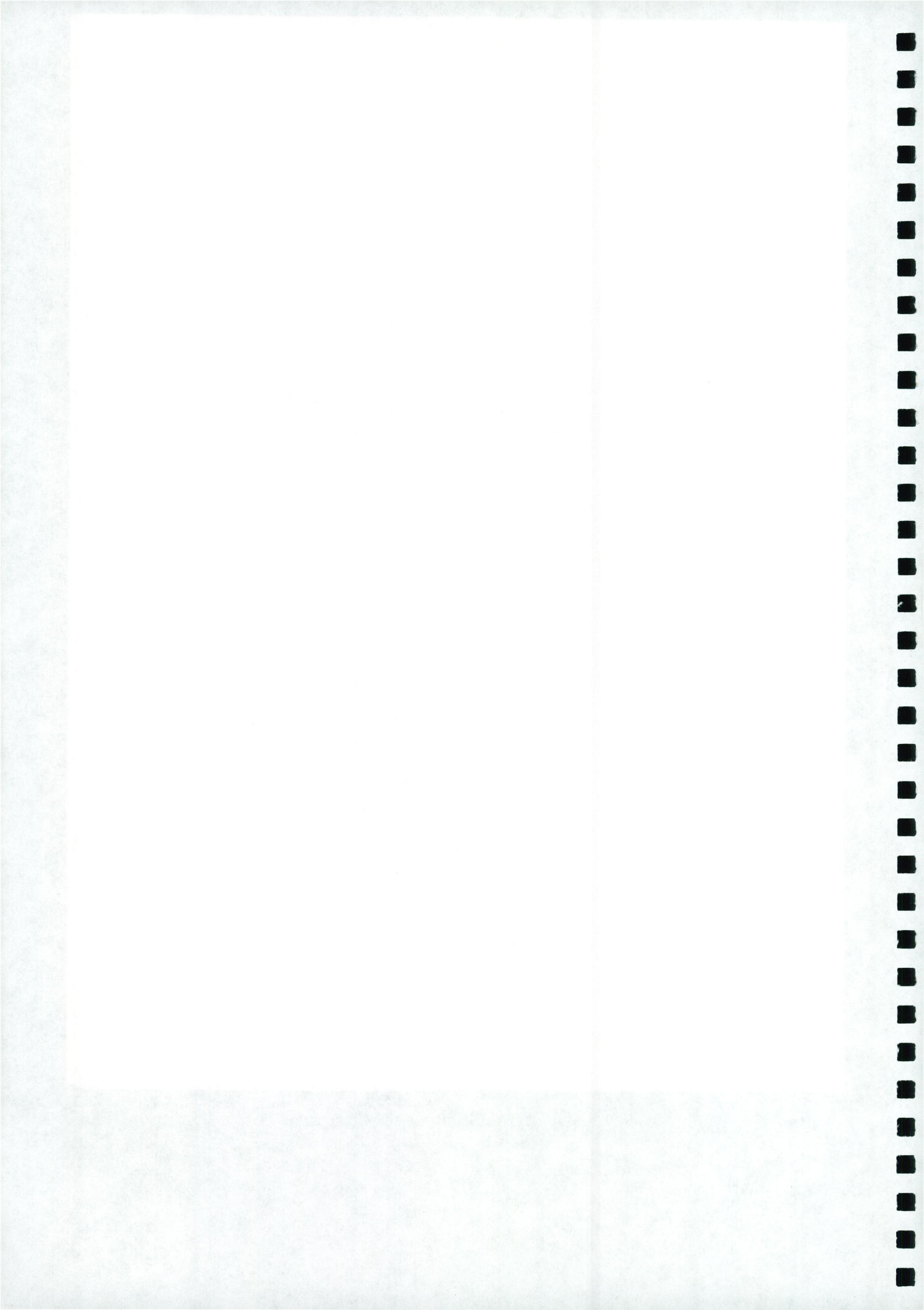


Fig.7 Map of Tibet, showing the Changtang



Phala, located in the Western Changtang, is one of the coldest and most inhospitable regions of the world, even though it is on the same latitude as New Orleans and Cairo. The severe climatic difference is due to the average altitude of the Western Changtang being about 16,000 feet. In the midst of the brief summer, temperatures can rise to 100 degrees fahrenheit in the sun, but temperatures can also fall to below minus 30 degrees fahrenheit in the winter. The effective temperature is even colder because of the wind chill factor, the Western Changtang being exceptionally windy, and sudden gusts can blow a rider off his horse or bury a traveller under drifts of freezing snow. From all points of view, the Phala region has one of the world's most extreme environments.(Fig.8).

Dwarfed by the Changtang's bleak mountains, the Nomads of Phala pursue their traditional way of life. These nomads are the descendants of the early Yak herding nomads who, perhaps several thousand years ago, began to move their herds around the Changtang. There, they captured the energy locked in the wild grasses and converted it into food, clothing and shelter.

For us, the life of the nomads seems exceptionally difficult. No matter what the weather is like, snowing, hailing or raining, the nomads must go out to work with their animals. They accept hardship and discomfort as a matter of fact, a part of the natural way of things. They do not share our perception of their way of life, the men and women both feel their way of life is far easier than that of farmers:

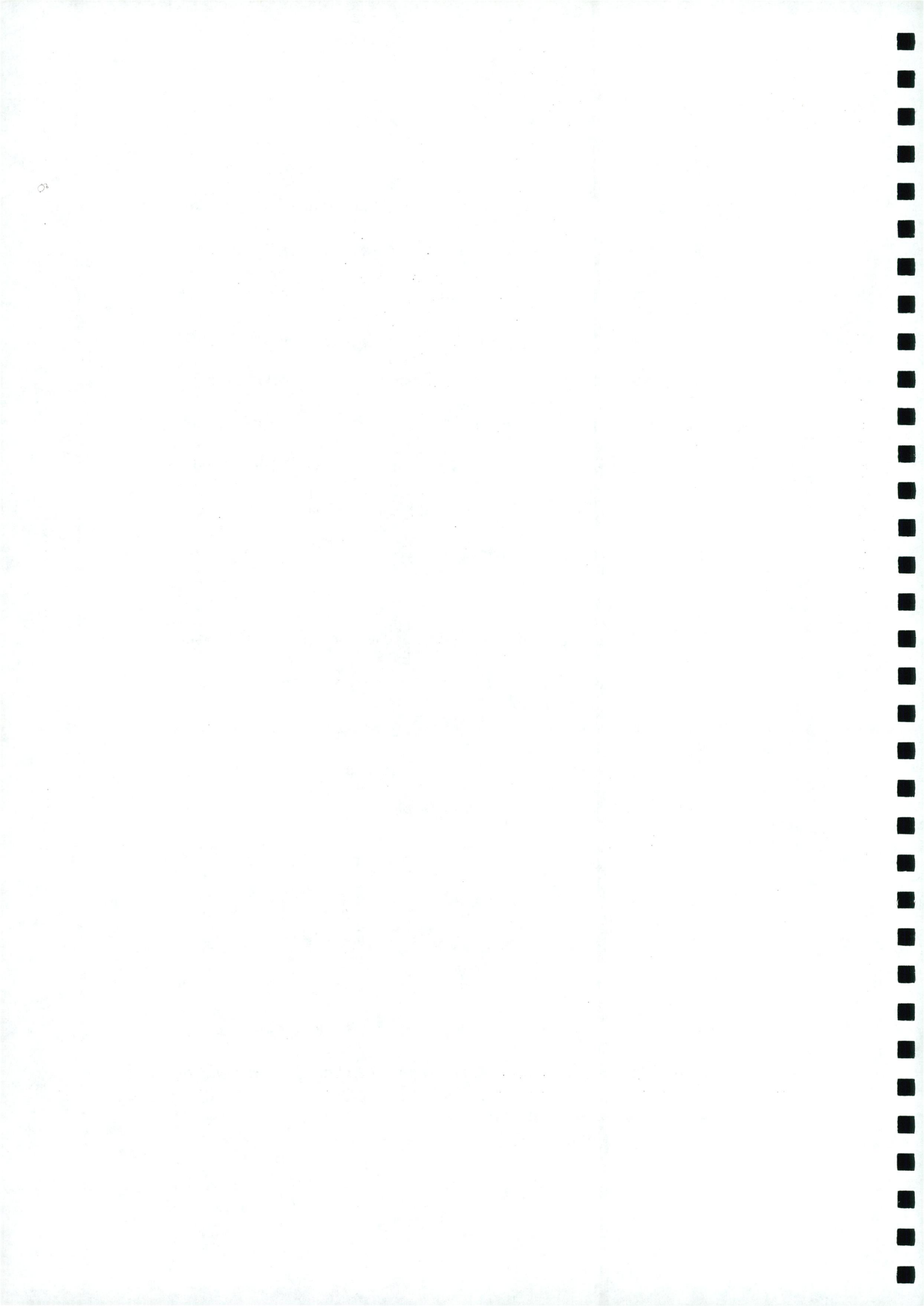




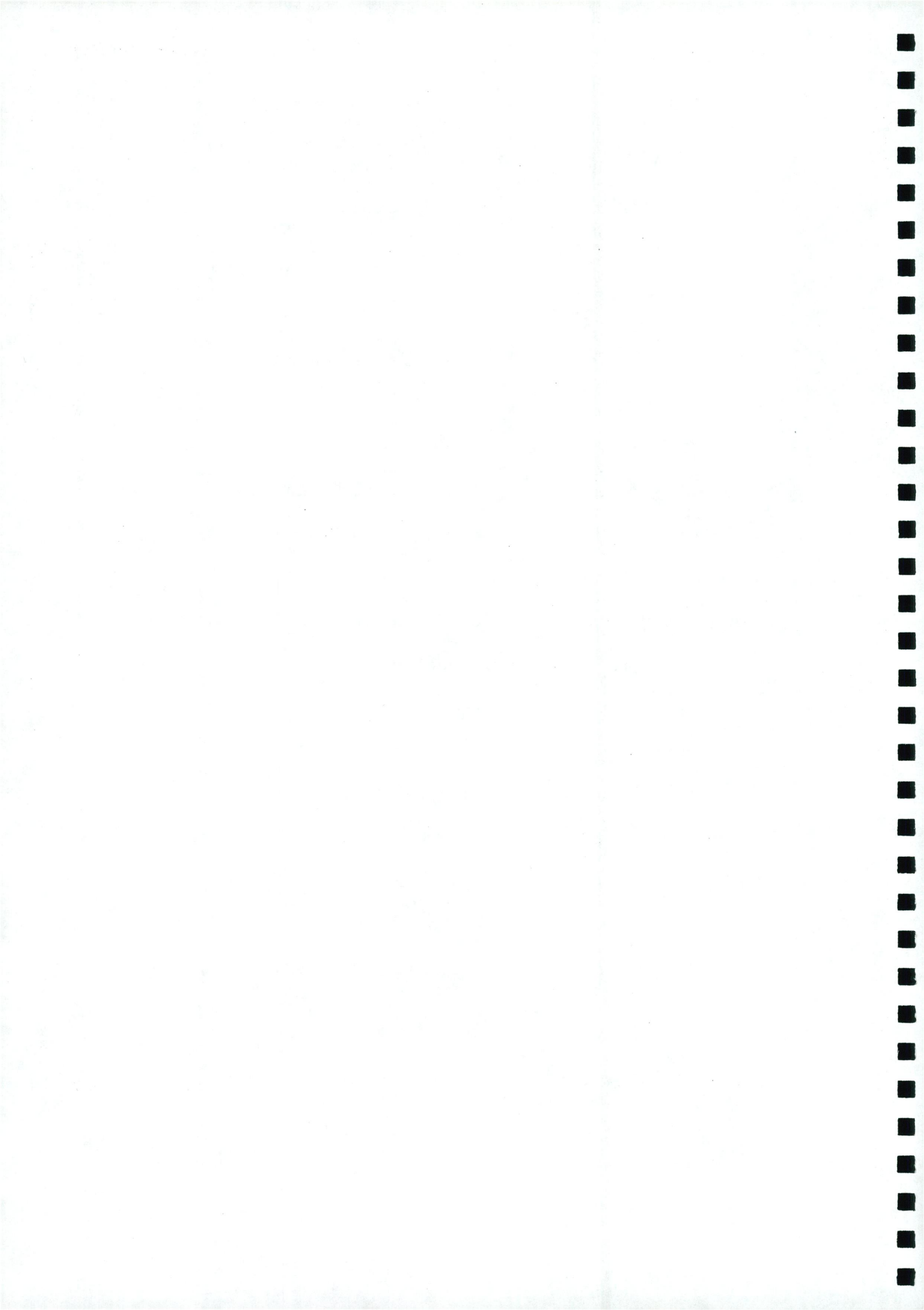
Fig. 8 A view of the Changtang Plateau.



"Look," explained one, "it is obvious that we have a very easy life. The grass grows by itself, the animals reproduce by themselves, they give milk and meat without our doing anything, so how can you say our way of life is hard? We don't have to dig up the earth to sow seeds nor do any of the other difficult and unpleasant tasks that the farmers do. And we have much leisure time. You can see for yourself. In the summer scores of farmers come here to work for us, but do we go to work for them? As I have told you several times, the farmer's lifestyle is difficult, not ours." (Goldstein, 1989, p. 764).

This view reflects the deep conviction with which the nomads adhere to their customs and cherish their way of life. Even though they are looked down upon by farmers and townfolk in Tibet as simple, barbaric and backward, and although they have little possessions, the nomads are proud of their ability to live on the Changtang and achieve from it a way of life that they view as leisurely. These tough, quiet people have an air of dignity and contentment that is difficult for outsiders to reconcile with their arduous life and relative poverty of possessions. The nomads see themselves as masters of the environment; but this is a mastery fundamentally different from that which we know in the west, or even that understood by farmers in Tibet. The young Goldstein, while living amongst such a group of nomads, befriended one middle-aged man who eloquently expressed the strange combination of awe, respect and confidence that the nomads hold for their environment:

"We build no canals to irrigate pastures, and we don't build fences and sow seeds to grow more grass," another nomad remarked. "They tried to make us do this during the cultural revolution, but that is not our way. The Changtang is a ferocious place. One minute the air is calm and the sun is shining, the next it is hailing. It is not possible to try to control and alter the Changtang. We do not try; instead we use our knowledge to adjust to it." (Goldstein, 1989, p. 766).



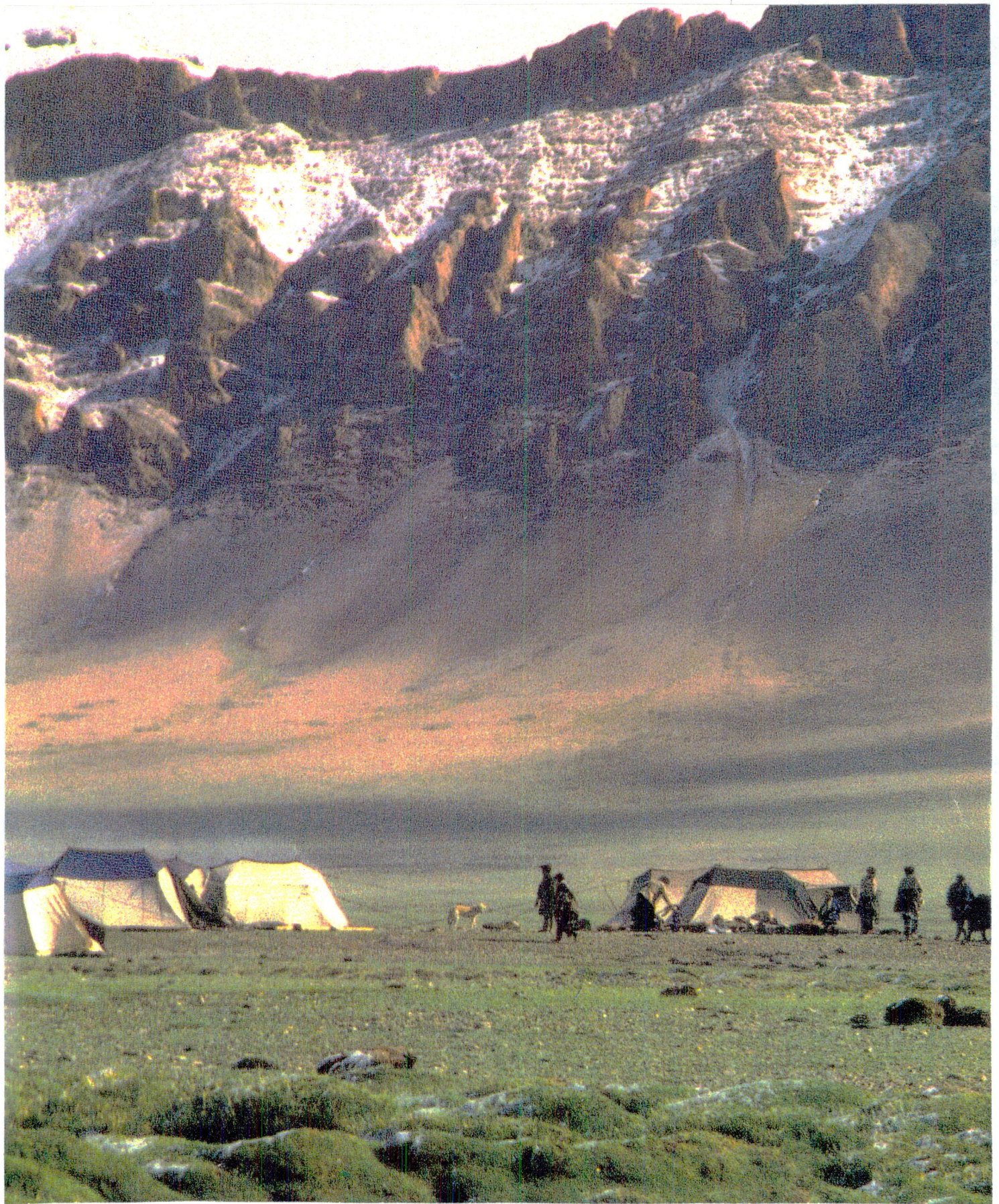


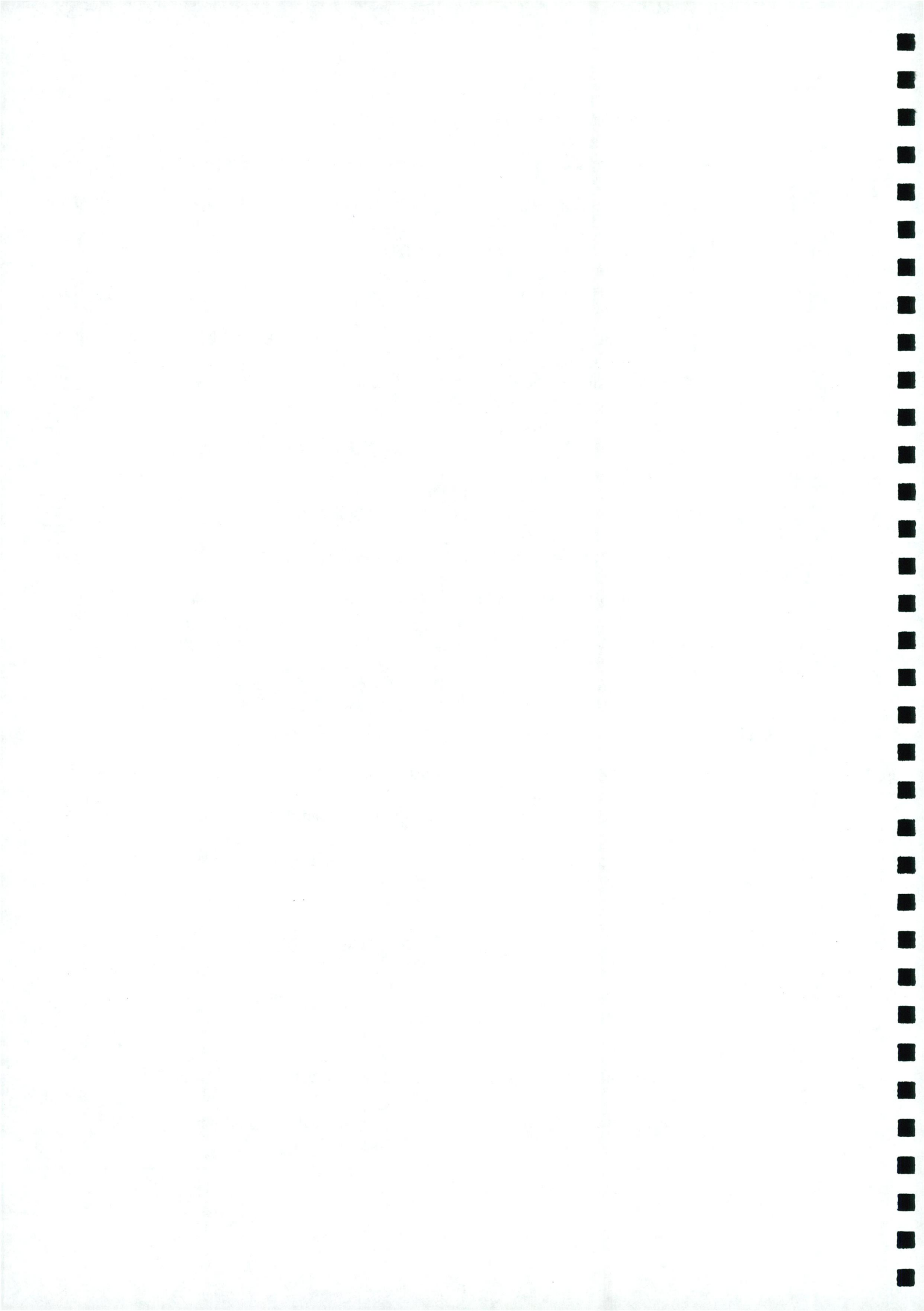
Fig.9 Lightweight cloth travelling tents camped in summer vegetation.



The nomads of Phala have mastered ways to accommodate to the changes of the environment - not to alter or transform it. Though they feel they are completely vulnerable to the climate and the environment, they are also confident that their traditional way of life allows them to survive the worst of catastrophes. These nomadic pastoralists have a remarkable animal management system which balances livestock and pastures and which has allowed them to inhabit the Changtang for centuries without destroying their resource base.(Fig.9).

Ten days travel by yak will bring you to the southern fringes of Tibet. Here all along the borderline shared by Tibet and Nepal, dwell 400,000 nomads, known to the other peoples of Nepal as the Bhotia. The soaring peaks of the Himalayas, which reach above 25,000 feet, have always isolated the Bhotia communities from one another, and by custom each group is known by the name of its locality. All of the Bhotia share an ancestral home in Tibet, from which they derive their language, culture and their Buddhist religion, their colourful homespun dress and their diet. Their ancestors lived a nomadic life in the great expanses of Tibet but crossed over the border into Nepal and made the mountains their home. Their way of life, like that of the Phala nomads, continues almost untouched by the outside world.

Nepal's largest and most remote of all its districts, the Dolpo region is surrounded by mountains. In the south lies the great Dhaulagiri mountain



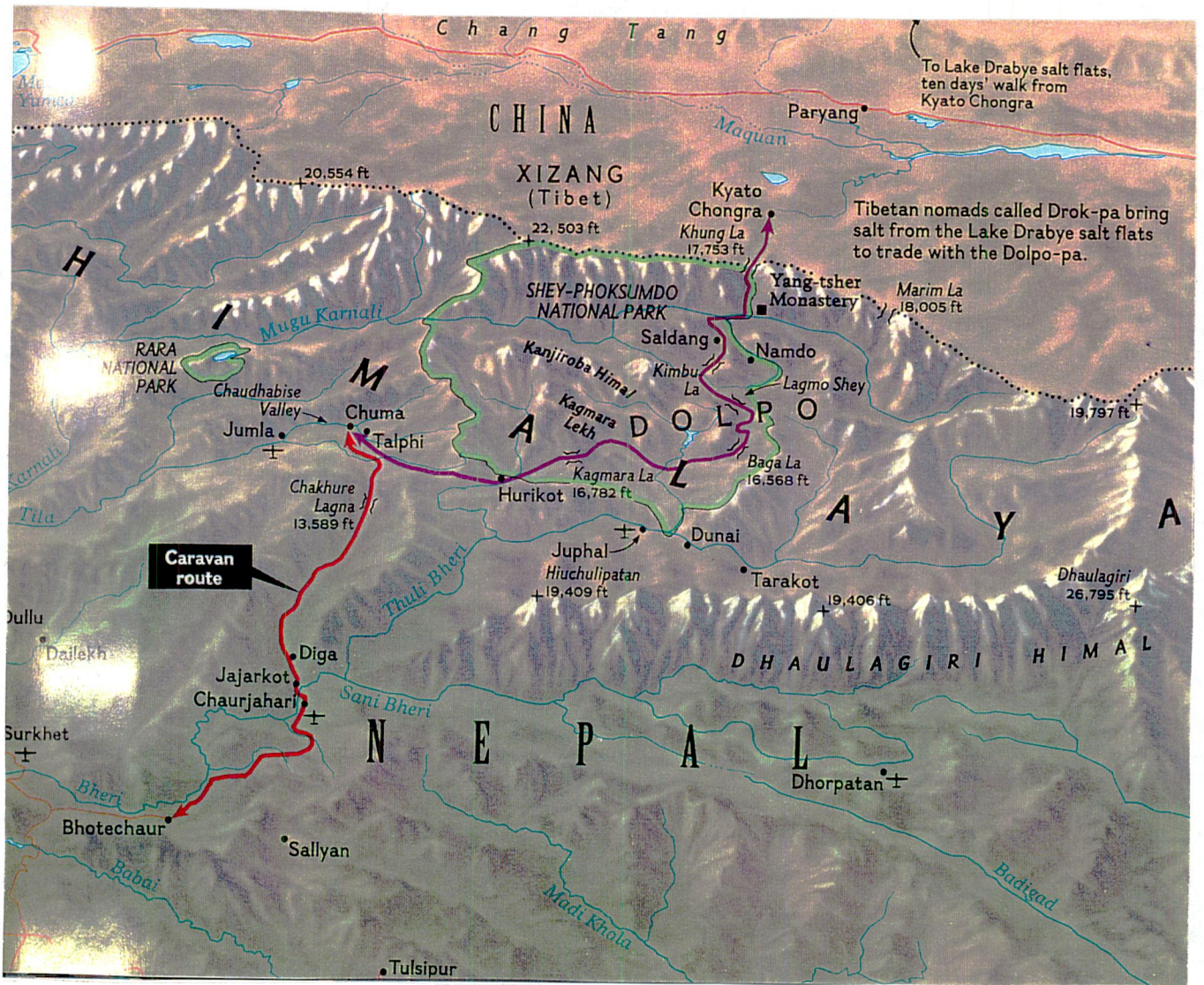


Fig.10 Map of Dolpo and surrounding region.



range and to the west the Kanjiroba Himal. The Northern boundary of Dolpo is formed by the Tibetan frontier, and to the east the other regions of Munang and Mustang. Of all the border areas of Nepal, Dolpo is the least accessible. With the average height above sea level being 10,000 feet and above, the Dolpo live at a lower altitude than that of the Phala. This by no means gives them a kinder environment in which to live. Ironically, their situation would actually seem worse. For they not only live on land which is too poor and too arid to yield more than half a year's grain, but they are also robbed of life-giving moisture. During the brief summer, monsoon clouds from the Bay of Bengal are stopped by the peaks of the Dhaulagiri. Only occasional showers fall on Dolpo's thirsty soil. In September the skies clear and the land crumbles. Temperatures plummet and by December Dolpo is a virtual mountain desert, impenetrable behind walls of ice until spring.(Fig.10).

Yet in this daunting land the people of the Dolpo manage to survive and even to prosper (Fig.11). They combat the cold with long woollen robes, woven boots and a natural inbred hardiness and resilience born of a lifetime's exposure to wind and sleet. Infant mortality is very high/only the hardiest babies survive. Thus ensuring a very tough ancestral stock.

Unlike the nomads of Phala, they resort to constructing flat-roofed, stone houses with windows small enough to keep out the worst of the weather and retain the heat of their permanently smouldering fires (Fig.12). This

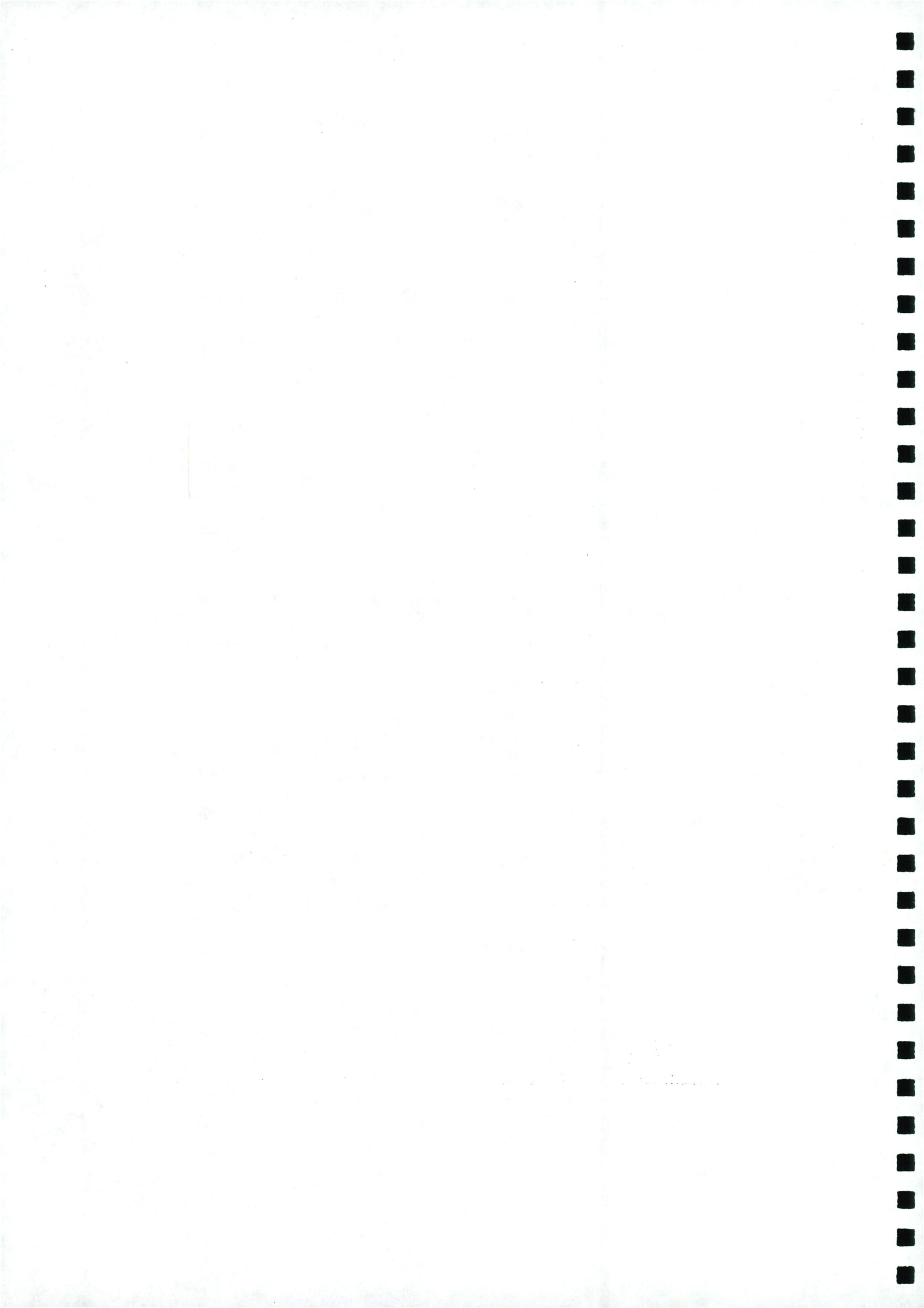
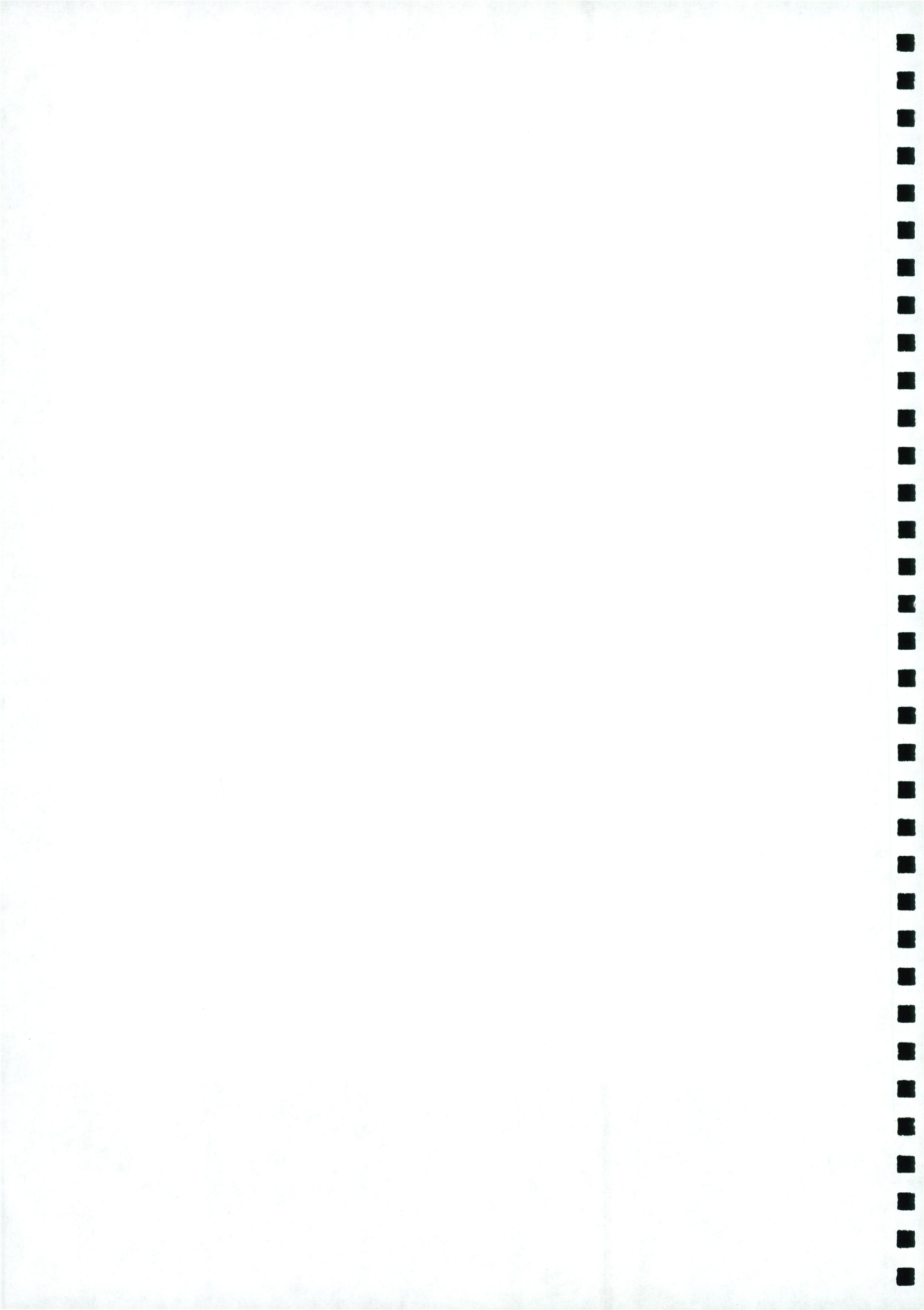




Fig.11 View of a valley in the mountains, Dolpo.



fact would seem to challenge their view of themselves as true nomads. Yet it is fundamentally true to call them such: even though their ancestors lived a Nomadic way of life in the great expanses of Tibet, in their new environment within the Himalayas, grazing land is scarcer and almost all are based in villages (Chorlton,1974,p.15) . Nomadism is still very much a part of the Dolpo's culture, however, and many spend no more than a few months a year in their villages. Feeding their animals on summer made hay and grain. In winter they are away trading and in summer they move higher up the mountainside in search of grazing for their flocks. A family member will remain behind to watch over the almost empty village. They will live at a slower pace, until the caravanners return and bring life back into the village.

The people of Dolpo, though often moving with their herds to pastures at a considerable distance from their villages, do not build alternative settlements of a permanent nature, nor is it customary to cultivate land in more than one locality. The men and women who move with their herds to distant pastures, live there in camps consisting of a number of tents made of yak hair. These tents are transported on the backs of yak from camp site to camp site, but once put up they may remain for some weeks in the same place. Although they build houses and live more settled lives than the nomads of Phala, they are still nomads in behaviour and instinct, and it is only due to their environment that they have had to change their style of life.

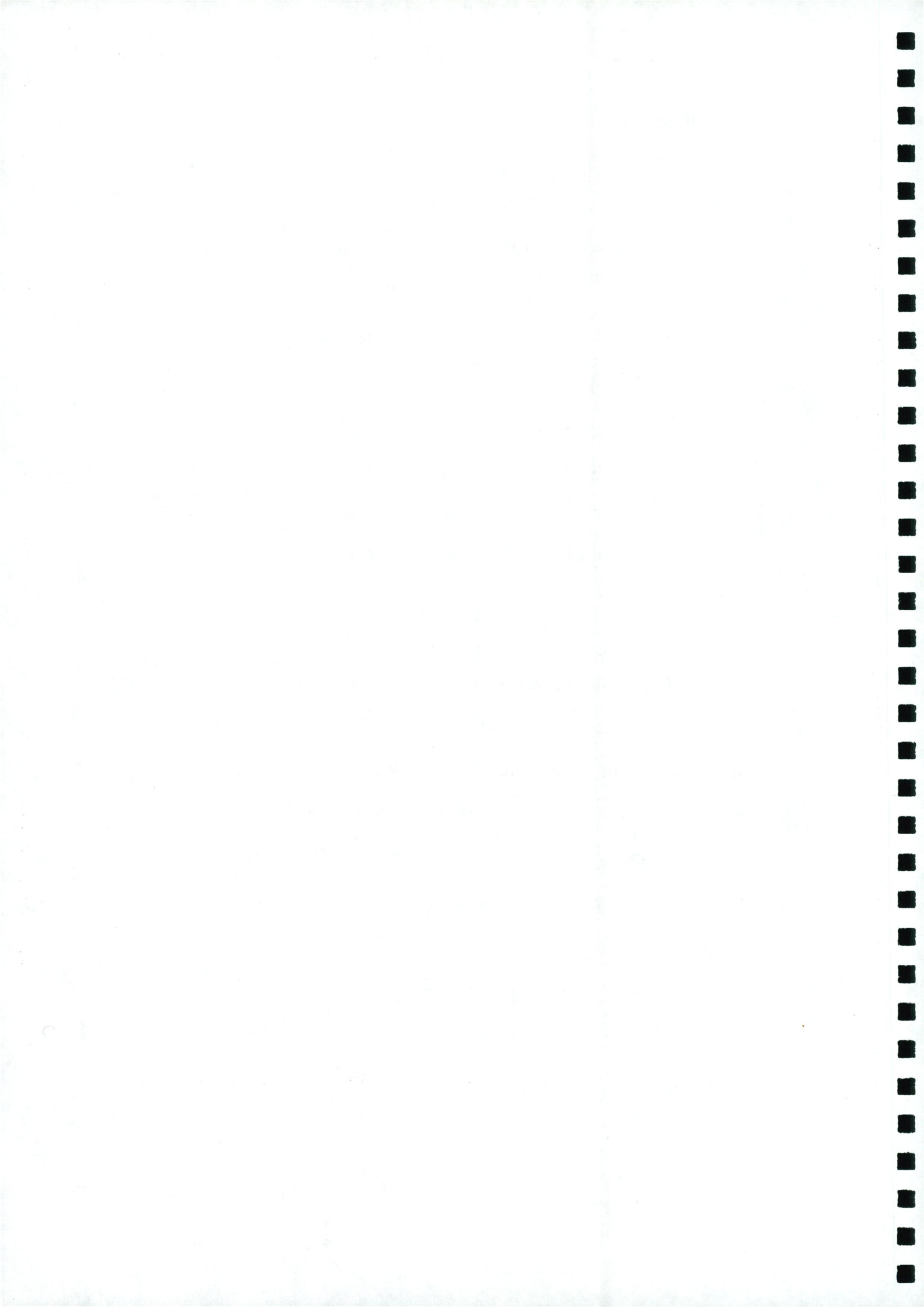
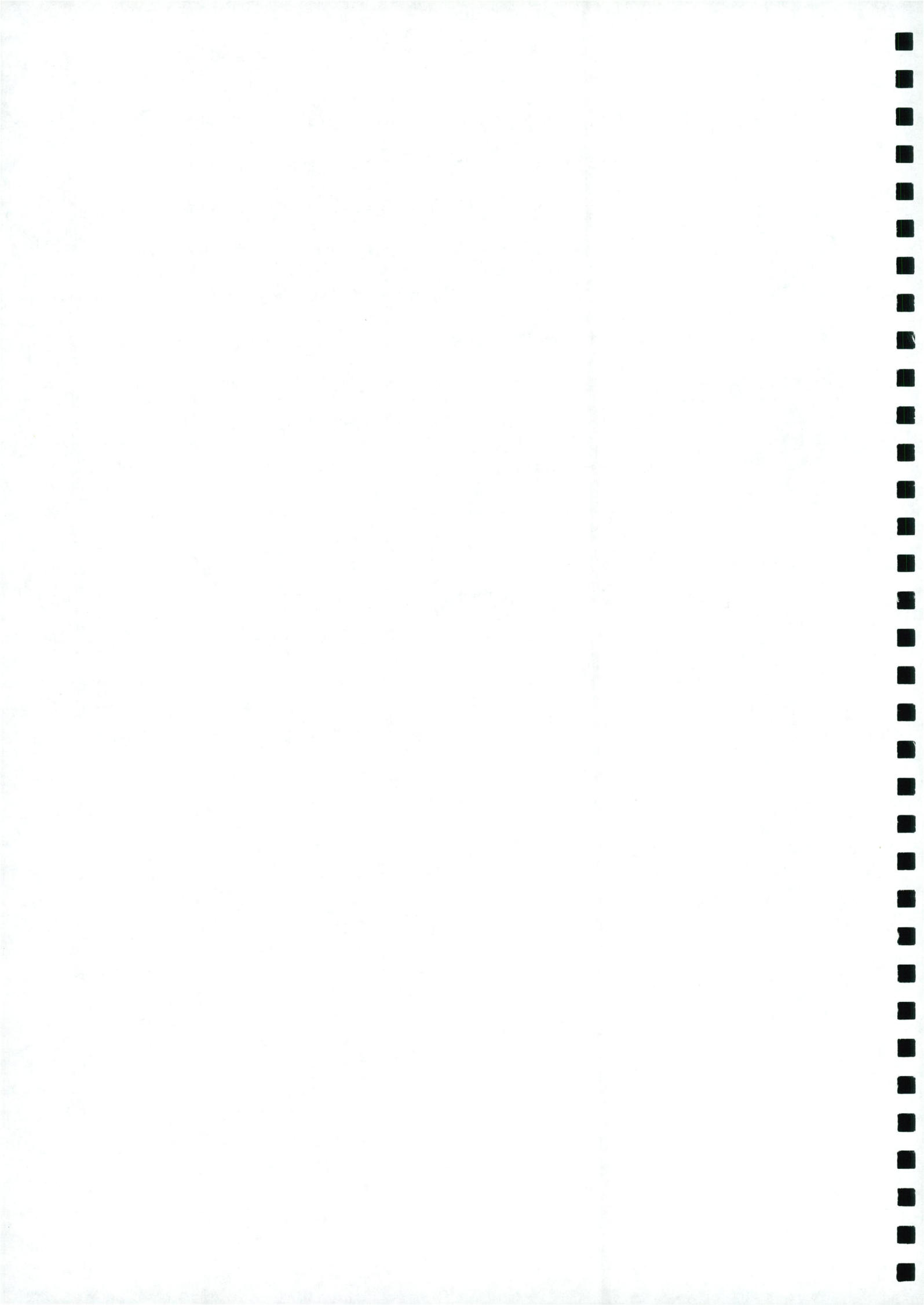




Fig.12 A Dolpo house.



Nomads the world over depend on their geographical situation. It is extremely important that we gain a greater understanding of the nomads' relationship to their environment. It is their unique use of land, water and animals that unites these disparate peoples. Their knowledge and love of their environment has enabled them not merely to survive, but also to do so in a manner that maintains their traditions, protects a rich social life, sustains a balance with their neighbours, and continues to preserve the land around them for the future. Nomadism has survived and has proven itself to be an efficient use of resources over a very long period. Living in such severe environments, on the marginal areas of the world, is their only safeguard against the onslaught of the more technologically-dominated Westernized world, and yet this still might not be enough. For the moment, Nomads continue to flourish in an environment which would seem to serve their needs.



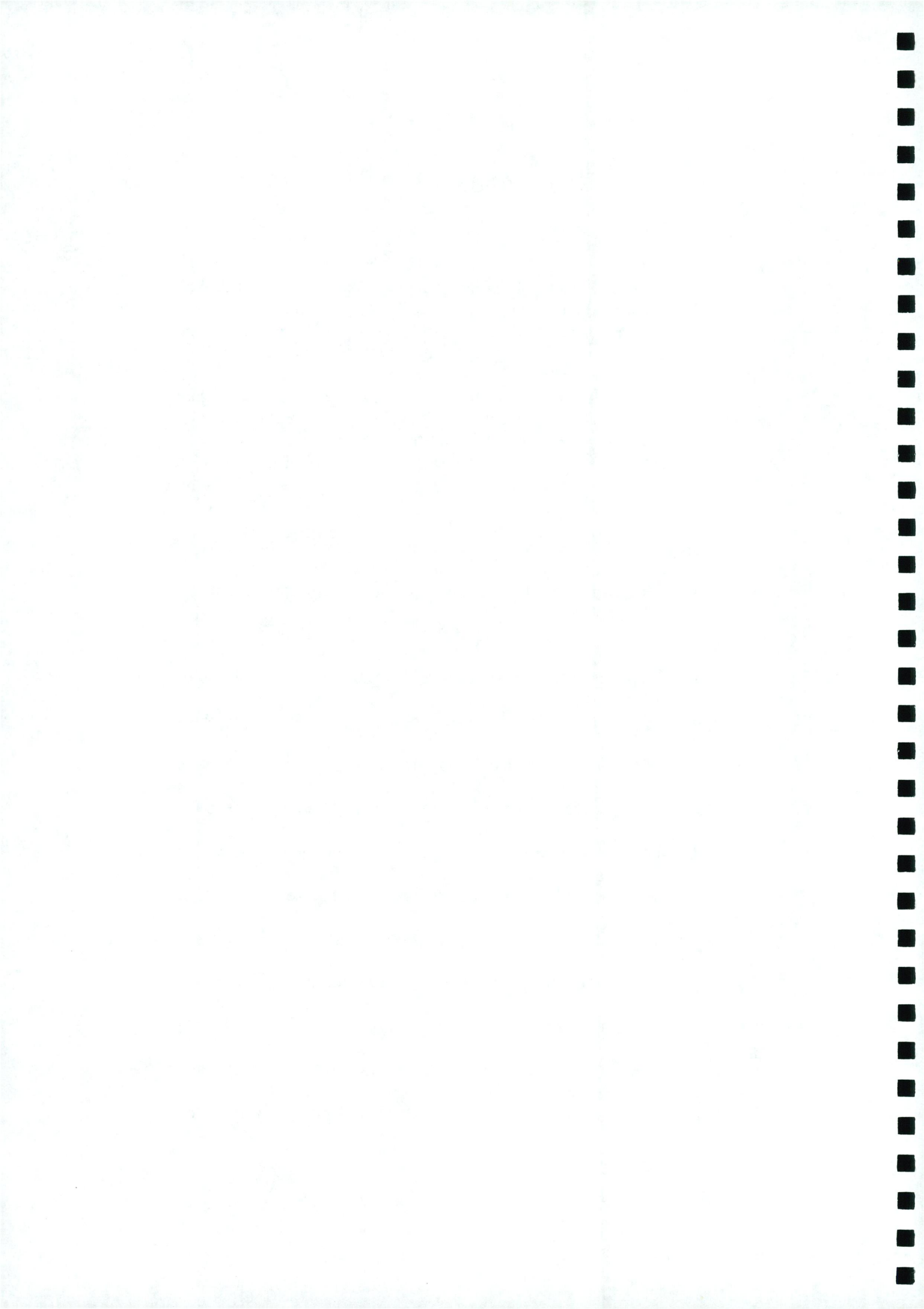
CHAPTER 4

ANIMALS

"You see," Pemba said, pointing to the pile of wool at his side, "we live off the products of our animals. Every year our sheep provide wool, skins, meat, milk and butter which we use for barley, tea and so forth. And then every year virtually every adult female sheep gives us a new lamb. The same is true of our goats. So long as we can guide our animals to where there is grass, they take care of all our needs. They are our true providers and our measure of wealth - if they flourish, so do we." (Golstein, 1989, p. 774).

On how he and his fellow drokba see their way of life.

Animals mean a lot more to nomads than merely a source of food. Their animals are a passion that provide survival for them. Clearly the meat, milk, hide, blood, bones and dung of the animals provide food, clothing, housing and implements for their owners. They appear in all aspects of everyday life from functional to, more importantly, ritual, dowry, symbols of status, prestige and to be killed for honoured guests. Livestock affect the whole social and political structure of nomadic society. The language of the nomads is rich with animal imagery. The nomads living in the Himalayas have a proverb proclaiming that the four most essential possessions in order of importance for any tribesman are his horse, his gun, his birthplace and finally his wife! It is this important and deep-rooted attachment of the nomad to his animals that marks one of the most significant traits that the nomads the world over share, despite their very different environments and circumstances. It is the nomads' complete economic dependence on



livestock that separates them from villagers. The animals themselves are valuable trade items: one sheep can be traded for up to seventy five pounds of barley.

"A horse is not a horse if it does not carry up hill, and a man is not a man if he does not walk down hill".
A Tibetan proverb.(Sherring,1974,p.68).

The nomads of Phala and Dolpo are extremely fond of their horses. They are bred locally and like most central Asian horses, are quite small, not that much bigger than ponies. Horses are very much a luxury item: they do not use them for herding, nor will they drink the mares' milk or eat horse meat. They pay a huge amount of attention to their horses' tack. They have colourful matching woven rugs which come in sets of two: a larger rug lies between the horse and the saddle which is made of wood or metal, and a smaller, rectangular, square or oval rug which is placed on the saddle itself. The saddle rugs are reinforced with red cloth or felt and lined in order to make them more hard wearing. They create a splash of colour in the bleak environment. Saddle rugs are not usually used for trade, as most are worn out by use.(Fig.13).

The horses are not nearly as hardy as the nomads' other livestock, but because they are worth so much more, they are given a lot more attention than their other livestock. They are fed hay which is obtained annually from special pasture that is left ungrazed throughout the growing season.

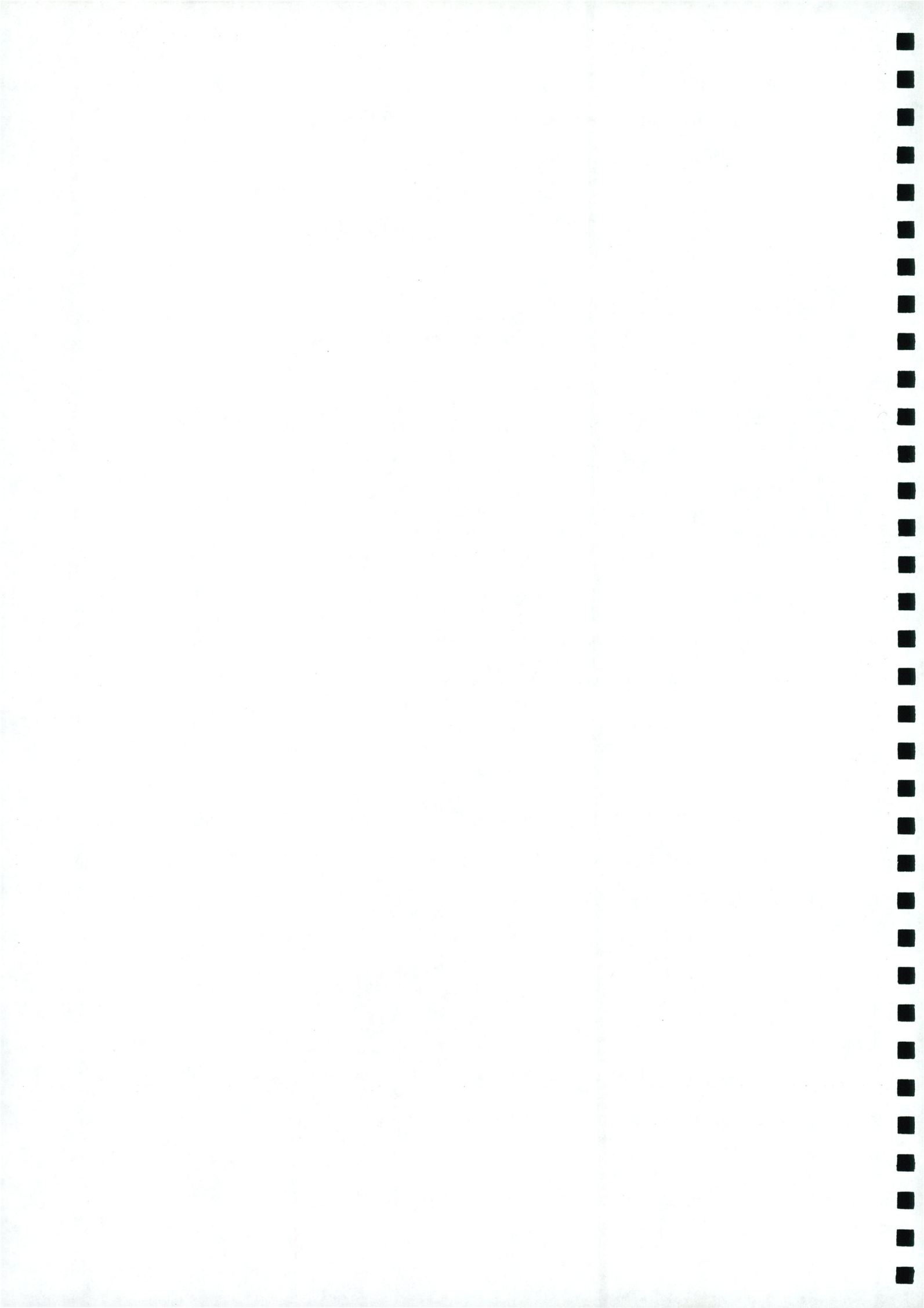
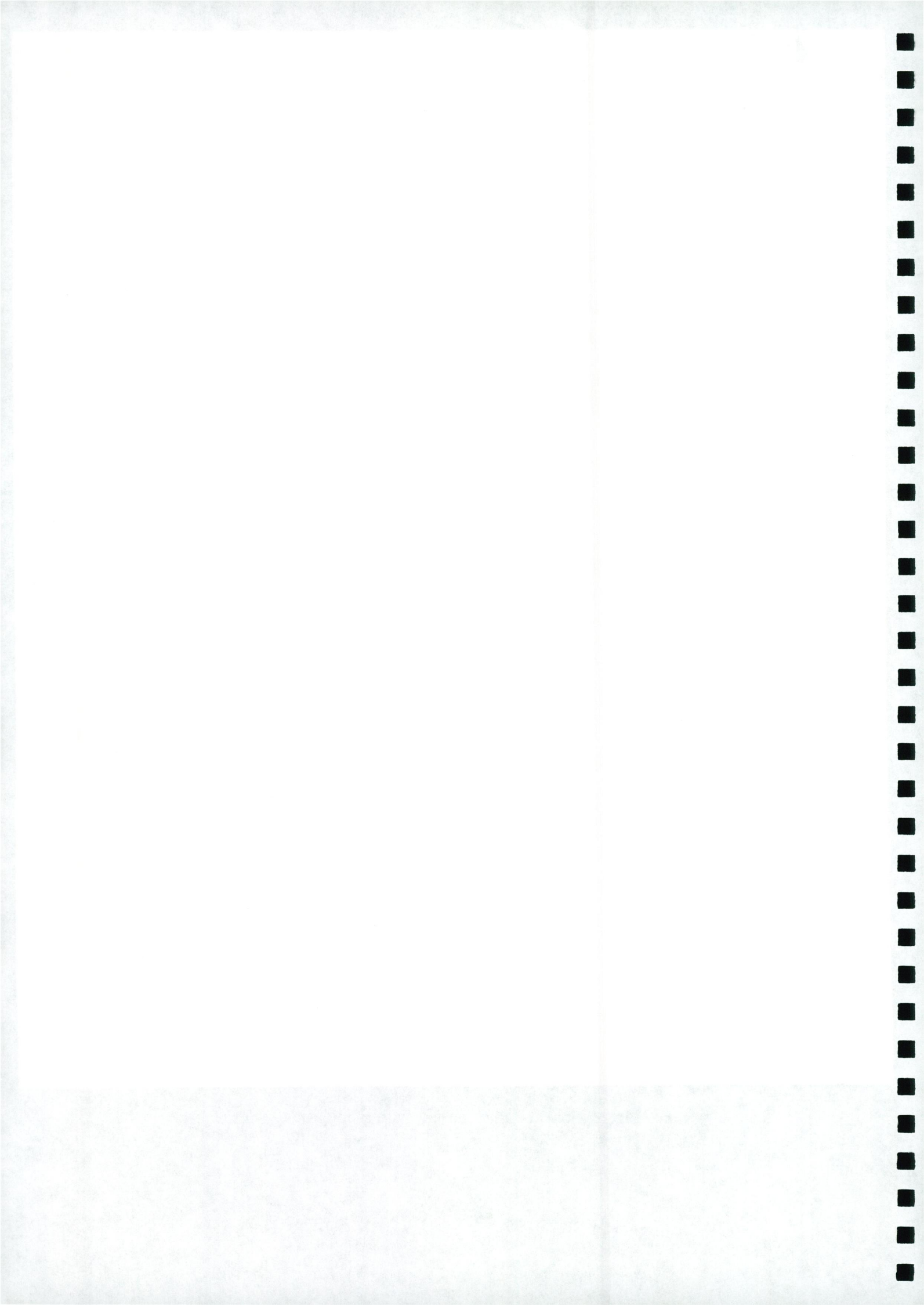




Fig.13 Nomad on horseback, with saddle rugs.



A horse commands a high price when traded. A nomad would give about five yaks or forty to fifty sheep for a horse, thus placing them out of reach for some of the nomads.

The horses, along with the nomads' valuable hunting dogs, partake in hunting activities. Some nomads clearly enjoy the challenge of hunting, and others because they like the extra meat. They are Buddhists, and as such feel they should not kill other creatures. However, if they are desperate for food, they will hunt. Hunting represents a non-essential component of the nomads' subsistence: it is an economic reserve.

"Yaks are our parents," says Tilen.
"They carry our loads. They take care of us."
Tilen, a young nomad on the importance of the
Yak. (Summers, 1993, p. 17).

For the nomads, the most essential animal is the yak. The yak is a perfect match for the nomads. It is well adapted to the cold and has great endurance even at the highest altitudes. The nomads' name for the yak is not yak at all but 'Nor'-a word that translates aptly as "wealth" (Haimendorf, 1984, p. 12). The Yak is a big, solid animal, which has a thick outer coat of coarse hair, and a soft undercoat of cashmere like wool. Its layer of fat allows it to live all the year round out in the open. Being an extremely powerful animal, it is the only animal that can carry the nomads' heavy and bulky tents, each side of which can weigh up to 100 pounds. (Fig. 14).

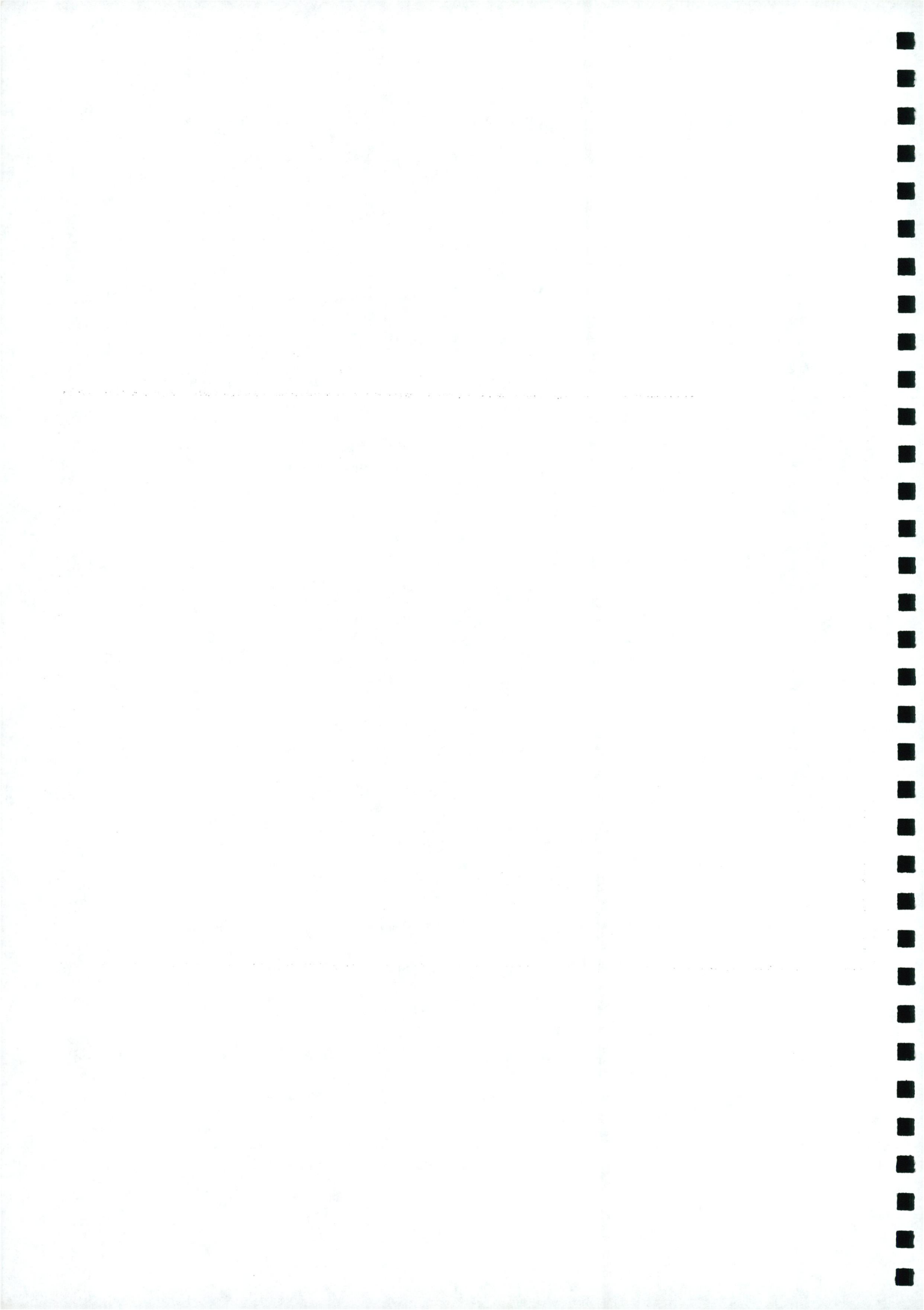




Fig.14 Part of a Yak caravan.



The Yak is the quintessential Changtang and Dolpo animal. Life in this part of the world would be near impossible without the Yak. They provide not only an indispensable means of transport but also a great deal of food: milk, yoghurt, cheese and butter for the tea which is the main if not most important part of their staple diet. Yaks also provide large quantities of meat. Their coarse belly hair is spun and woven into tent material, and their soft cashmere wool, 'Kulu', is used for ropes and blankets, essential for the warmth of the nomad.

Their strong hide is made into the soles of boots, needed when crossing such great distances all year around. Finally their dung is collected, dried and stored in piles. In a land where trees are scarce, the dung is used as fuel for warmth and cooking. With so much use it is no wonder that they are valued so highly: traditionally, roughly six sheep and seven goats were bartered for one Yak. (Fisher, 1986, p.79).

Sheep, however, are the more dominant herding animal in these mountainous regions of Southwest Asia. At this high altitude, the sheep are different from those of the lowland sheep: they have got more haemoglobin in their red blood cells, and larger lungs, as well as having a thicker, longer coat of wool. Like the Yak, they provide many essential goods to the nomads. Milk and meat contribute to the food, whilst their skins and

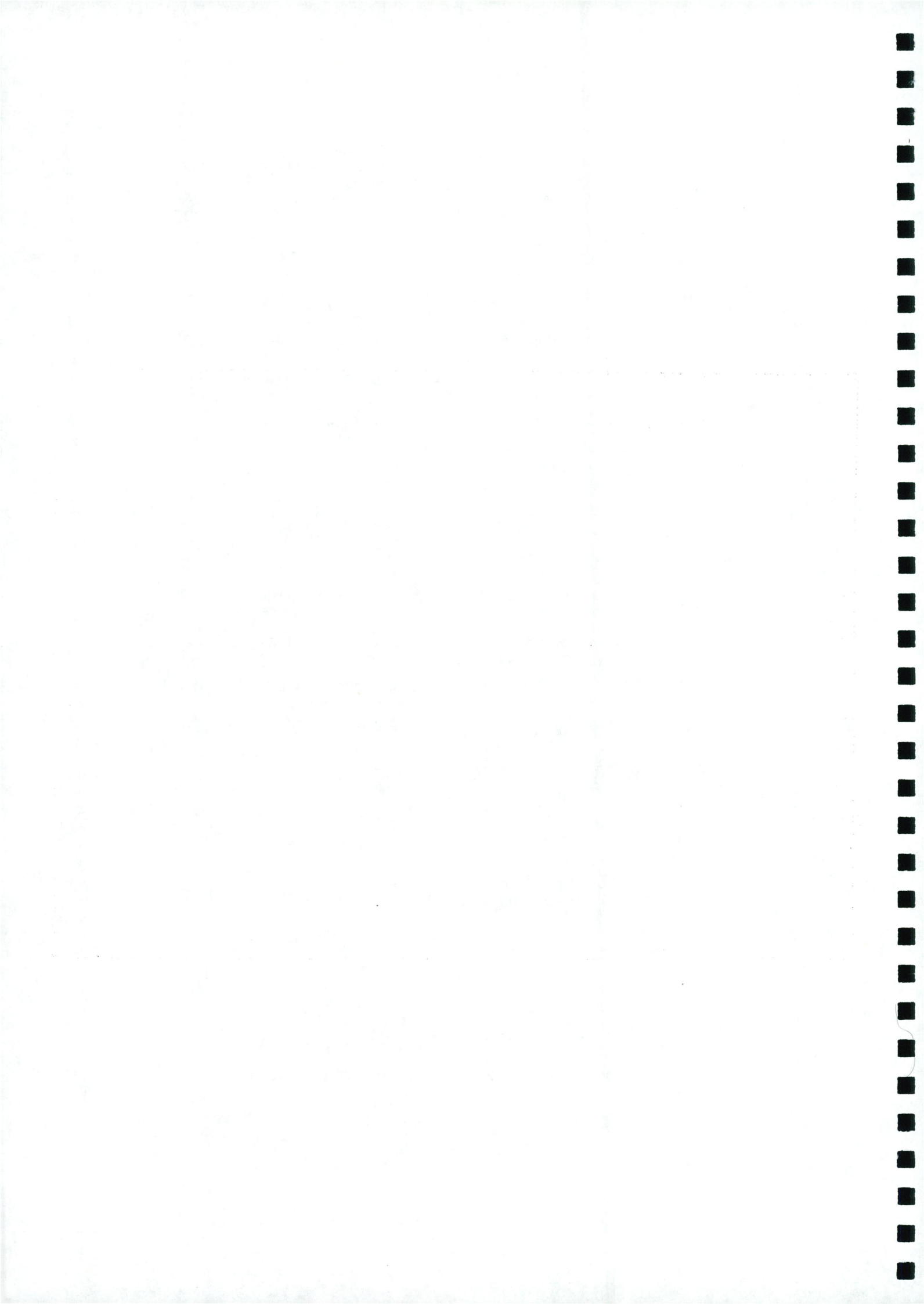




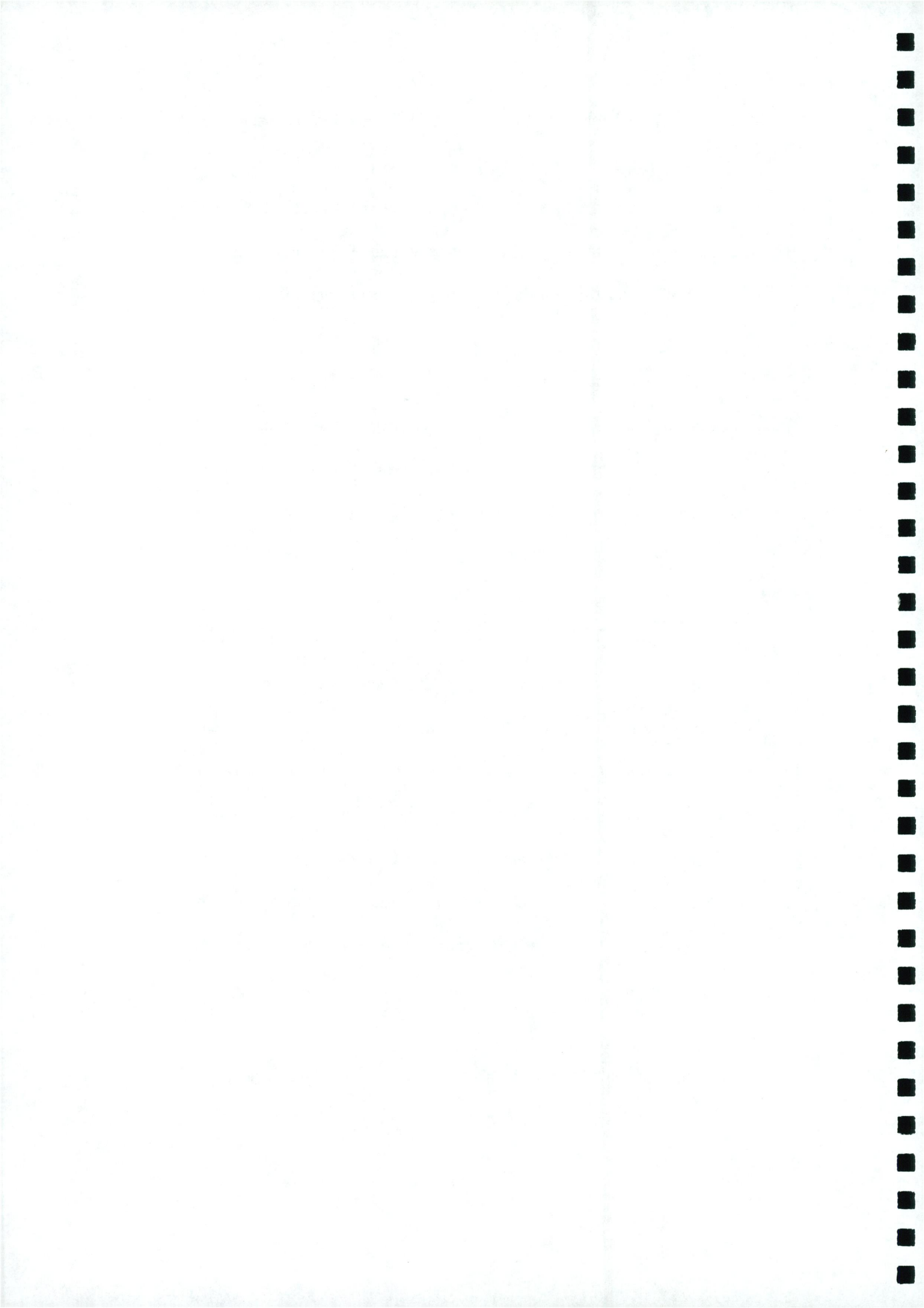
Fig.15 Sheep with saddlebags (Fadse).



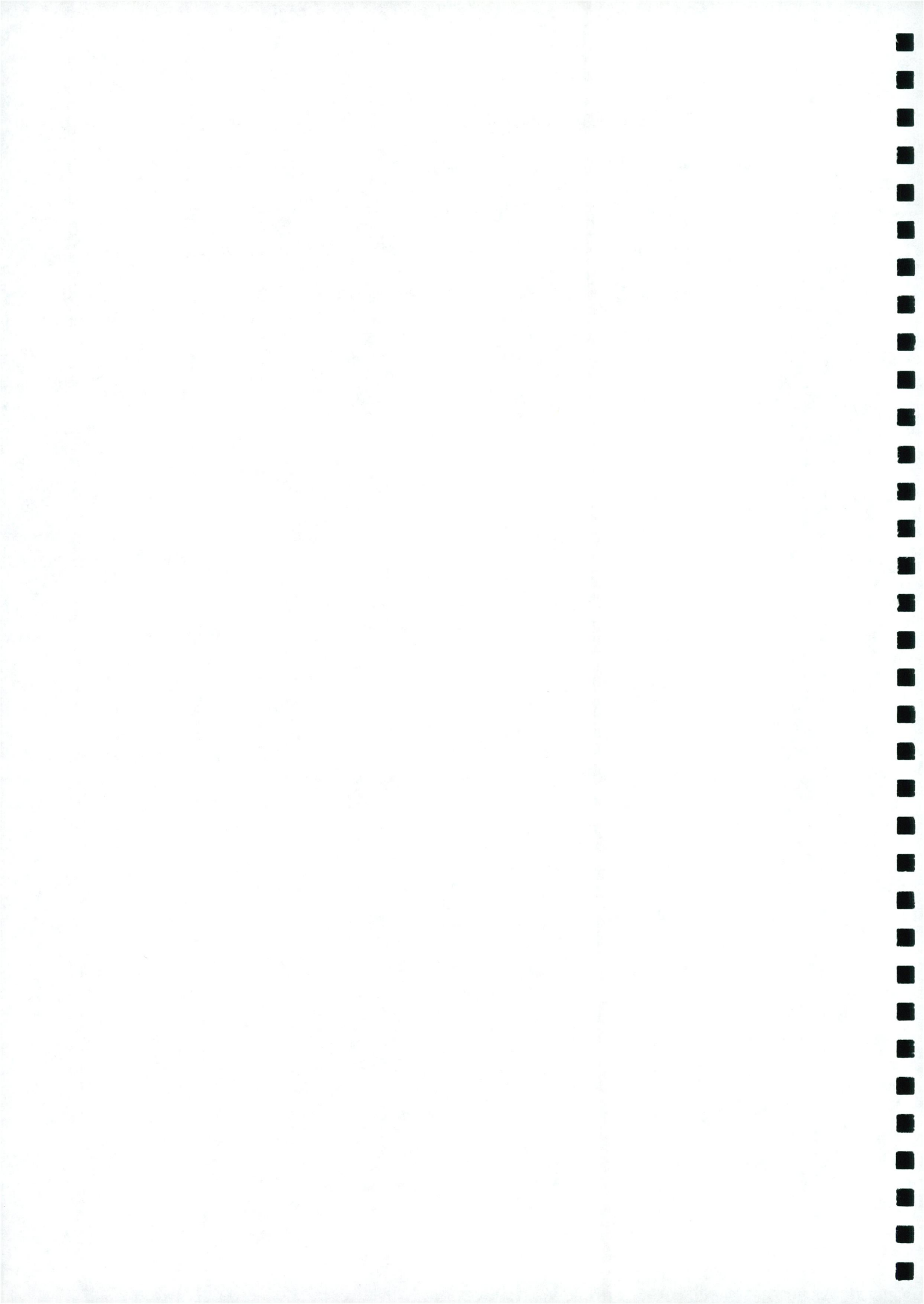
wool are needed for the nomads' winter clothing. They are used as pack animals: the adult males can carry up to thirty pounds of grain or salt in a saddlebag, called a fadse. They are also used for trade. The nomads exchange sheep with villagers for grain, goods and for doing laborious jobs such as the tanning of skins and building of corrals.(Fig.15).

Goats, another popular herding animal, have always been well adapted to mountainous areas. But, like the sheep, they tend to have higher haemoglobin and breathe a lot faster than low-altitude goats. Even though goats seem to thrive in this area, traditionally, goats were considered less valuable than sheep. The reason was that there was less demand for goat meat or hair. But goats are more hardy than sheep and are kept to provide some insurance against losing an entire herd in a very bad year. Goats also give milk for six to eight weeks longer than sheep and give more milk per day, and their skins are generally considered to be warmer than sheep skins. The value of goats has also increased dramatically over the past years as a result of the development of a lucrative international market for cashmere. Cashmere is now the most valuable international trade item they produce. Since the price of cashmere is rising much faster than wool, goats may well end up as the basis of a new affluence for the nomads in the economic world.

The Yak, the sheep, and the goat provide the nomad with the goods they need to carry out their annual cycle of production. The availability and



quality of animal products vary throughout the year. The nomad's traditional production strategy has adapted to this by: first, converting temporary abundances into storable forms that can be used throughout the year; secondly, by collecting products at peak quality. Dairy products exemplify the first strategy; meat, wool, and cashmere the second.



CHAPTER 5

OCCUPATIONS

DAIRY PRODUCTION

Although the nomads typically say their way of life is easy because livestock provide all their needs for them, pastoral production really takes time, work and skill. Obtaining milk exemplifies this. It is most exclusively the responsibility of women to milk the animals, make the yogurt and churn the butter. In summer, when the sheep and goats are being milked twice a day, dairy work can take up to six hours. After several hours of milking and an hour or so of churning, there is a midday pause when other chores are done, including preparing tsamba, fetching water, spinning and weaving wool and making yogurt. While it may seem that the men are sitting around relaxing and the women are doing the majority of the work, the women do not complain; they view it instead as a "natural" division of labour.

"But of course I don't resent having to do the milking and my other tasks. The men have to undergo the hardship of long-distance travel as the men do when they go on their journey to collect salt from distant lakes, or when they go to trade in winter with villagers a month away".(Goldstein,1989,p.766).

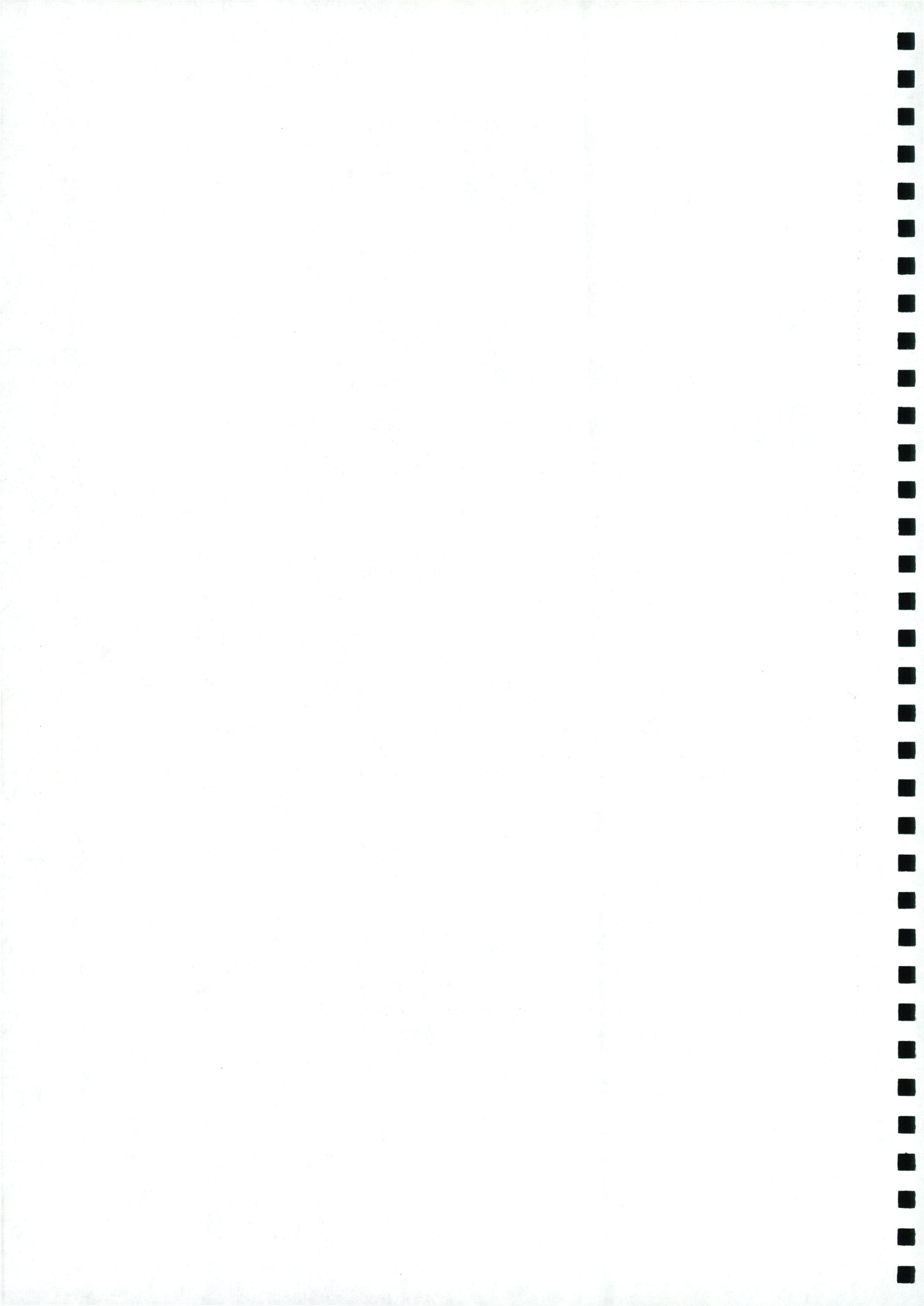




Fig.16 Women churning milk to make butter by plunging a wooden paddle up and down in a Chest-high churn.



Milking time, however, is not all work. Usually several families at an encampment tie their animals together in a single line up and the women of the camp gossip and laugh while each milks her own animals. The children help with the milking and play alongside the animals. Some play at being animals, while others practise counting by enumerating the animals in line.

"You have to understand that although our yak, sheep and goats all provide milk, the sheep and goats do so for only part of the year (sheep for three months and goats for four-and-a-half months in summer). Only the dri (female yak) give milk year round. Thus, while I get lots of milk from my animals in summer, I get very little in winter. So we transform a large portion of the summer milk abundance into butter and cheese since these can be stored and utilized later when the fresh milk is insufficient for our needs. They can also be sold whenever we need other products". Wanam, a head man explains the essence of his dairy production. (Goldstein, 1989, p. 767).

The nomads, consequently, consume virtually no milk by themselves. Instead they first make yogurt by bringing milk to the boil and leaving it overnight. By the morning they have what they call sho, a rich, bitter and smooth yogurt. The women go on to churn it into butter, setting aside a portion for the day's meals. The butter is made by lifting and plunging a wooden paddle in a chest-high wooden churn, for an hour or two (Fig. 16). The yak milk is kept separate because it produces the yellow butter that the nomads prefer to the white butter which is produced by the sheep and goats milk.

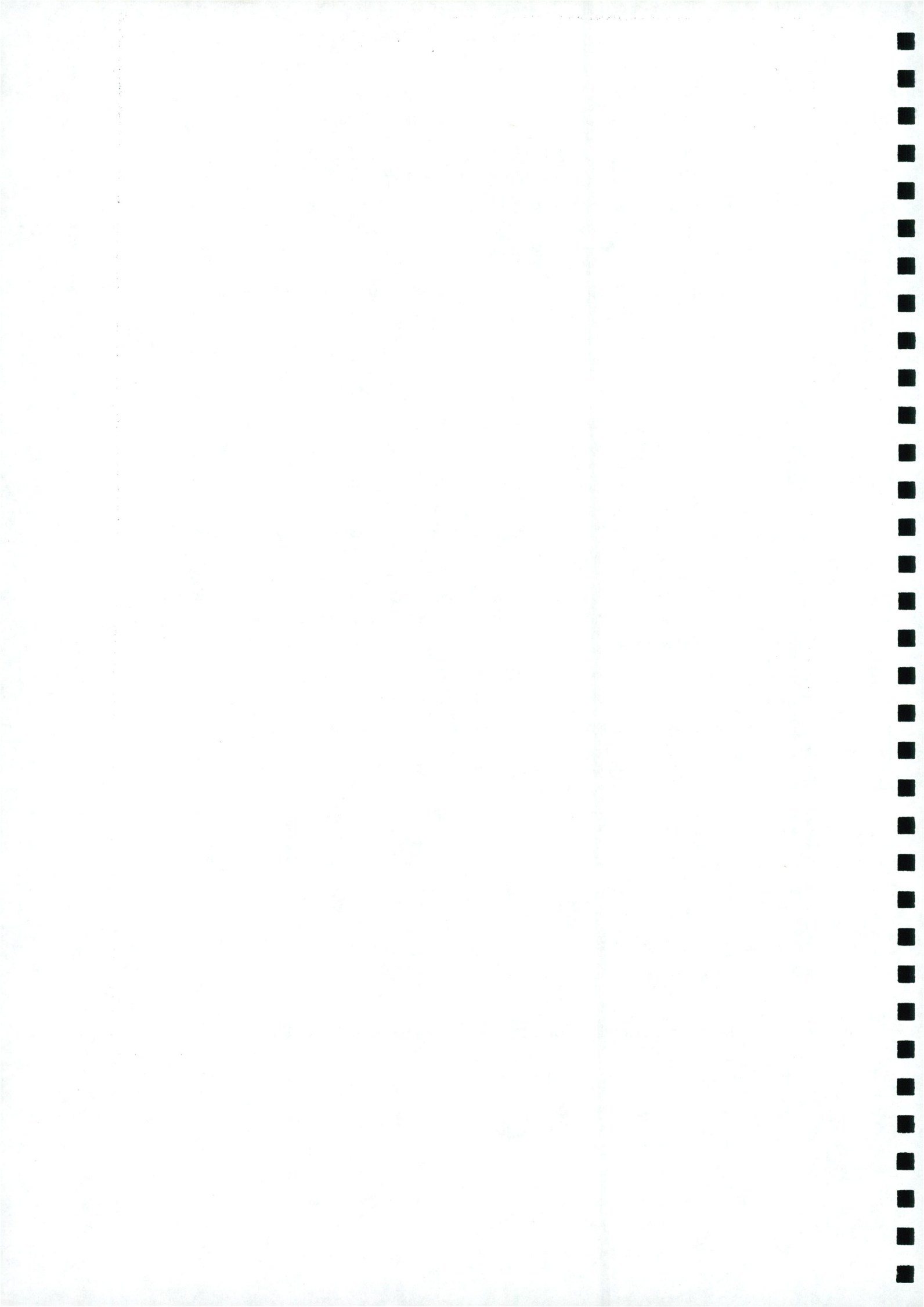




Fig.17 A nomad blowing into a sheeps stomach, which is used for churning in winter and also for storage.



In Wintertime, when very little milk is obtained, they save two to three day's worth of yogurt to be churned together. The churning is usually done in the tent in a container made from a sheep's stomach (Fig.17). The churner blows air into the stomach to inflate it, pours in the yogurt, and then shakes it back and forth on her lap until the butter forms. It is then sewn tightly into sheaths made from the sheep's stomachs where it stays fresh for about a year. This method of storage enables the nomads to spread the nutritious value of their dairy products to the seasons when milk is scarce.

After the butter has been removed from the sheep's stomach, the left-over buttermilk is boiled and strained to yield cheese. A little cheese is consumed fresh, but most is sun-dried into rock-hard bits and stored for use in winter and spring. Dry cheese lasts for years.

After the cheese has been removed the liquid known as whey is left, sometimes the nomads consume it, but most of the time it is fed to the dogs, and boiled to make the women's black make-up called doja. Doja is made by boiling whey until it becomes a dark and thick concentrate. A batch of doja can last for weeks. A few drops of water are added to the thick concentrate which is then reheated at the edge of the fire. Doja is applied carefully with a small tuft of wool to their foreheads, nose and cheeks. It is said to protect the skin against the sun, but most of the time they use it as a cosmetic to enhance beauty. Young girls start to apply it

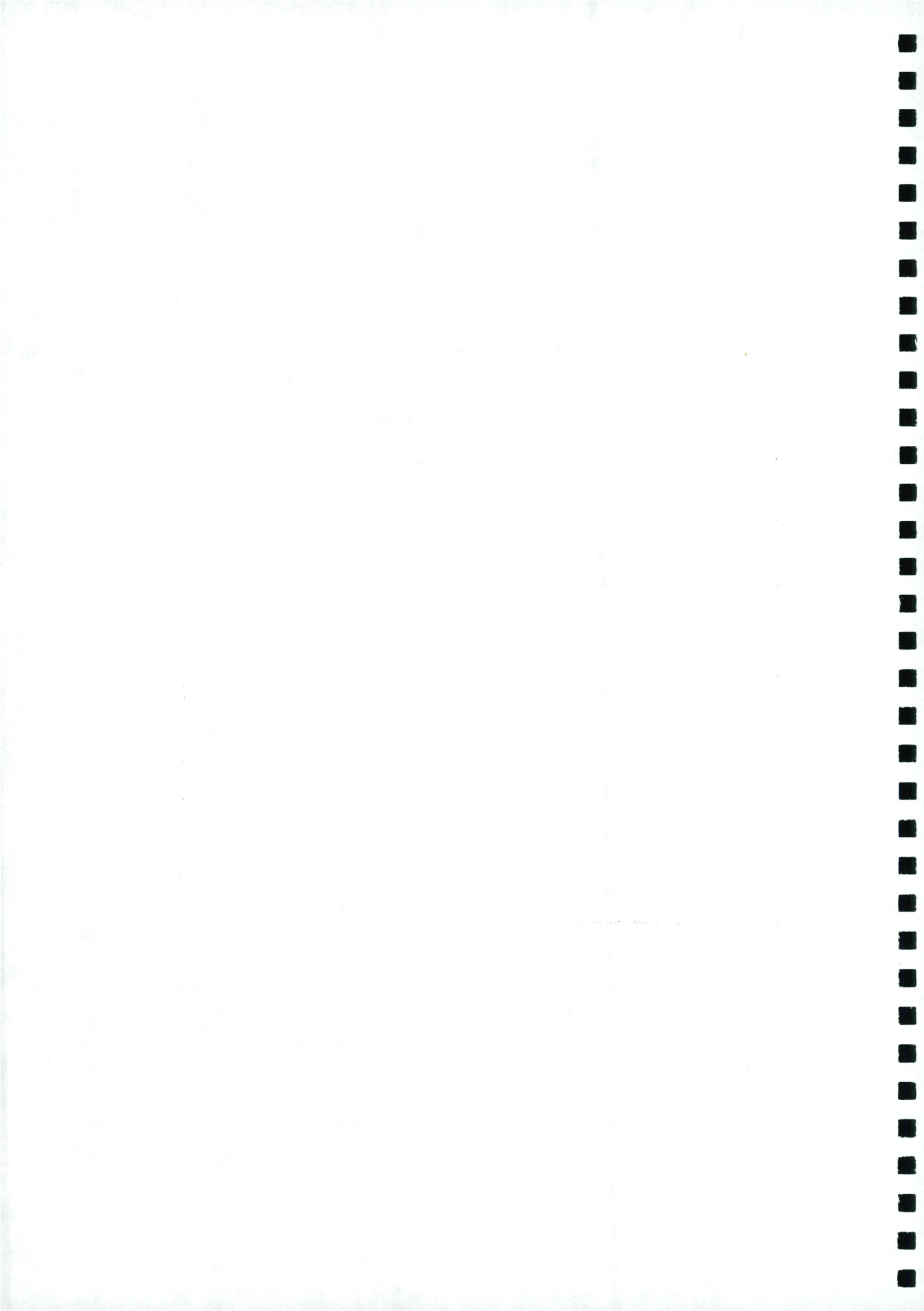
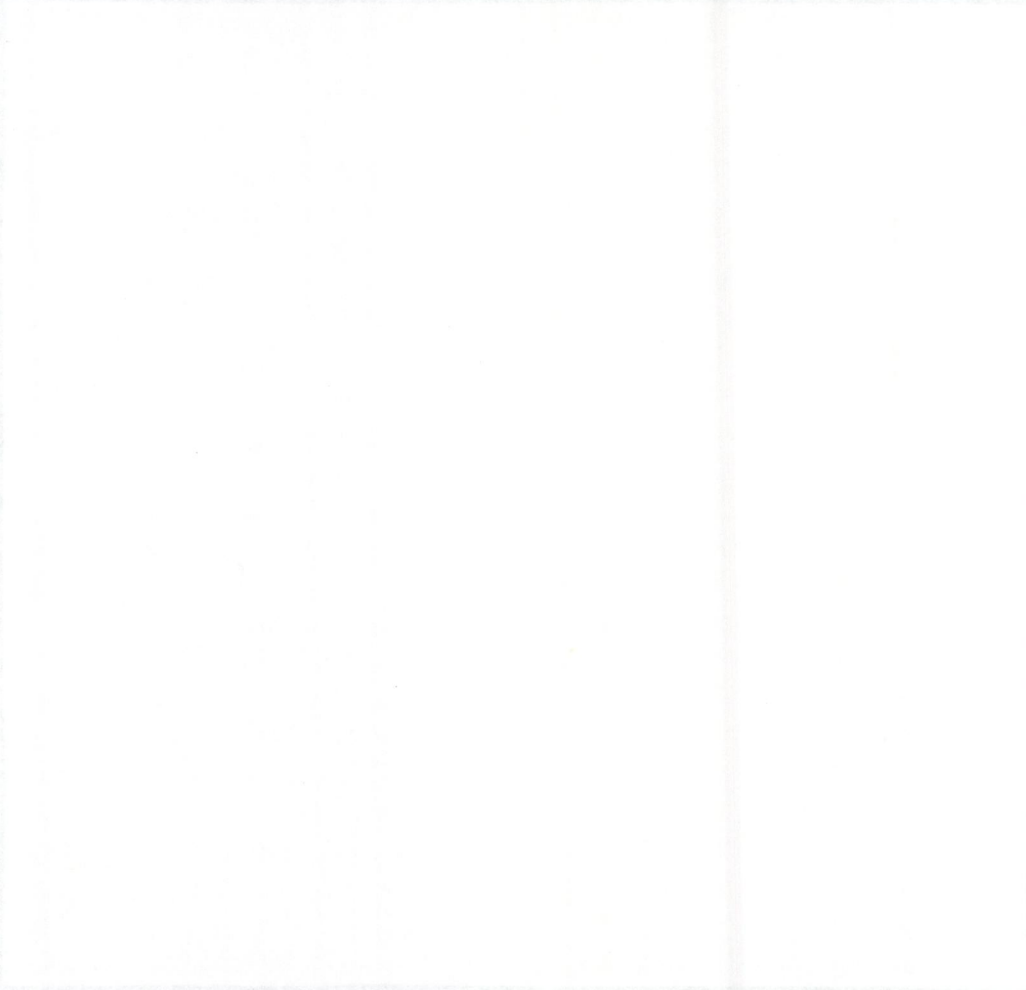




Fig.18 Women applying doja.



around ten or twelve years of age and continue to do so until their fifties. Men do not use it at all.(Fig.18).

Most of the dairy products, whether stored or not, are consumed by the nomads themselves. Yet it is not unusual for dairy products to be used as bartering goods.

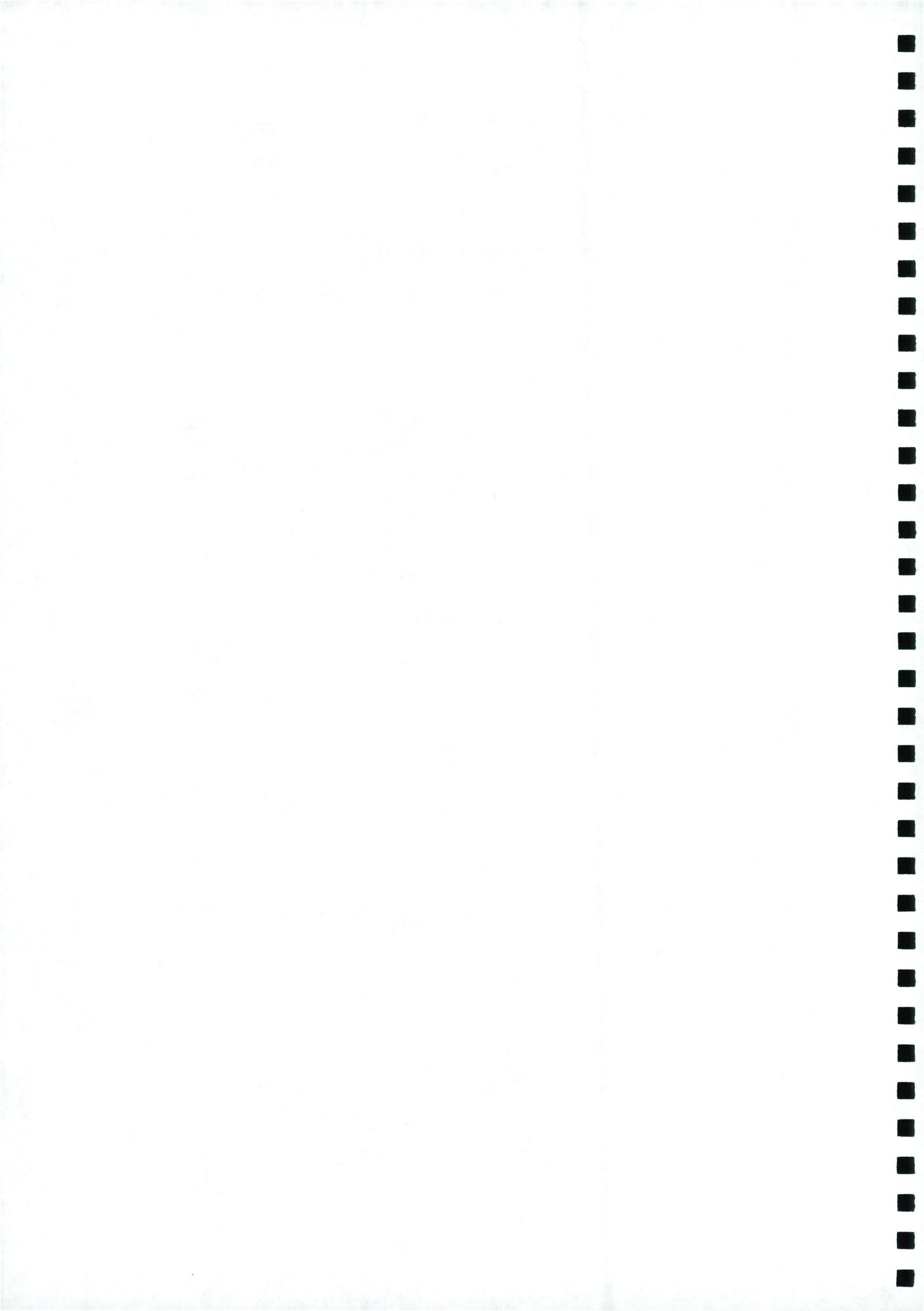
"The trading took place at Kyato Chongra, a seasonal marketplace one day north of the Nepalese border. Besides salt, the Drok-pa also brought dried cheese and butter". (Summers,1993,p.17).

Dairy Production is an ongoing cycle within the nomads' lives. It provides them with the food they need to survive, and constitutes virtually half of the nomads' entire diet. The benefits they reap from their herds can be deduced from the importance they place on their traditional dairy production strategy.

MEAT PRODUCTION

"We kill now because this is the optimum time. The good summer and autumn grass has helped the animals to build up the stores of fat that give the meat its good taste, and the animals have not yet started the inevitable winter-spring loss of weight". (Chorlton,1974,p.140)

Just as summer is the time for dairy plenty, winter is the time of meat abundance.The nomads think of livestock as capital. Ideally, they try to



increase the capital fund by selling or slaughtering fewer head of livestock than are added to the herd through birth. Disaster for the nomads can occur when a family is confronted with the need to eat or sell off part of its capital to survive, which could start a downward spiral ending in impoverishment. Nomads typically try to preserve their capital when this happens by temporarily working for others. This reduces their need to sell and slaughter livestock, and regain their capital.(Fig.19).

The annual winter slaughter is the time when the future structure of the herd is determined. Although the nomads cannot control the herd mortality which is a chance element in their production system, they can control the composition of their herd by deciding which animals to cull each year.

Once the decision is made, the killing is generally completed over a span of a few days. However the nomads of Phala and the Dolpo-pa do not physically do their own slaughtering. As Buddhists they believe it would bring bad karma, and they believe that reincarnation is determined by one's karma. So they avoid killing by hiring other nomads to do this, thus keeping their karma good. They employ poor nomads who need the wages. Before the animal is killed, a brief prayer is said for the "soul" of the animal. Once the animal is dead, the males of the household are free to help in the actual butchering, the sin being only the act of killing. The entire animal, even the head, is boiled and ultimately eaten, although

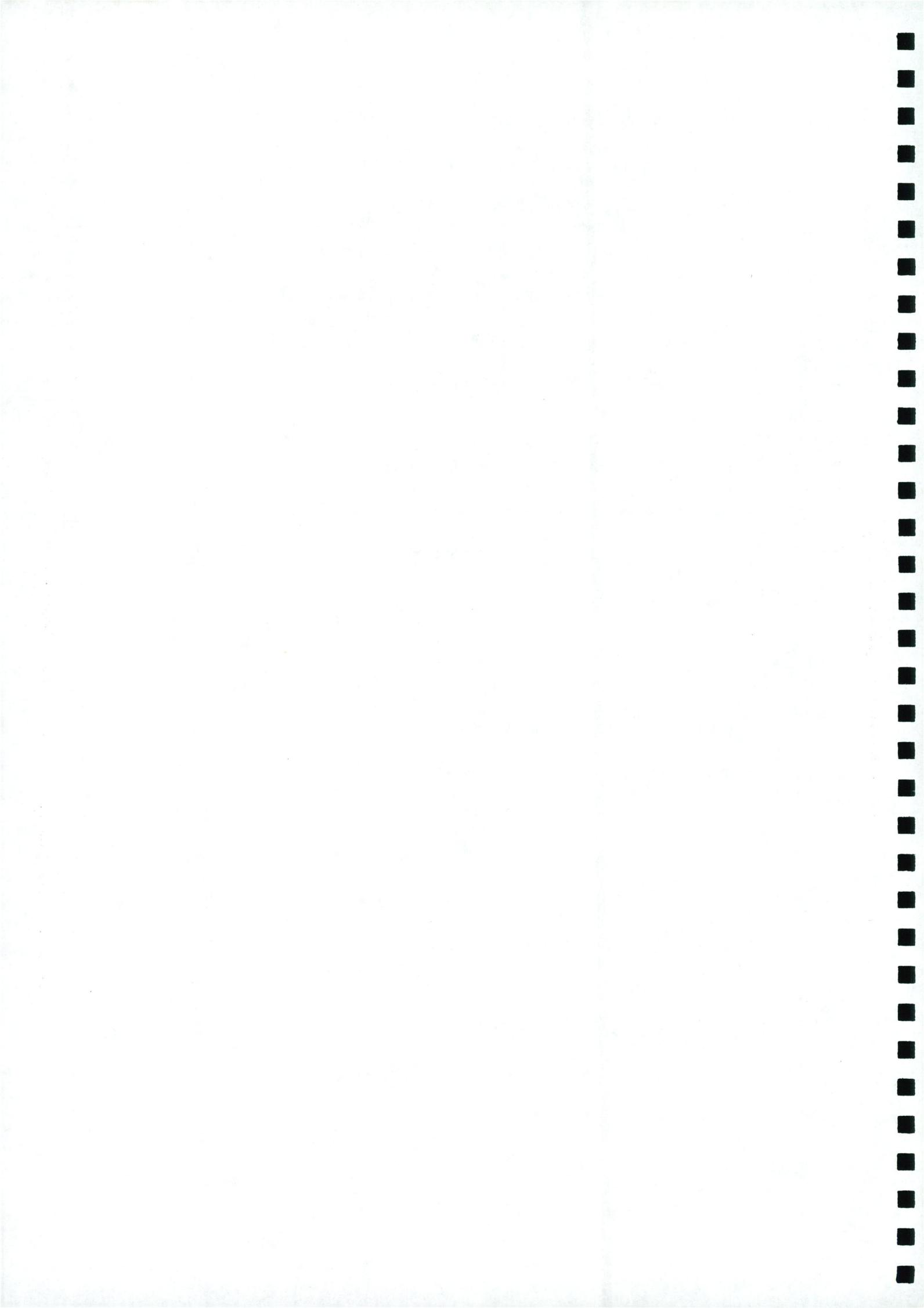




Fig.19 Butchering a Yak.



except for sausages, the meat is not processed in any other way before storing. Their cravings demand that they eat every part of the animal, though they do not realise that without this practise they would not have a complete diet.

Slaughtering the animals in late November/December not only ensures that each animal yields the maximum calories but also enables storage without spoilage. December's cold and aridity freeze the carcasses whole, so there is no need for special processing such as slicing, drying or smoking. However, for most families summer spoilage is not a great problem since their supply of meat is usually exhausted by then.

OTHER PRODUCTS

"It is October now in Dolpo, and the harvest is finished. New leather soles are stitched on to felt boots, and the click clack of looms is heard in every home as women finish weaving woollen threads into brightly coloured striped blankets". (Summers,1993,p.16).

The herds provide more than just meat and dairy products. Sheep produce wool for weaving and barter, skins for clothes and stomachs into which butter is churned and sewn for storage and intestines, organs and blood for sausages.

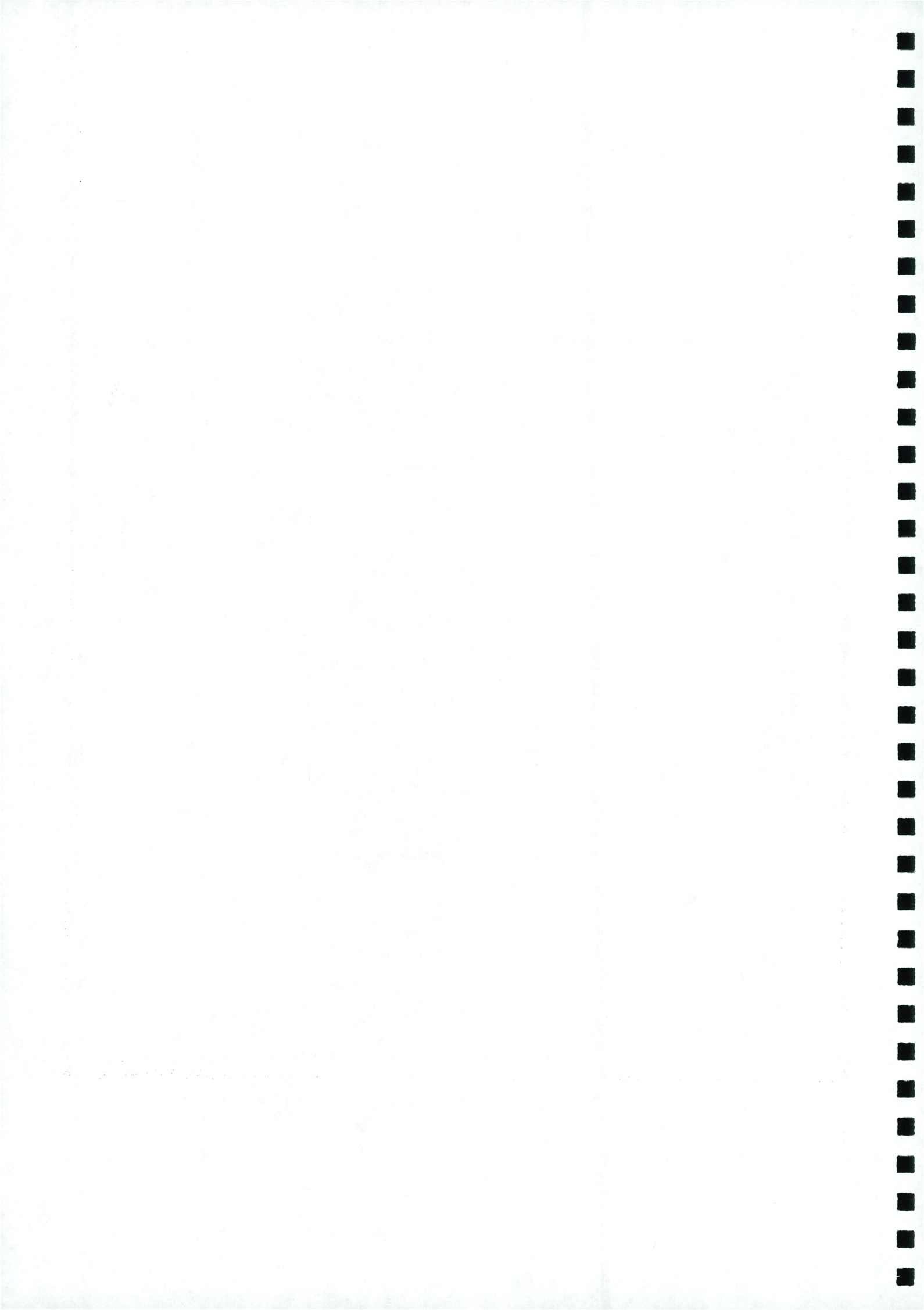




Fig.20 Separating wool that has recently been sheared.



The sheep are only sheared about once a year, around late July. Each family co-operates when it comes to shearing, to be able to complete the work in a single day (Fig.20). Some of the wool is exchanged for barley at market, whilst the rest is kept for their own use. First it must be spun with a wooden spindle: this is done in their spare time in their tents, walking with the herds and even while travelling. It is an autumn and winter activity (Fig.21). Different types of spindles, which are obtained through barter, are used to achieve different thicknesses of thread. A backstrap loom is used by women to weave bags, clothes, or belt fabric (Fig.22). They also use the wool to make felt which is done by wetting and patting down the wool, and then rolling it tightly in a blanket, and pounding it. After this process is repeated a number of times, the wool coalesces into felt and is peeled off the blanket (Fig.23). They also braid ropes, and even use the wool as a bandage for wounds.

The smoky black yak-hair tents, have a spider like appearance. They are sewn from long stripes of woven yak-hair cloth about fifteen inches wide. Each tent consists of two separate halves that are connected at the top by two short lengths of rope and toggles that loop over a wooden cross pole by front and back wood pillars inside the tent. A long open space along the top allows smoke to disperse and can be closed over with a flap when it snows.(Fig.24).

The Nomads' basic garment, the Lokbar, resembles a long-sleeved, belted

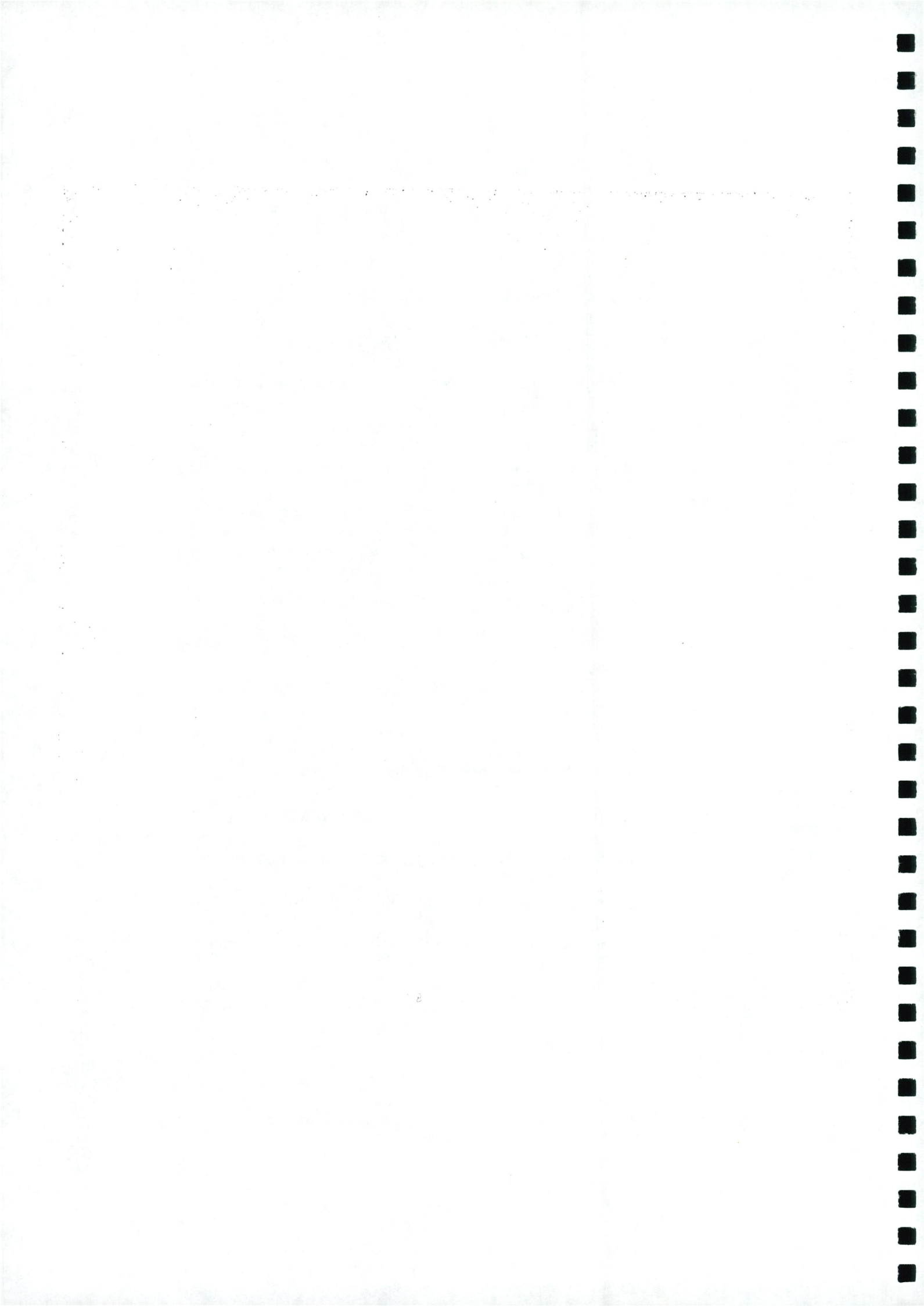
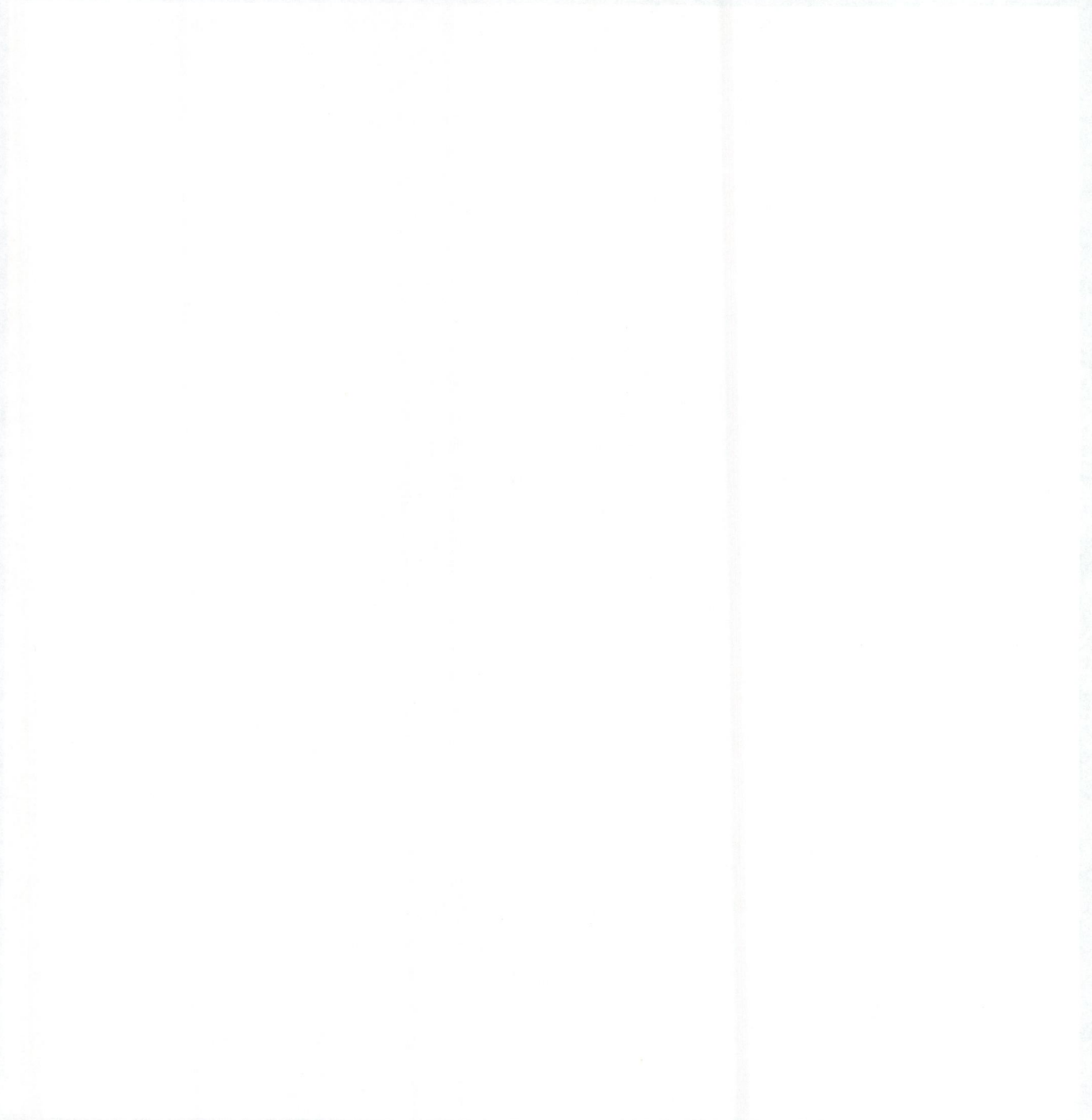




Fig.21 Spinning wool.



robes with a full fleece on the inside and a waterproof hide on the outside. They are worn full length by the women and hitched up to the knee by the men and are extremely heavy. Adult Lokbars are usually made from about ten tanned adult sheep or goat skins. Men do all the hand stitching of the garments, tailoring being one of the ways men can supplement their income. The outside of the women's Lokbar is decorated with eight to ten horizontal stripes of brilliantly coloured felt sewn onto the skin. Men's Lokbar have a single black stripe at the hem of the skirt and the sleeves. The sleeves of the Lokbar are cut to hang eight to ten inches below the hand, functioning as gloves when the hand is not being used. Lokbar also are used as blankets, the nomads curling up inside them to keep warm during the freezing nights. In Winter, some men also wear sheep or goat skin trousers, although most of them wear heavy wool trousers, woven by the nomad women. There is a constant need for skins to make new garments, since the efficiency of the Lokbar decreases as the fleece wears thin.

As already stated, Cashmere or Kulu is the soft down or undercoat of Goats and Yak. Nomads use metal combs with long teeth to get hold of the Kulu. The Nomads make no terminological distinction between goat's kulu and the soft undercoat of the yak. However Yak Kulu has little economic value since the legal definition of cashmere in the West restricts it to the Kulu of goats. Cashmere has become in recent years a highly profitable bartering item for the nomads.

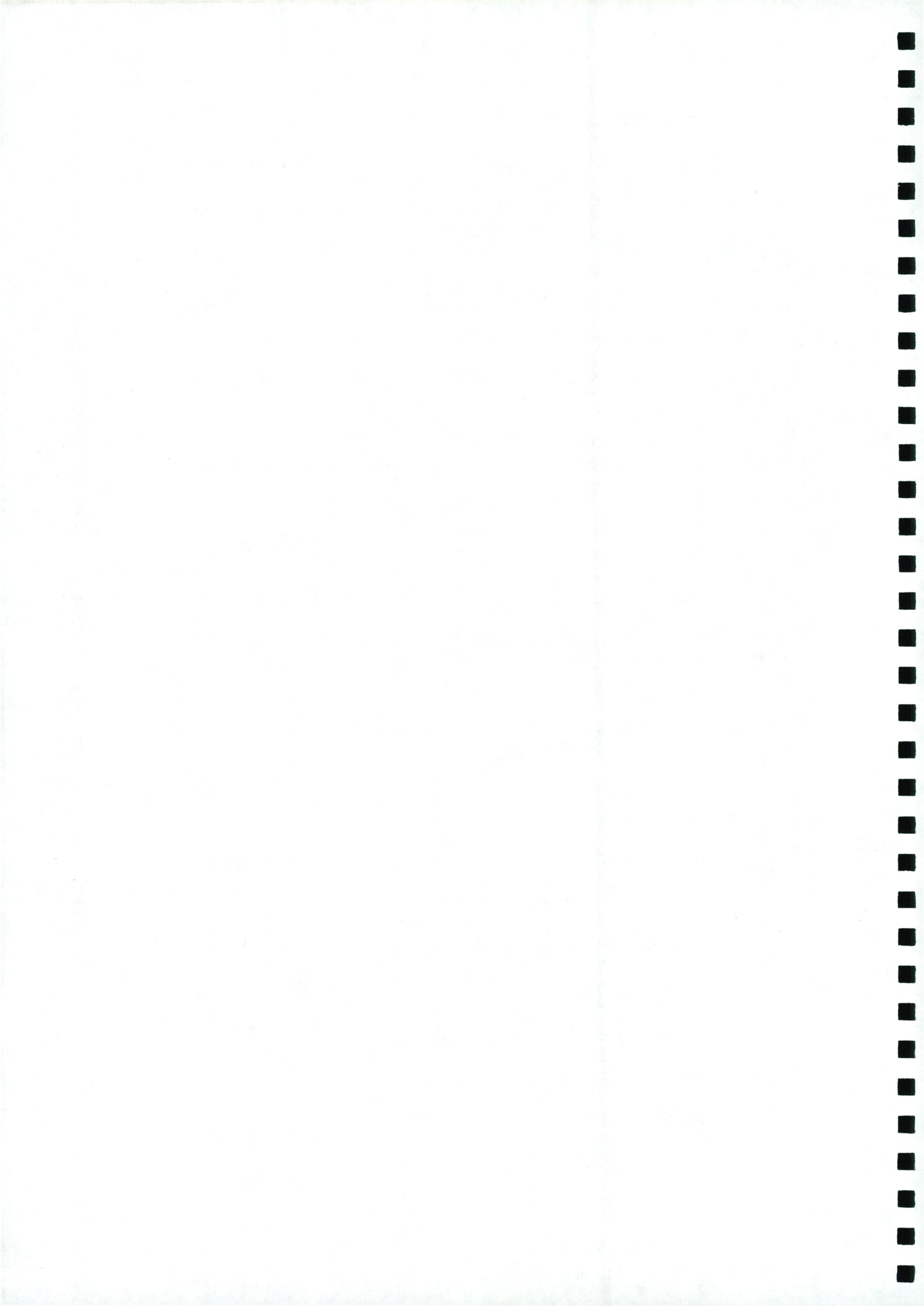




Fig.22 A Backstrap loom is used by women to weave bags, clothes, or belt fabric.



All of these products gained from the animals are essential for the nomads, both for their own use and for the use of bartering.

Metalwork

The Blacksmith, known as the Gara, transports his forge from place to place. He is a craftsman who possesses a range of metalworking skills that are central to the life of the Nomads salvaging scrap as well as repairing old utensils, sharpening knives and sickles, filling in holes in teakettles and pots.

Valli writes about the Garas social standing in his book Caravans of the Himalayas. Always in contact with metal, they are considered impure in Tibetan culture and is the lowest on their social ladder. Until recently he could not enter the homes of other nomads. He is fed by every home and offered tea and a bit of grain to take home. He is given grain per job when he forges new tools or makes jewellery for marriages. This noble and delicate work enables him to be particularly well treated. What emerges from his hands symbolizes a family's richness, and thus its power.

The Gara forges, beats, cuts, rivets and burnishes the metal vessels and implements whose forms have changed very little over the years and match perfectly the simple and equally unchanged needs of the nomads. Some of these undecorated, simple metalwares hold a great beauty of their own.

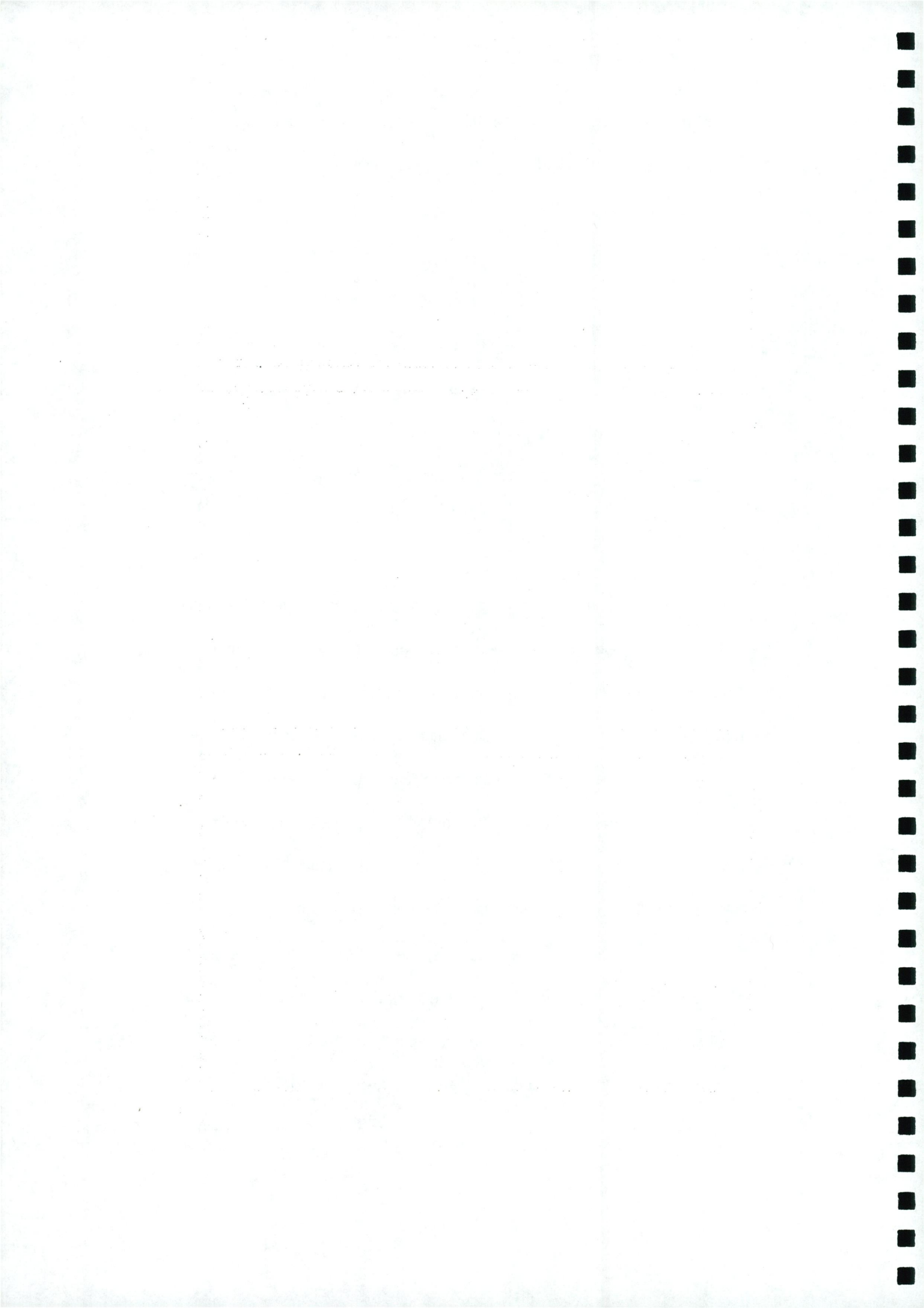




Fig.23 Felt Making.

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Depending upon the form of the final object, malleable sheet metal can be hand-shaped with a hammer, the strength improving from repeated hammering during the shaping of the metal form.

Metal containers are essential to their life as no clay-pot making of any kind takes place. Pottery being too delicate to transport. (Sherring, 1974, p.83). The most common metals in use are brass and copper which are thought to have health-giving qualities and are used for the collection and storage of water. They cook mainly in iron pots. However, through trade, more modern plastics, mass-produced stainless steel and aluminium goods are now tending to take the place of these traditional hand-wrought metalwares.

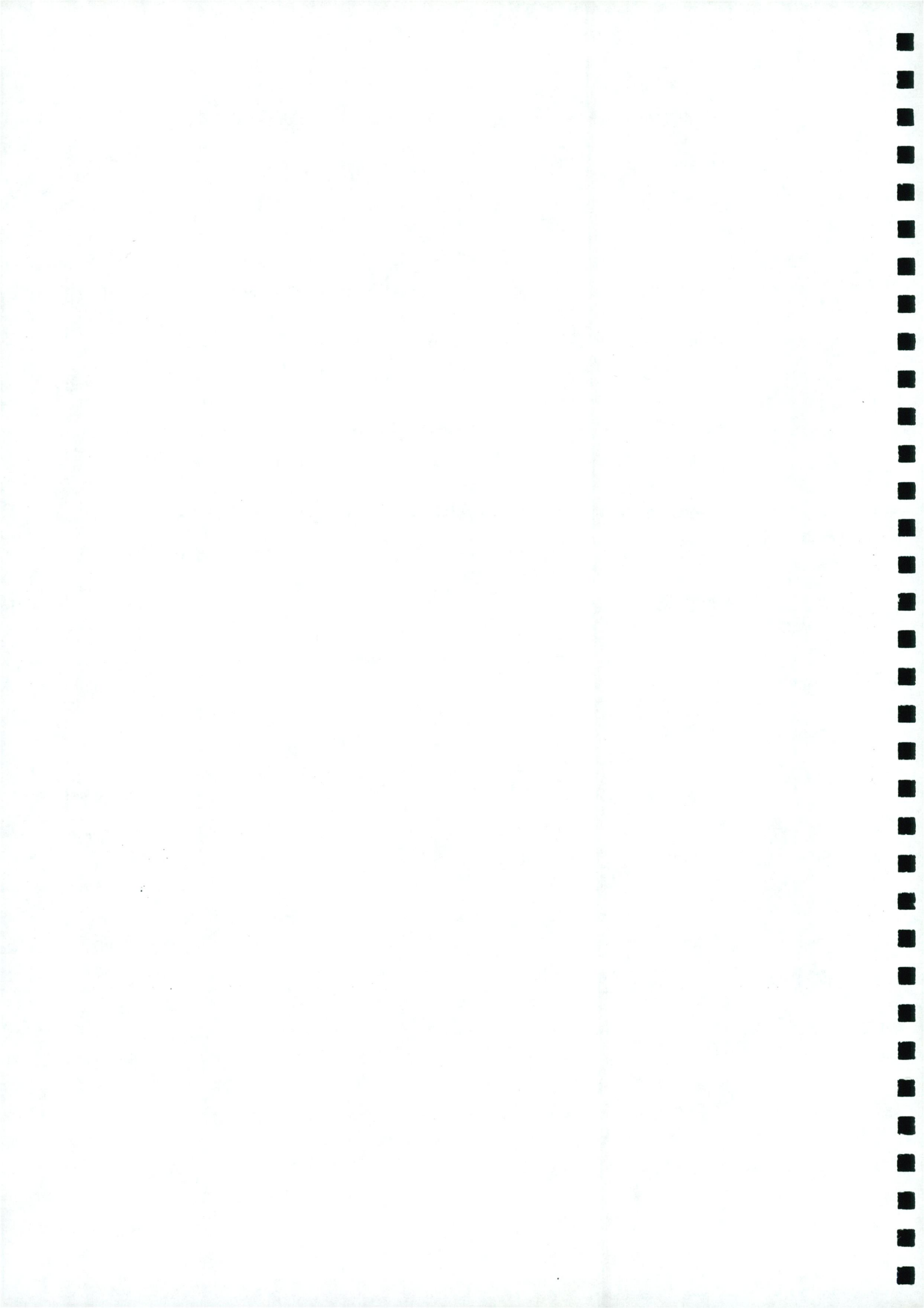




Fig.24 Taking down a tent, the sitting area is the open space between the hearth in the center and the belongings that are piled along the outer edges.



CHAPTER 6

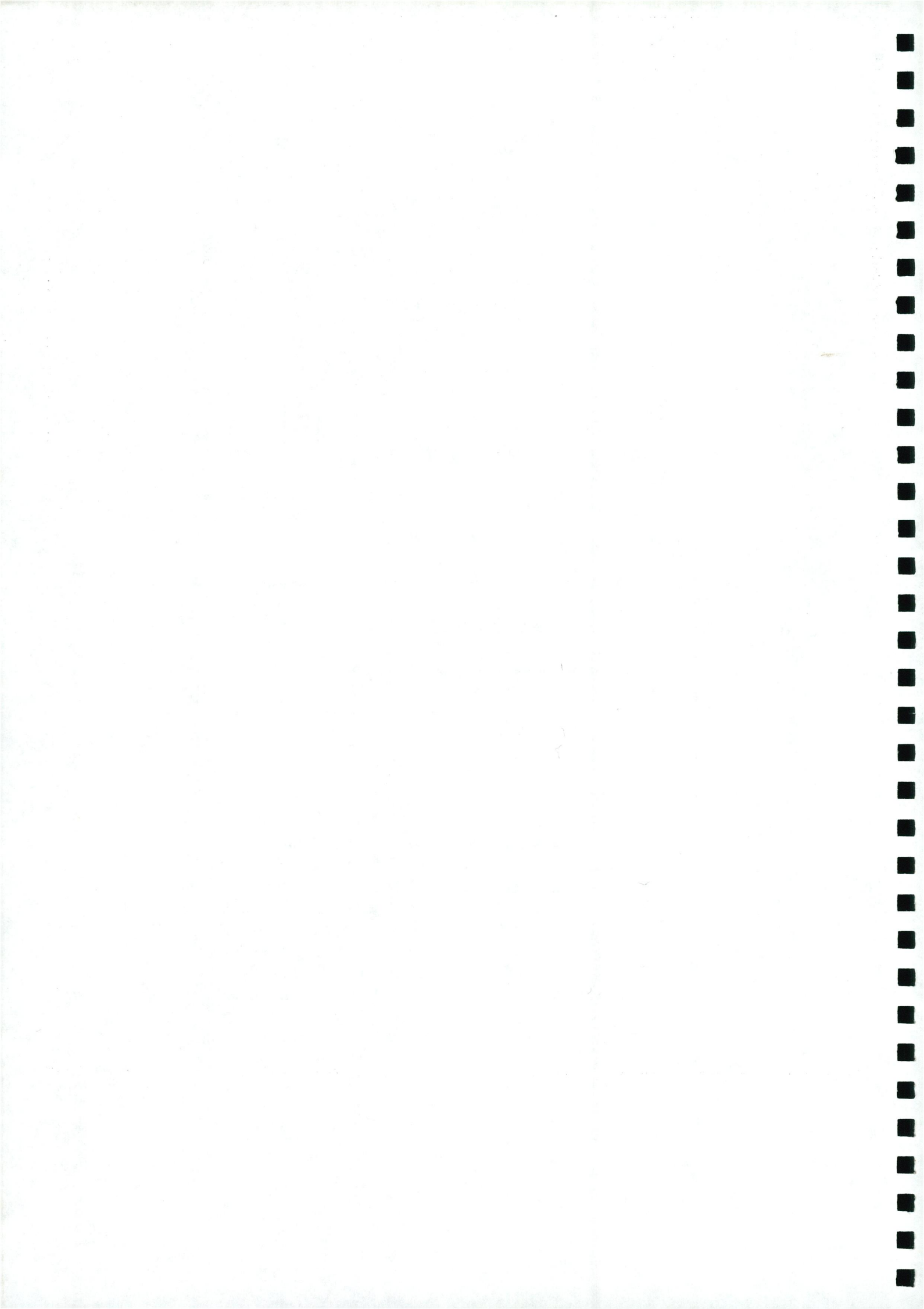
THE SALT TREK

"The salt lakes of the north are a storehouse of precious gems; whosoever's hand is longer can reach and take them".
(Valli,1995,p.118).

Since time immemorial, Tibetan nomad men have been the main source of salt for the villagers and townspeople of Tibet and the adjacent Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim. Each spring Phala men drive pack animals 140 miles northwest to salt flats at Lake Drabye, a 50 to 60 day roundtrip. Goats and sheep are normally used. Like most of the nomads' tasks, the entire process of gathering the salt has been worked out to the last detail.(Fig.25).

"On the trip to the lake," he said, " we go very leisurely so that our animals can maintain their strength. Pasture is a problem, for the new growth of spring grass has yet to begin and we must depend on the grass left over from last summer. At the lake, pasture is even more critical, than along the route, since there are so many nomads and animals concentrated there. Because of this, we send a small advance team of four or five men to dig up and collect the salt, so that when we arrive with the animals, we can load up immediately and leave the next day".

A nomad explains the process of gathering the salt.
(Goldstein,1989,p.767).



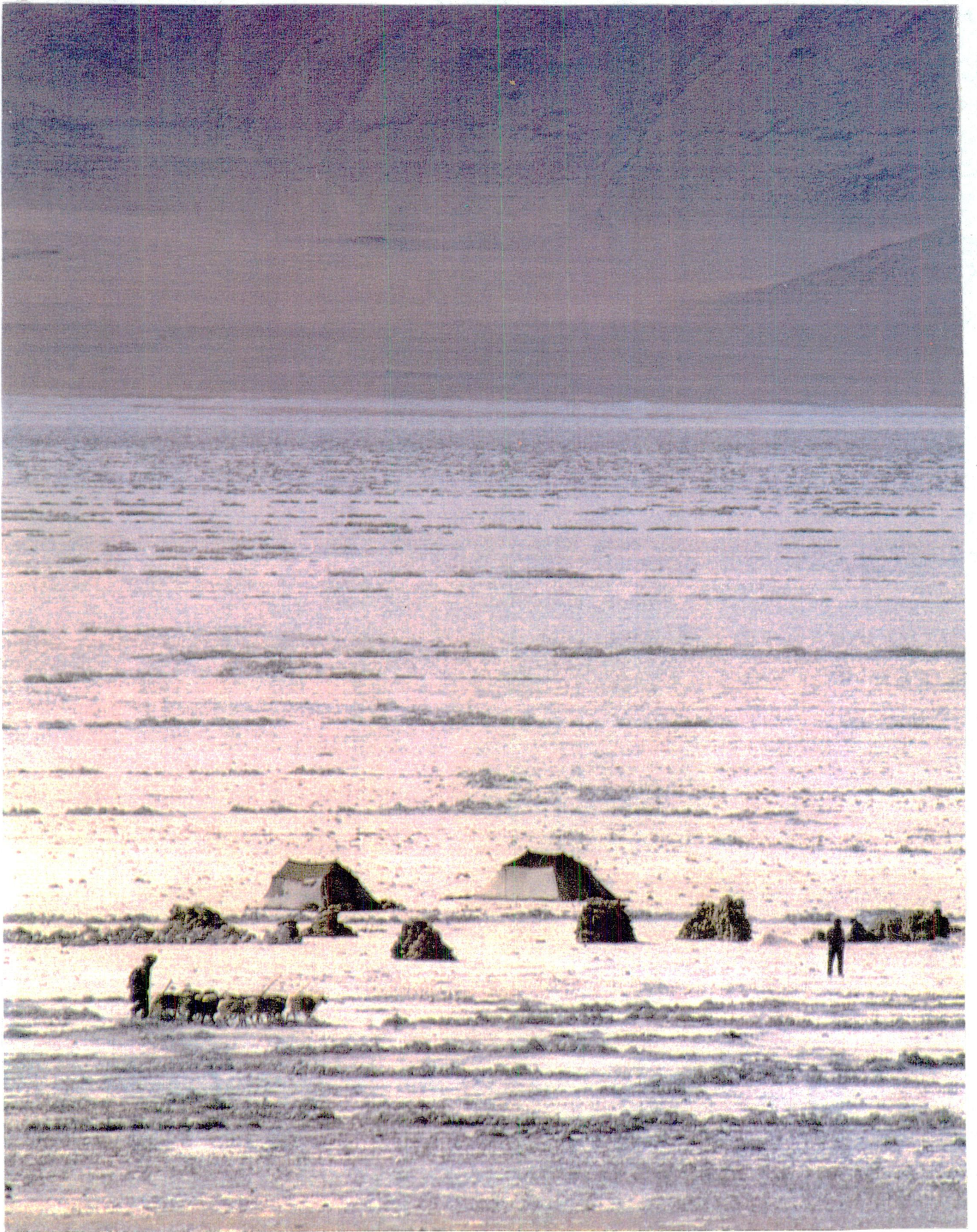
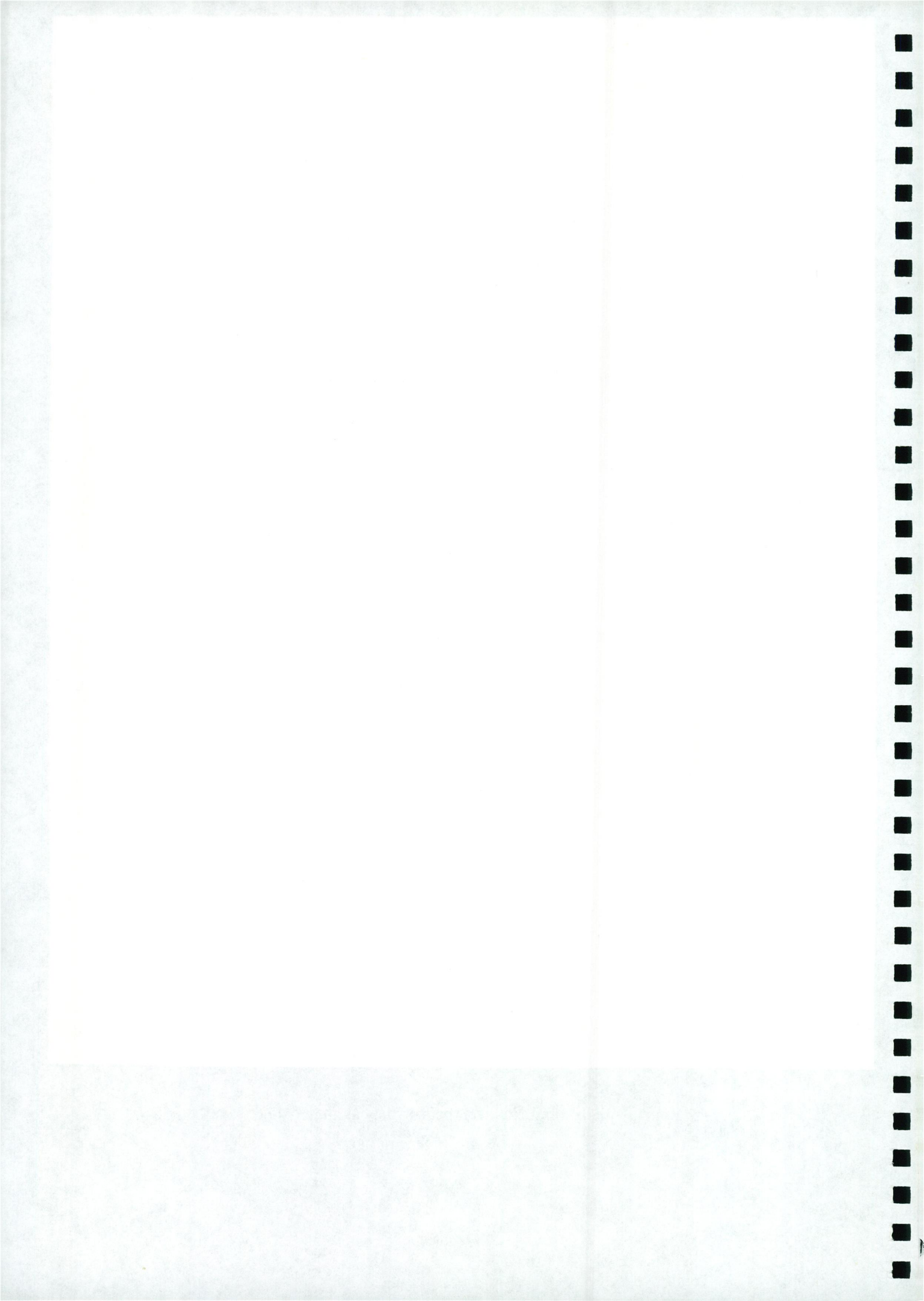


Fig.25 Nomads pitch camp right on the salt flats as they collect salt.



The Changtang's salt flats have always provided a free source of income or those willing to make this arduous trip. Collecting the salt, packing it into the woven saddlebags (Fig.26), however, and getting it home are just the first stages of the process. After the nomads return home some of the salt journeys onwards. They carry it still further south to a seasonal market place called Kyato Chongra, near to the Nepalese border, where an ancient cycle of trade takes place. All told, therefore, collecting and selling the salt require an investment of roughly three to four months for both the nomads and their animals.

Meanwhile the Dolpo-pa in the high and dry reaches of Northwest Nepal head north across the Tibetan border at the Khung Pass. They leave the mountain chaos behind them and penetrate the Changtang's vast land. They hike for two more days and then the caravanners see the tents of the Phala nomads on a grassy plain near a lake. This is where the exchange of life begins. Here, every year in the summer, the nomads of the Dolpo meet the nomadic herdsmen of the Changtang to trade the goods they have gathered. Besides the salt, the Phala also bring dried cheese, sheep, and wool. For their part the Dolpo caravanners offer barley and corn, potatoes, buck wheat, turnips and other goods.

After the trading takes place, both nomadic groups go their separate ways. The nomads of Phala turn north and head home, whilst the Dolpo-pa keep part of the salt for themselves and for their animals. The rest they take

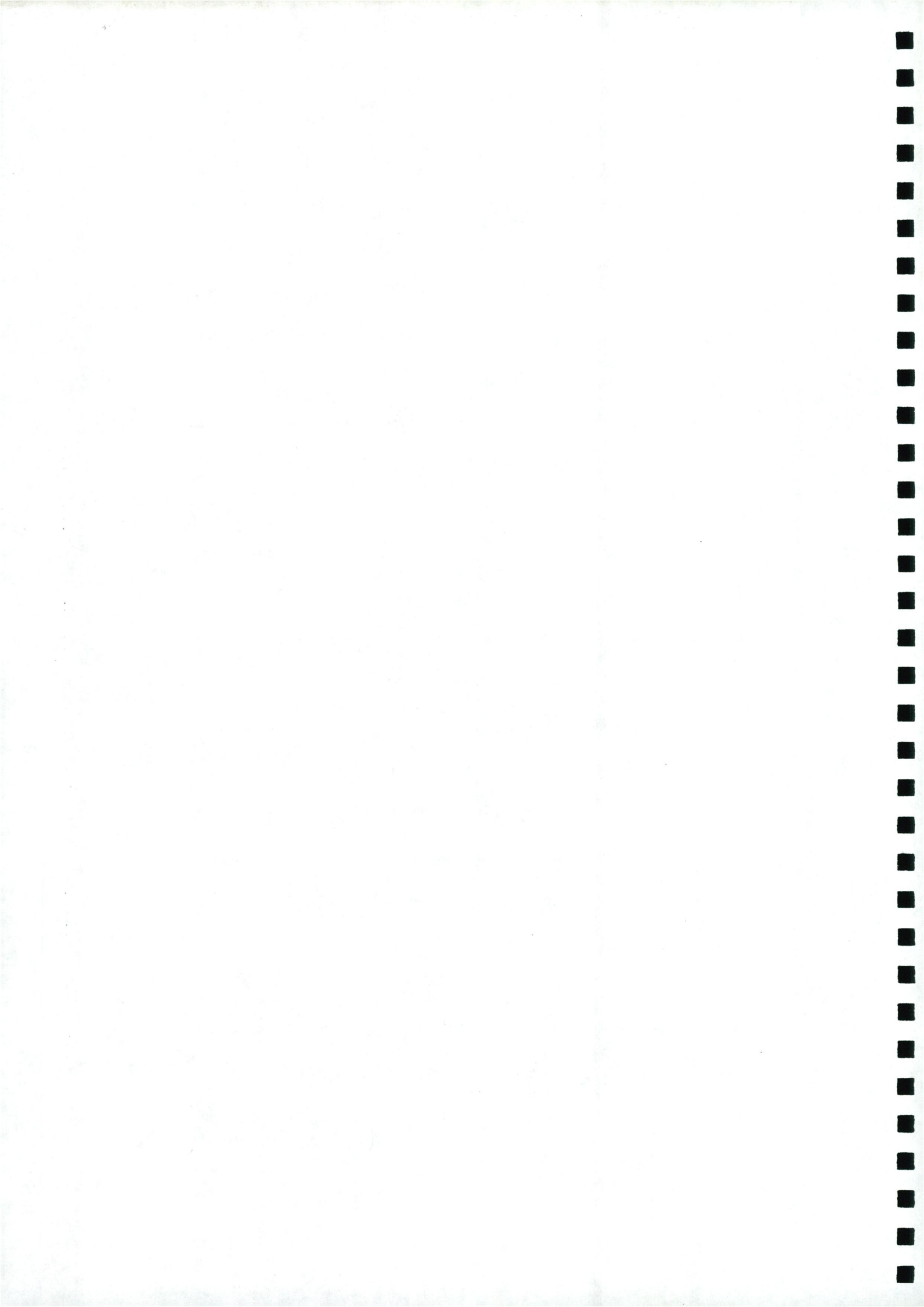
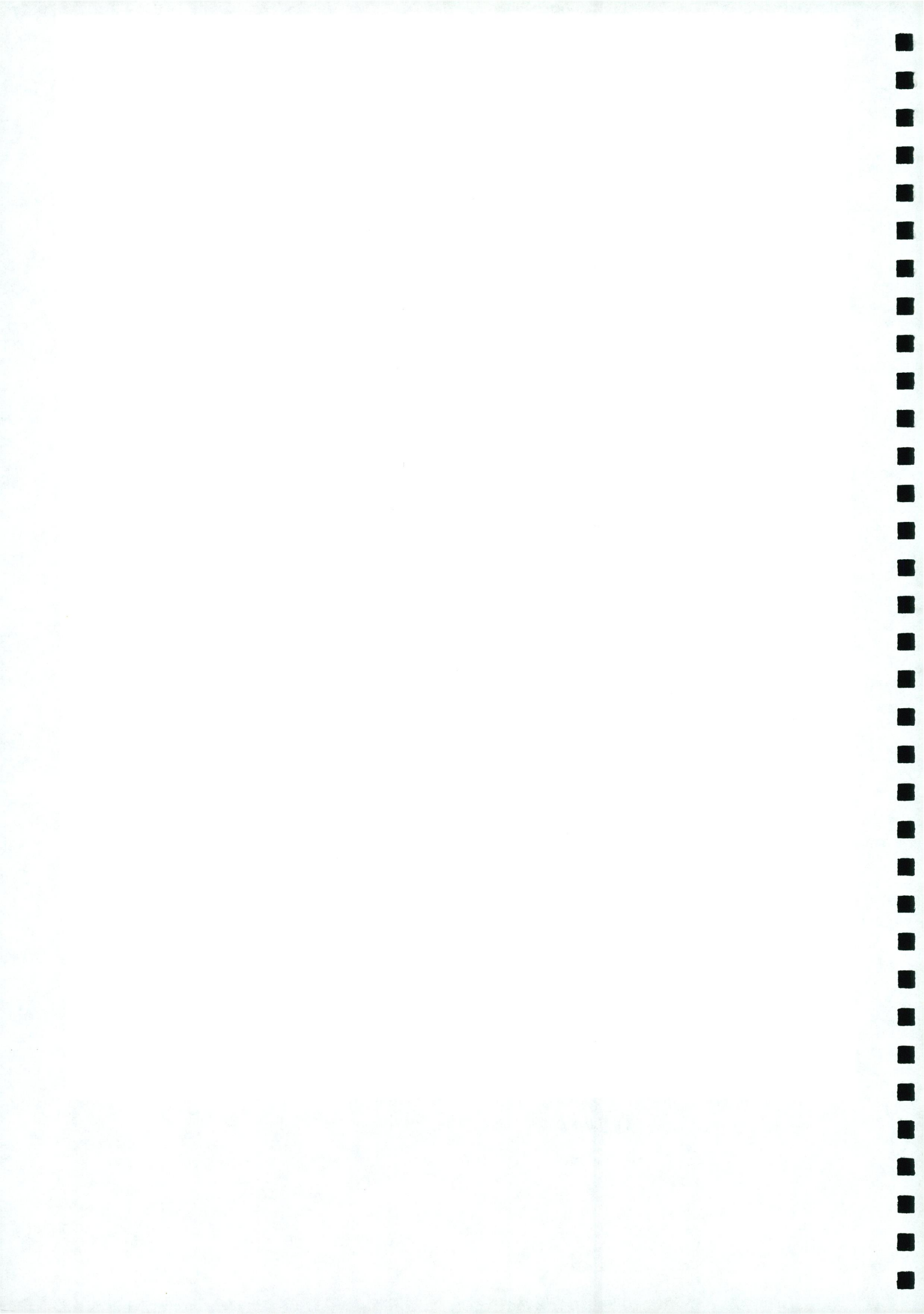




Fig.26 A nomad packing salt into a Fadse.

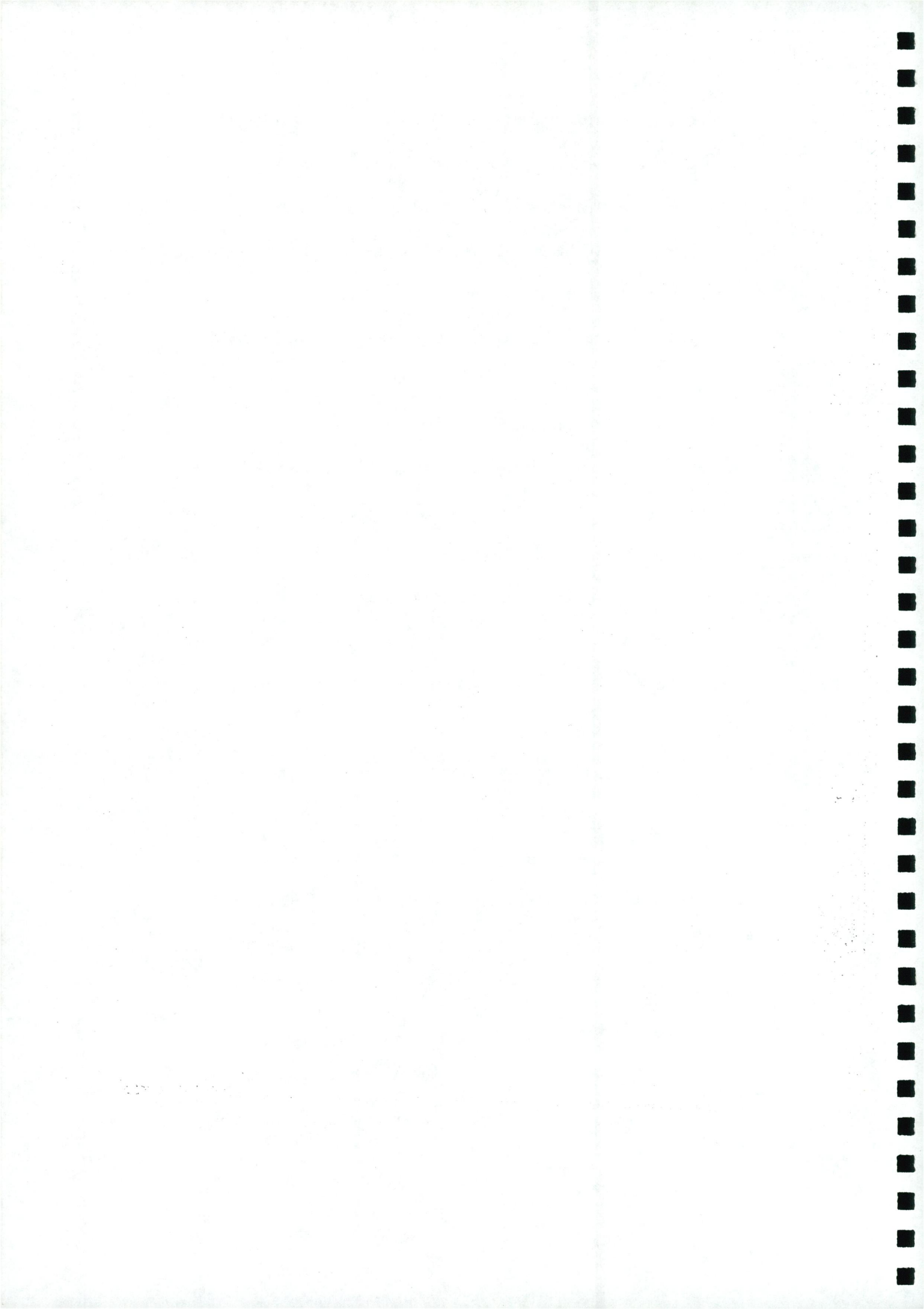


south over some of the highest passes in the world to trade for corn and other grains grown on the southern flanks of the mountain. Awaiting them are the Rong-pa, a people rich in grain, who need salt for themselves and their large flocks of sheep and goats. Their trading done, the Dolpo-pa begin the slow journey home, for the sowing of seeds. They now have all they need to survive another year round. It is a trade for life.(Fig.27).

Summers in a 1993 article pointed out that the Dolpo-pa have enough salt to last another year but change is coming: Tibetan salt is harder to come by as Chinese officials impede trade. For now, the caravanners will continue their travels but they know the next trek could be their last. Trade for grain, tea, and other products has always been an integral component of the subsistence economy of nomad families. So much has changed. Before the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959, from generation to generation, every Dolpo-pa and Phala nomad had a special partner, apart from among themselves, with whom they could trustingly negotiate.

These traditional commercial ties were severed by invading Chinese who, since 1959, have controlled the trans-Himalayan trade. Since then, a representative from the government decides on rates, quantities, and exchange partners.

The Chinese government thus determines the precise exchange date for every village. The Dolpo-pa and the Phala now only have three days to



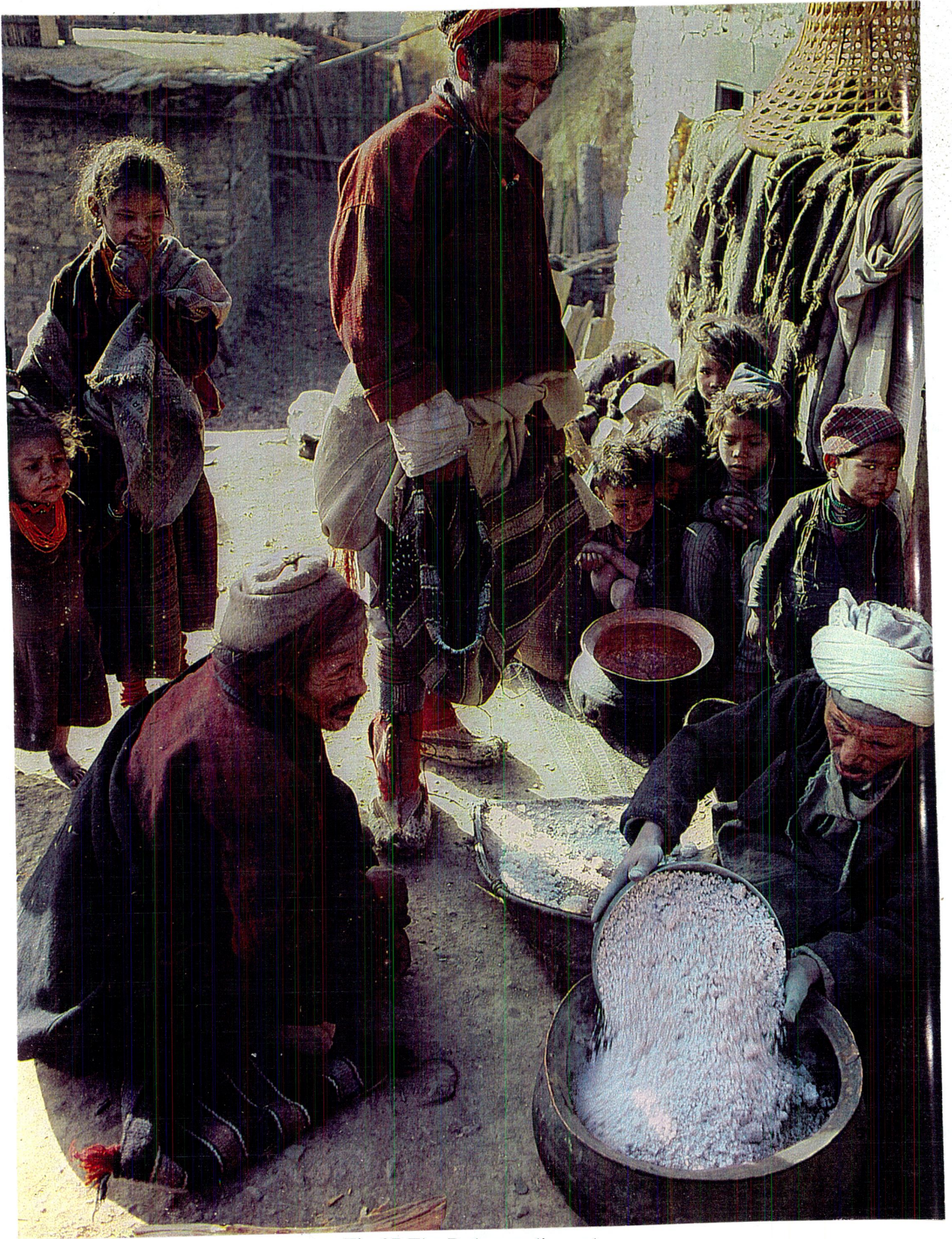
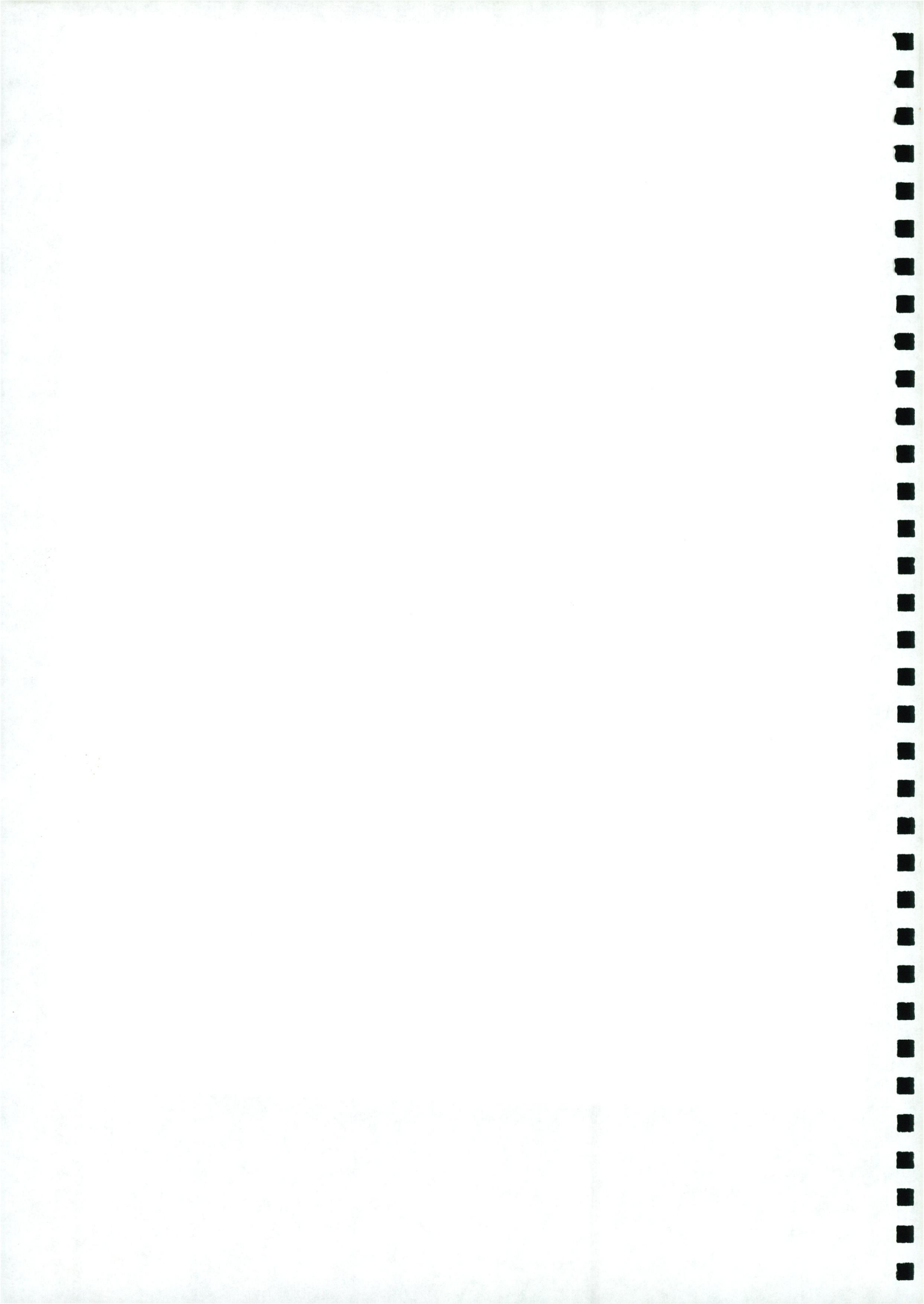
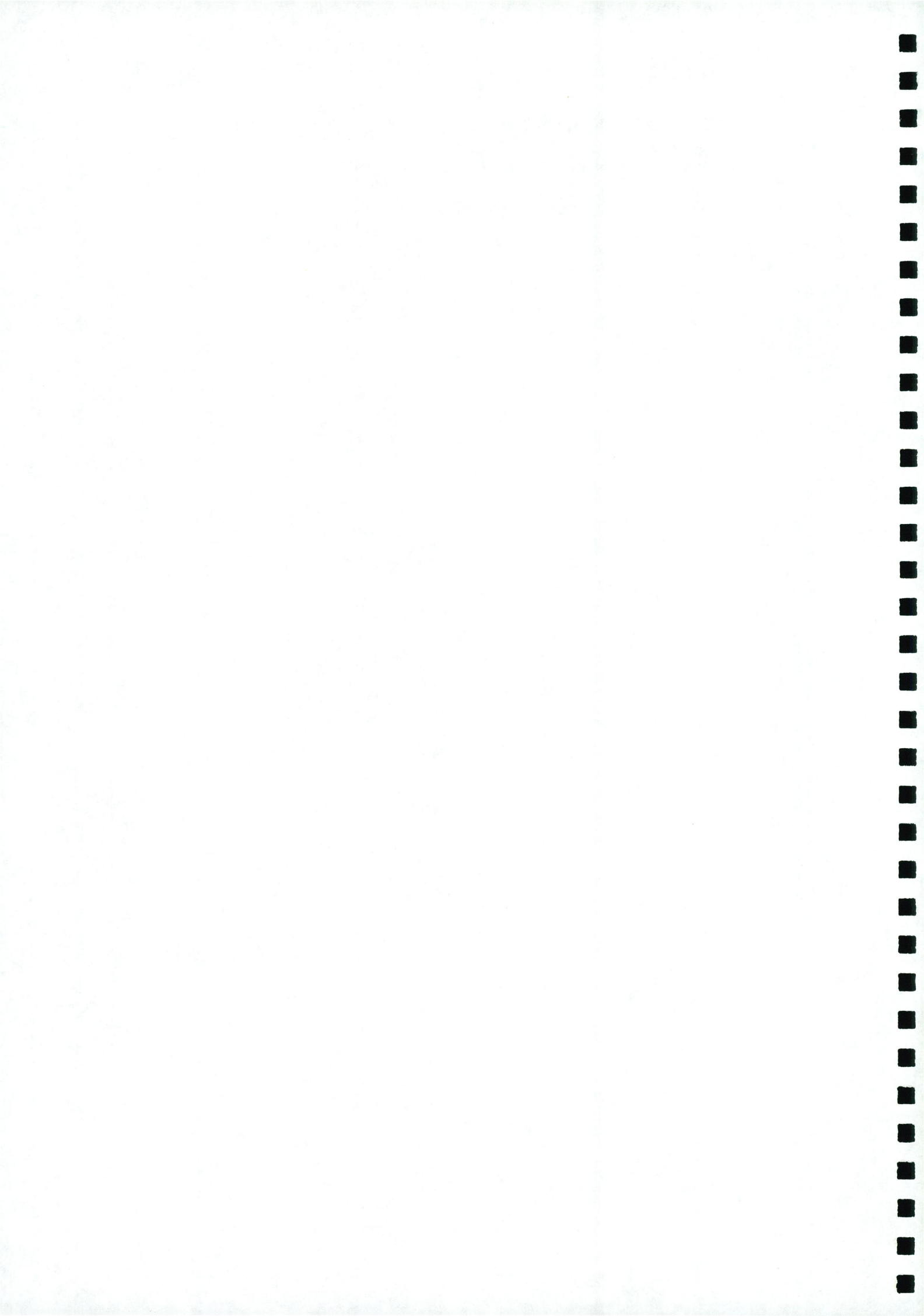


Fig.27 The Dolpo trading salt.



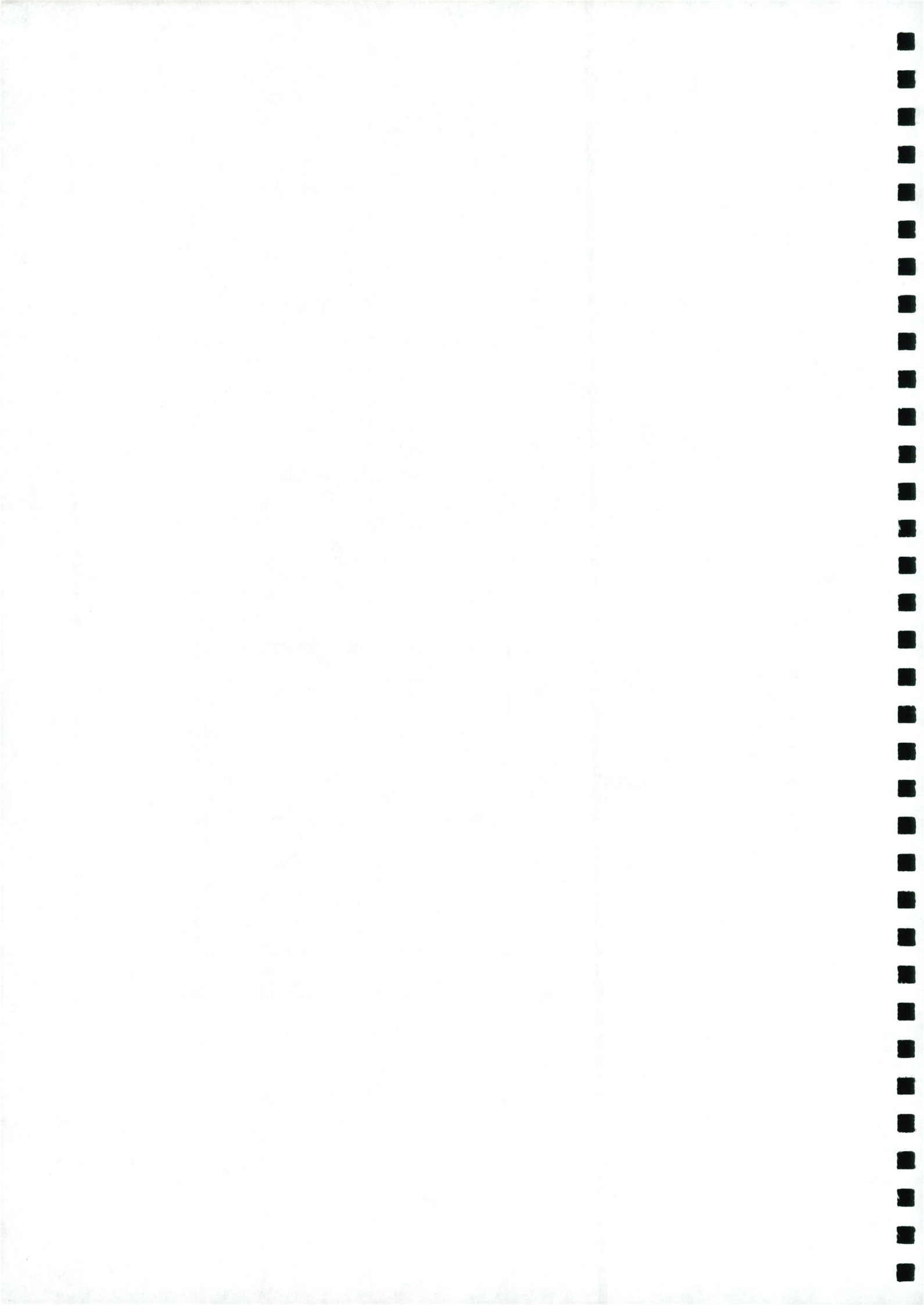
conclude their bartering. These encounters used to be more than purely commercial and lasted a lot longer. All these restrictions have gradually weakened the ties that united the two communities.



CONCLUSION

Generations of us living in towns and cities, more or less participating in a rat race industrial economy, are vulnerable to innumerable pressures as members of a large and complex nation state. Nomadism, edged onto the fringes of our vision, symbolises as a way of life much that our "civilisation" now denies us: the romance of a leisurely arcadian life, closeness to nature, the virtues of endurance in the face of a tough environment, the preservation of honour in confrontations with enemies and neighbours, and independence from the constraints of government.

This romantic view which I too held on encountering the nomads seems not to be generally shared by the governments and other peoples of the countries in which they live. For them, the nomads with their "primitive" wandering habitats and their apparently unruly behaviour are anachronistic, the epitome of backwardness, survivals of a past which the developing nations are struggling to leave behind. In all respects, social, economic, political and administrative, belief insists that, nomads are obstacles to modernisation. This view began with politicians and development agencies who, ironically, have only recently begun to appreciate the nomads' economic role as producers and exploiters of a marginal habitat.

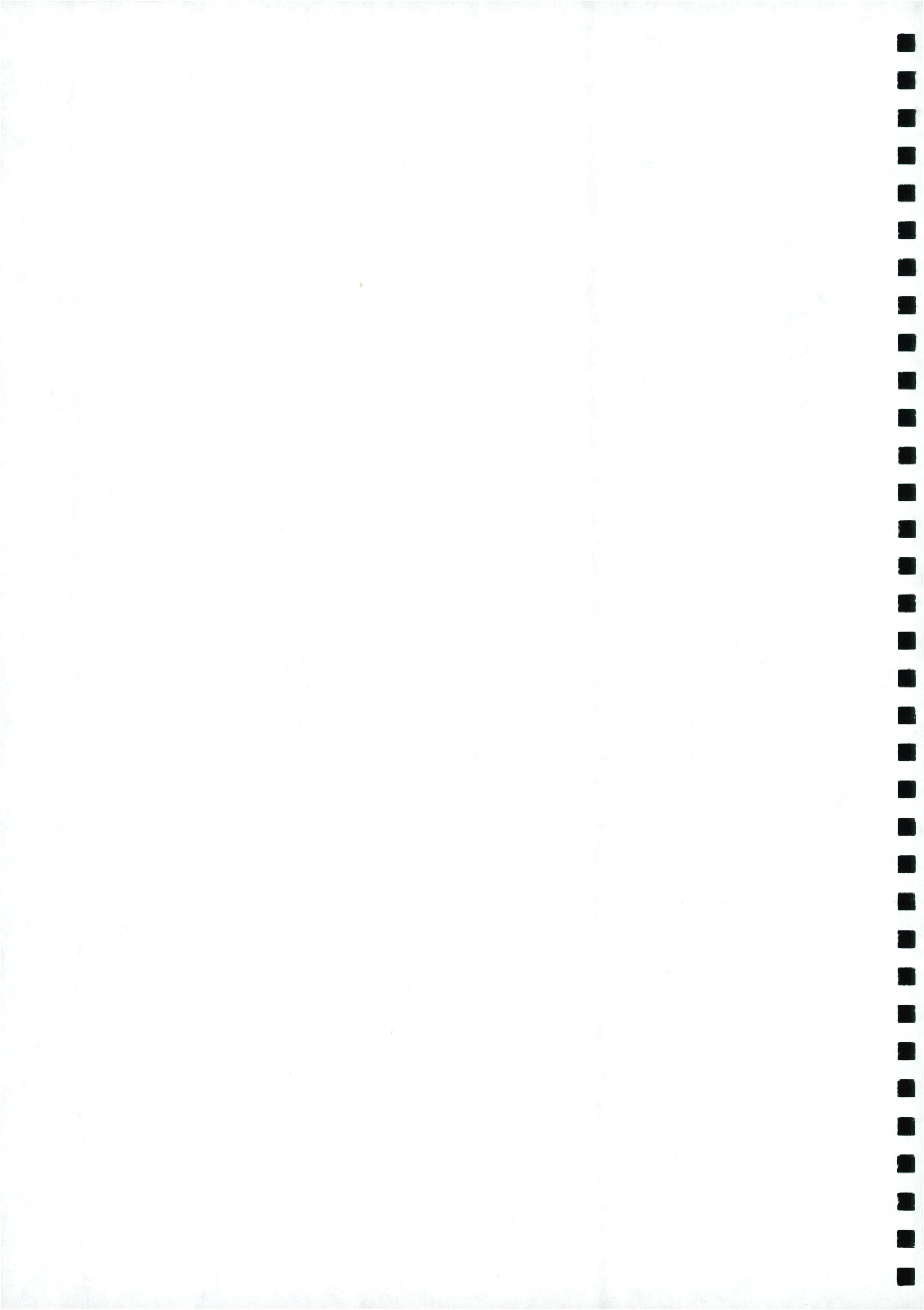


"In turn the citizen reviled the nomad as a savage wrecker of progress. And, since literature itself is the invention of settlers, the nomadic record looks black in writing. Thus an ancient Egyptian official would write of the Bedouin Hebrews, 'Their name reeks more than the stink of bird droppings', or a Chinese Imperial Secretary of Eastern Huns, '...in their breasts beat the hearts of beasts...from the most ancient times they have never been regarded as a part of humanity'. Roman authorities treated the citizens of the Empire as men, outsiders as animals, and their historians could calmly compare the annihilation of Germanic people to a medical cure. Elsewhere, nomad invaders, who migrated onto sown lands, were compared to plagues of locusts and swarms of snakes.(Chatwin,1989,p.218)

The Dolpo-pa and the Phala are not exempt from this situation. Nomads the world over are under threat.

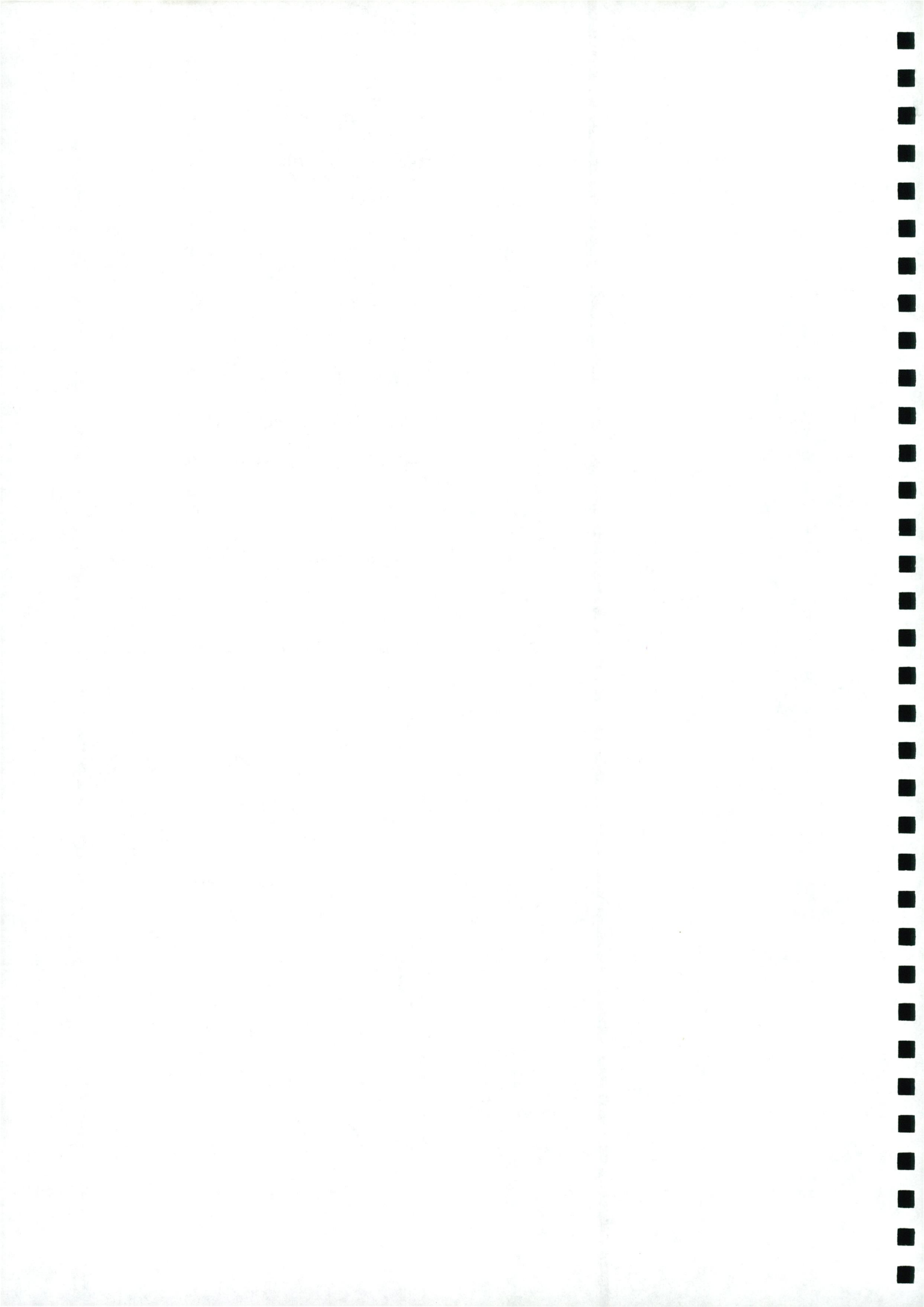
The Dolpo prefer the life of the caravan to staying in their village. Their animals give them the freedom to trade and to roam the mountains. In their hearts they are nomads. Within a few years, however, all might change. As roads push into the Himalayan foothills, trucks carrying Indian salt and other products may replace the Tibetan salt trade completely and threaten their subsistence economy, which is vital for their survival. If that happens, the traditional barter that has allowed Dolpo to survive will collapse. The caravans will be finished.

A few years previous to my journey the Nepalese government opened Dolpo to tourism as an economic alternative to the old ways. But so far treks are organised mainly in Kathmandu, and because they are largely



self-sufficient, they give little to the Dolpos' economy and tourism threatens to exact a high price from the region's traditional culture.

In contrast to this, the Nomads of Phala have come through rough times. For the foreseeable future, the nomadic pastoral way of life is alive and well on the Changtang. The new policies formed under the Tibet Autonomous Region in essence vindicated the nomad's belief in the worth of their nomadic way of life and their Tibetan ethnicity. The nomads of Phala like their way of life and want to maintain it in the years ahead, choosing to incorporate or ignore items as they see fit. Although there are problems and issues yet to be resolved, for the moment they want nothing more than to be allowed to pursue the life of their ancestors, and flourish or fail as the gods and their own abilities dictate.



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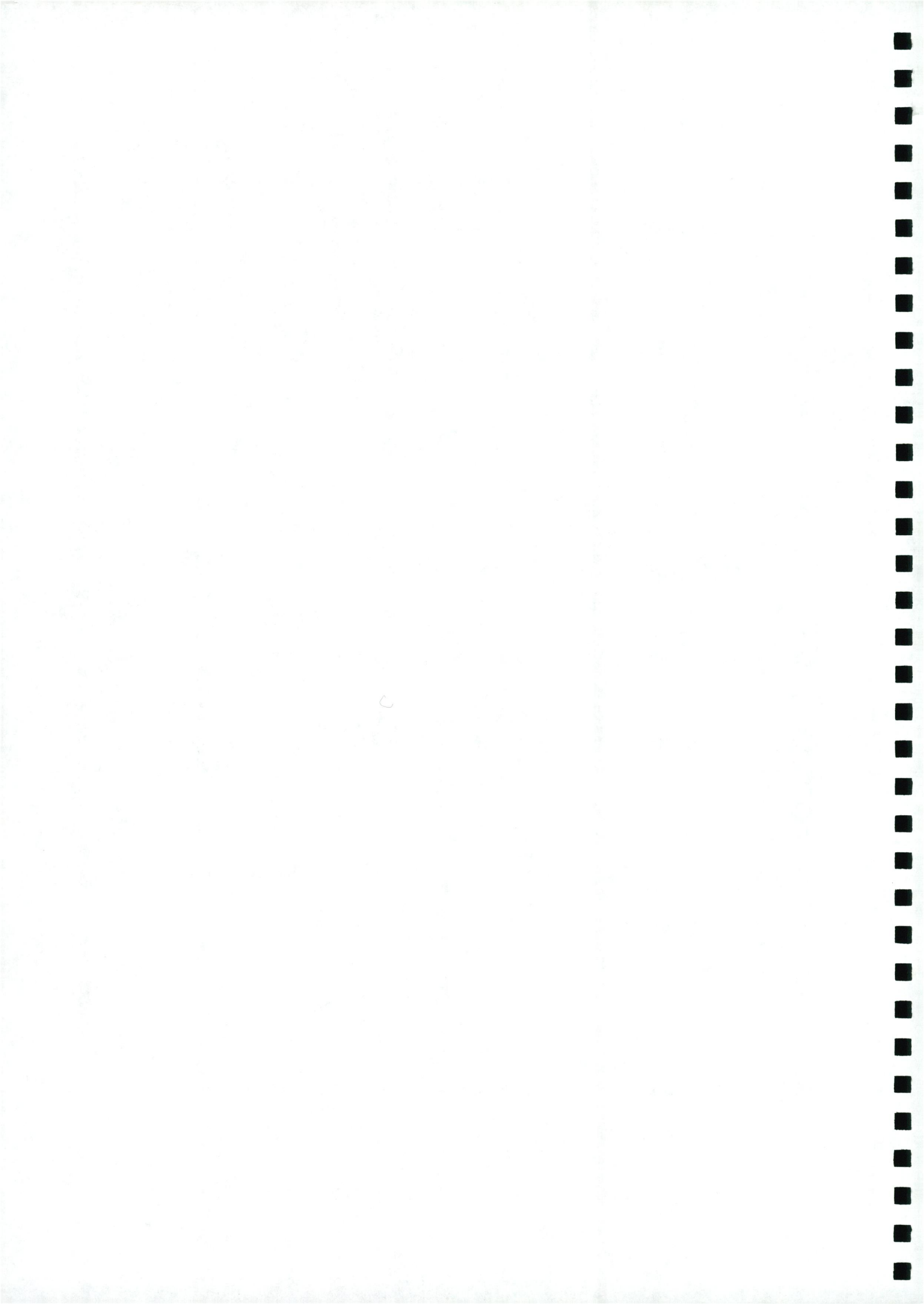
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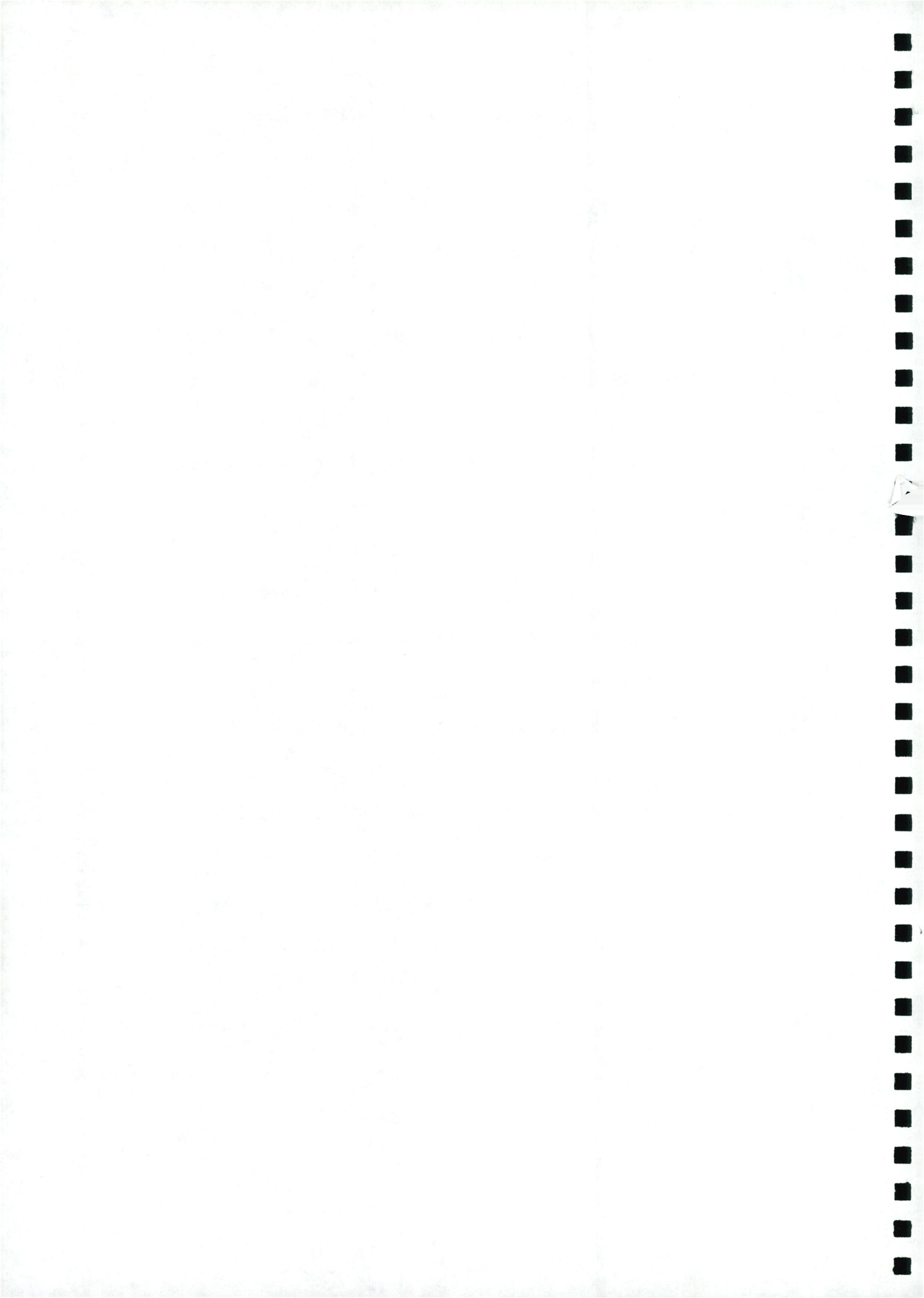
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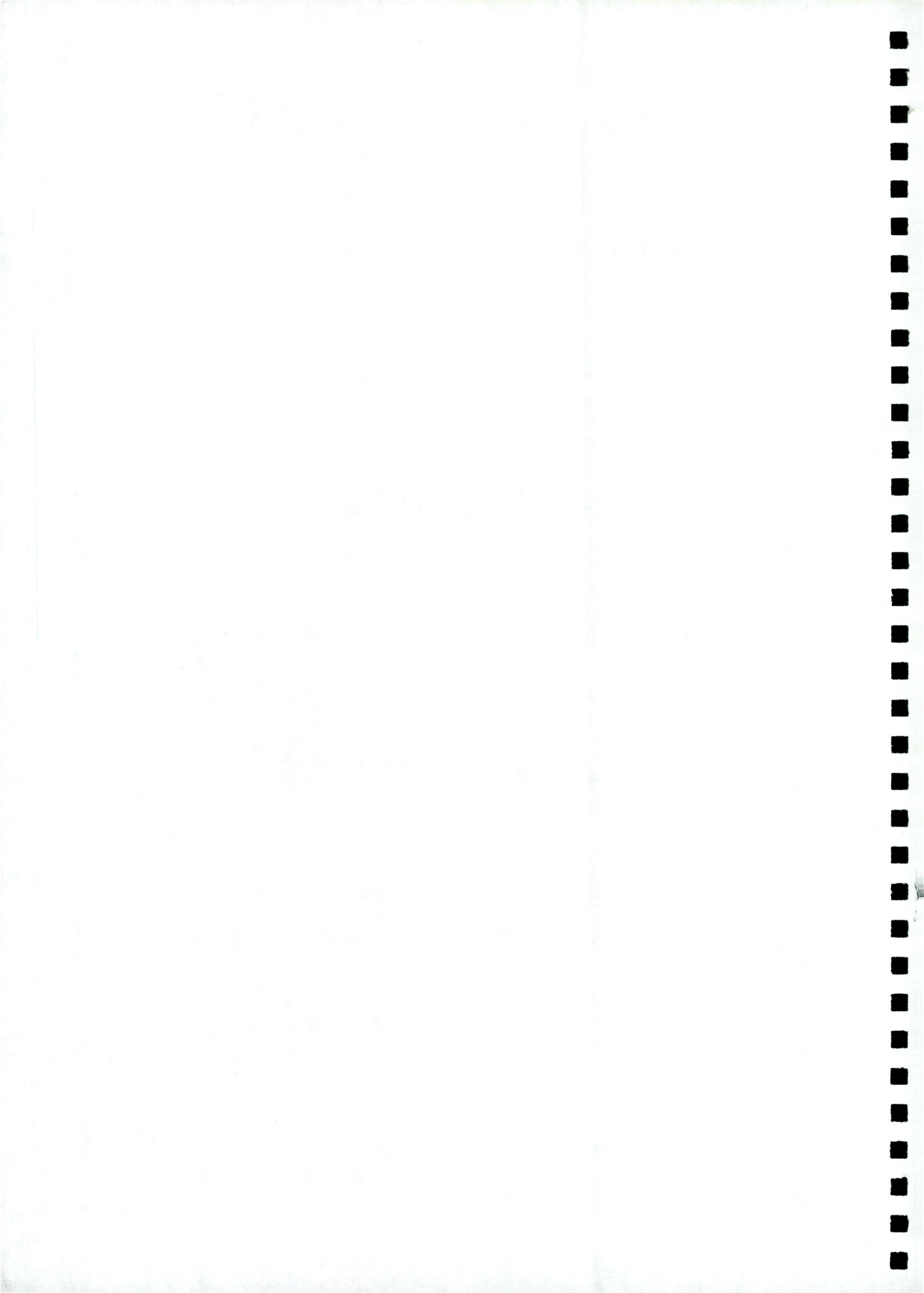
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