

Special Section Research Article

## What if Khata Could Talk?

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### Abstract

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Tibetan pastoralists often say that many know how to graze animals (མོག་ལུག་འཚོ་བ), but few know how to nurture them (མོག་ལུག་སྐྱོང་བ). *Skyong* (སྐྱོང) means nurturing or attending to something or someone with tenderness. While conducting fieldwork research among Tibetan pastoralists in eastern Tibet, I learned that animals were dying from eating discarded plastic *khata* (ceremonial scarves) and prayer flags. Even those who nurture animals through winter, when grass was scarce and snowstorms were constant, were not sure what to do to prevent this. This ethnographic experience inspired me to make a documentary film and to experiment with flash ethnography on this topic of the sacred status of *khata* in relation to its poisonous contemporary materiality. This flash ethnography takes creative license, allowing *khata* to speak.

### Keywords

Flash ethnography; Khata; meaning; materiality; Tibet

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My name is *Khata*. I am a ceremonial scarf used on many occasions in the Tibetan and Himalayan world, including for births, weddings, graduations, and the arrival and departure of guests. According to indigenous Tibetan narratives, I am closely related to *muthag* (མུ་གུ།), a sacred cord that connects heaven and earth. I symbolize respect, gratitude, and pure motives. When offered as a farewell gift, I am considered a blessing for a safe journey. When offered to arriving guests, I represent a sincere welcome.

I am a talkative *khata*. Perhaps you don't like me already. You humans talk all the time. Because you like to talk, you become knowledge-makers. Some of you often say that the humans are unique because you have a complex system of signs—language—to communicate with each other.

If that is true, then why do you need me? I communicate some of the most profound human expressions: faith, fortune, friendship, honor, blessings, sincerity. Instead of offering a *khata* to an important Buddhist lama as a way of expressing deep faith, why can't you just say, "Dear Root Lama, I have complete faith in you and in your teachings!" That would be awkward. Instead, you need me to carry those concepts in my being.

I create relationships between people. I bring joy. However, I am going through an existential crisis these days. I am both valued and devalued. I am a precious object one moment and simply trash the next. My value is ephemeral. Humans once used sheep wool to depict my physicality, but now they use polyester. I once thought that I only brought positive things to the world, but now my existence has become less meaningful and more detrimental to a wide range of beings.

Tibetans love to offer me to lamas—these days in large quantities. What do the monasteries and the lamas do after they received thousands of *khata* from their followers? They either set us on fire or throw us in garbage dumps. The Tibetan plateau is very windy, so the wind blows us

from garbage dumps to nearby grasslands where there are many animals and birds.

During winter when grass becomes scarce, poor animals, both wild and domesticated, die from eating us. Unlike wool or cotton, animals can't digest polyester. They writhe in pain before they die. When wind blows us to the grassland, we land on barbed wire fences. Then, birds sit on us. Their talons get trapped in our threads. It is a slow, brutal death...

Tibetans have a ritual practice called *ter* (གཏེར་), the practice of burying treasure bundles in the earth or lakes. These treasure bundles consist of a mixture of minerals, soil from special sites, foods such as barley and wheat, and plant medicine. The purpose of this ritual is to restore vitality to the land. Sadly, these days, many Tibetans wrap their treasure bundles in *khata* and then either bury us in the ground or throw us into lakes. Many people don't know that we are made of polyester, and we don't decompose. As we spend time in lakes, our strings loosen, trapping the fins of fish. We kill many fish.

We are mostly used in Tibetan areas, but we are not made on the Tibetan plateau anymore. Now we come from large factories in a town called Ranyi (冉义镇) near Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China. This town is also known as the Town of *Khata*. In 2019 alone, the town produced 20 million polyester versions of me.

Tibetans are often told to be grateful for the financial assistance they get from the Chinese government, but this town in Chengdu lives off making our bodies. A spectacular display of gratitude is displayed through us, before we are trashed. Often, we are not even used twice because our freshness, cleanliness, softness, or even our whiteness is essential to the mission of delivering immense gratitude. To lamas. To Party officials. To brides and grooms. To guests.

Dear humans, you use too many *khata* on too many occasions. The finest thing is something rare. When something is rare,

it becomes a treasure. *Khata* have been precious objects for a long time. However, today, we are no longer rare. We have been made cheap, formed from chemicals. We are too plentiful. This diminishes our value, and it harms many beings. If you are serious about conveying some of the most important human expressions through us, then make us from materials that do not harm the earth and sentient beings. Don't use us too often and on too many occasions.

Perhaps you are tired of my bitterness. But my bitterness is also your tragedy.

**Huatse Gyal** is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Rice University in Houston, Texas. Dr. Gyal has contributed peer-reviewed articles to international journals such as *Critical Asian Studies*, *Nomadic Peoples*, and *Ateliers d'anthropologie*. He is the co-editor of a volume, entitled, *Resettlement among Tibetan Nomads in China* (2015). He recently co-edited a special issue called, *Translating Across the Bardo: Centering the Richness of Tibetan Language in Tibetan Studies* (2024). Dr. Gyal released his first feature length documentary film called, *Khata: Poison or Purity?* in 2023. His research explores the interdependent and intimate relationships between land, language, animals, and community, with concerns about state environmentalism and climate change on the Tibetan Plateau.