

BON, BUDDHISM AND DEMOCRACY

The Building of a Tibetan National Identity



Per Kværne and Rinzin Thargyal

NIAS

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Two papers by
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INTRODUCTION

With a written history stretching back at least to the seventh century A.D. Tibetans can point to a historical and cultural continuity almost as ancient as that of Japan or Korea. An abundance of sources testify to the fact that throughout this period Tibetans have remained keenly aware of constituting a nation, i.e. a community linked by bonds of a common language, shared social values and religious concepts, and living in a well-defined geographical area, the so-called Tibetan plateau.

This awareness of being Tibetan has persisted quite independently of the vicissitudes of the Tibetan polity, whether that polity has been one of imperial greatness (as in the seventh to the ninth centuries), subjection to foreign domination (under the Mongolians in the thirteenth century), political independence (as in the first half of the twentieth century), or outright military occupation by a foreign power (as in the latter half of this century). However, to point out the persistence of ethnic identity does not imply that it has not undergone modifications throughout the centuries. The “Tibetanness” of which a soldier in the army of one of the ancient Tibetan emperors might be aware would, obviously, differ considerably from that of a monk or a university student in the twentieth century. Yet in recent decades, the deep feeling that many Tibetans have of continuity with the past has been a dynamic element in the struggle for democracy and self-determination. To try to determine how Tibetans, at various points of time, have understood their own identity - in other words, their world-view and values - becomes an urgent, and at the same time politically sensitive task.

This little volume contains two essays which, however different they may be with regard both to the nature of the sources and the historical period dealt with, as well as the methodological approach of the authors, are nevertheless related in that they deal with the question of how Tibetans at a given point in history, in a particular religious or social context, have sought to create a meaningful ideological or religious basis for preserving their “Tibetanness”.

The first essay discusses religious change, specifically the conflict which resulted from the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet in the seventh and

eighth centuries. This conflict was the object of various retrospective interpretations in later centuries. The essay focusses on the twelfth-century interpretations of the surviving non-Buddhist religious tradition known as Bon, a tradition which has continued as a distinctive religious community until today. The second essay deals with a highly significant contemporary phenomenon, viz. the process of establishing democratic political institutions in the Tibetan exile community and the emergence of modern nationalism among Tibetans.

Both essays are of course only provisional attempts at approaching vast and complex subjects - subjects which are, moreover, acquiring new dimensions as Tibetans struggle to take charge of their own destiny in a world where “nationalism” has, in a very short time, become a term of abuse in certain circles. It is therefore of greater importance than ever before to take account of historical specificity, i.e. of the only reality which can be the object of true understanding as far as the study of political conflicts and social and religious changes are concerned.

Per Kværne

RELIGIOUS CHANGE AND SYNCRETISM:
THE CASE OF THE BON RELIGION OF TIBET

Per Kværne

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The Bon Religion of Tibet

The study of Tibetan religion is still a young discipline. This is especially true of the study of the pre-Buddhist religion, as well as that of non-Buddhist traditions in Tibetan religion. For instance, in spite of the research carried out during the last decade by Snellgrove, Karmay, Blondeau, and Kvaerne, there still is no clear picture of the circumstances in which Buddhism was introduced into Tibet in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. Thus there are sound academic reasons for pursuing the study of the non-Buddhist aspects of Tibetan religious history. There are, however, additional reasons beyond the purely academic ones why this study is now at a crucial juncture. In Tibet today there is a rapidly growing nationalistic fervour. There is a deep sense among Tibetans of constituting a *nation* with a long and proud history. This is a new phenomenon, for it is different from the traditional sense among Tibetans of belonging to a religiously defined culture. This new and restless nationalism has turned Tibet into a politically tense and culturally changing area in Asia. At the same time it is a situation in which research into the history, culture, and religion of Tibet will not remain without consequences for the Tibetans themselves.

Viewed in this perspective, research into what is regarded - at least by many Tibetans - as 'really' or 'originally' Tibetan, especially pre-Buddhist and popular religious traditions, becomes a culturally significant and politically sensitive task.

Turning to pre-Buddhist and non-Buddhist religious traditions, we note first of all that they are covered by a single term in Tibetan, viz. *bon* (the corresponding adjective is *bon-po*). Western scholars have adopted this term. Hence, in the context of Western scholarship, Bon can signify three things:

1. The pre-Buddhist religion which was gradually suppressed by Buddhism.
2. A religion, so most scholars believe, which developed in Tibet at the same time that Buddhism became dominant, and which manifestly has many points of similarity with Buddhism. The fact that the adherents of this religion, of

whom there are many thousands in Tibet and in exile even today, maintain that their faith is anterior to Buddhism in Tibet, and, in fact, identical with the pre-Buddhist Bon religion, has tended to be either contradicted or ignored by Western scholars.

3. A vast and somewhat amorphous body of popular beliefs, including divination, the cult of local deities, and concepts of the soul. However, Tibetan usage does not traditionally designate such beliefs “Bon”, and since they do not form an essential part of Buddhism or of Bon (in the sense of the word outlined under point 2 above) - although such beliefs are to a large extent sanctioned by and integrated into both religions - a more appropriate term is that coined by R.A. Stein, viz. “the nameless religion”.

Leaving, then, the third sense of the term “Bon” aside, the fact remains that in the West the traditional view of Bon has been less than accurate. Bon has been characterized as “shamanism” or “animism”, and as such, regarded as a continuation of what supposedly were the religious practices prevalent in Tibet before the coming of Buddhism. It is worth noting that the argument in support of this view is a circular one, the presence of such elements in the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet being inferred from their existence in present-day popular religious practices. Further, the later, so-called “developed” Bon religion was until fairly recently usually described in distinctly unfavourable terms as a perversion of Buddhism, a kind of marginal counter-current in which elements of Buddhist doctrine and practice have either been shamelessly copied, or else inverted and distorted in a manner which has been compared with the mediaeval satanic cults of Europe (no matter whether such cults ever existed or not). But this view of Bon was founded not on first-hand research, but on certain late polemical writings of Tibetan Buddhist critics of Bon, who, among other things, employed standard terms of polemical invective. It is only since the mid-1960s that a more adequate understanding of Bon has emerged, first and foremost thanks to the efforts of David L. Snellgrove.

As already mentioned, an adherent of the Bon religion is called *Bonpo*. A Bonpo is a “believer in *bon*”, and for him or her, Bon signifies “truth”, “reality”, or the eternal, unchanging doctrine in which truth and reality are expressed. Thus Bon has the same range of connotations for its adherents as the Tibetan word *chos* (translating the Sanskrit word *dharma*) has for Buddhists.

Although limited to Tibet, Bon regards itself as a universal religion in the sense that its doctrines are true and valid for all humanity. The Bonpos also believe that in former times it was propagated in many parts of the world (as conceived in their traditional cosmology). For this reason, it is called *g.yung g.yung drung bon*, “Eternal Bon”. According to its own historical perspective, it was introduced into Tibet many centuries before Buddhism and enjoyed royal patronage until it was supplanted and expelled by the “false religion” (i.e. Buddhism) coming from India.

Before reaching Tibet, however, it is claimed that Bon prospered in a land known as Zhang-zhung and that this country remained the centre of religion before it was conquered by the expanding Tibetan empire in the seventh century A.D., and eventually assimilated into Tibetan culture and converted to Buddhism. There is no doubt as to the historical reality of Zhang-zhung, although its exact extent and ethnic and cultural identity are far from clear. But it does seem to have been situated in what today is, roughly speaking, western Tibet, with Mount Kailasha as its centre.

The ultimate homeland of Bon is, however - or so the Bonpos claim - to be found farther to the west, beyond the border of Zhang-zhung. The Bonpos believe that their religion was first proclaimed in a land called Tazik (rTag gzigs). Although this suggests the land of the Tajiks in Central Asia, it has so far not been possible to make a more exact identification of this holy land of Bon.

For the Bonpos, Tazik is the holy land of religion, being the land of Tönpa Shenrap (*sTon-pa gShen-rab*, “the Teacher Shenrap”), a fully enlightened being, the true Buddha of our world age. The Bonpos possess a voluminous biographical literature in which his exploits are extolled. Without entering into details or discussing the many problems connected with the historical (and literary) genesis of this extraordinary figure, one may at least note that his biography is not closely related to the biographical traditions connected with Shakyamuni. Thus Tönpa Shenrap was - during the greater part of his career - the ruler of Tazik and hence a layman, and it was as such that he incessantly journeyed from his capital in all directions to propagate Bon. It is worth noting that this propagation also included the institution of innumerable rituals; these rituals which are performed by Bonpos today thus find their justification and legitimation in the exemplary action of Tönpa Shenrap. The propagation of Bon by Tönpa Shenrap also included the construction of temples and *stupas*

and the conversion of notorious sinners. His numerous wives, sons, daughters, and disciples also played significant roles (in a way for which there is no Buddhist parallel) in this soteriological activity. Tönpa Shenrap is considered to have been a fully enlightened being from his very birth, endowed with supernatural powers. His importance in the Bon religion is crucial; it is he who lends authority to the religious literature of the Bonpos and, indeed, to their entire religious tradition.

Even a cursory glance at the doctrines of Bon, as expressed in their literature or explained by contemporary masters, reveals that they are in many respects identical with those found in Tibetan Buddhism. It is this fact that until recently led Western scholars to accuse the Bonpos of plagiarism. It cannot be denied that the concepts of the world as suffering, of moral causality (i.e. the so-called “law of *karman*”) and rebirth in the six states of existence, and of enlightenment and Buddhahood, are basic doctrinal elements of Bon. Bonpos follow the same path of virtue and have recourse to the same meditational practices as Buddhist Tibetans.

By the late eleventh century the Bonpos had begun to establish monasteries that were organised along the same lines as those of the Buddhists, and several of these monasteries developed into large institutions with hundreds of monks and novices. The most prestigious Bonpo monastery, founded in 1405, is Menri (*sMan-ri*) in central Tibet (in the province of Tsang, north of the Brahmaputra river). Monks are bound by strict rules of monastic discipline, including celibacy. Over the centuries the monastic life of Bon has increasingly come under the influence of the tradition of academic learning and scholastic debate that characterizes the dominant Buddhist Gelugpa school, but the tradition of Tantric *yogins* or hermits, living in organised communities or in solitude, has never been abandoned.

Bon Literature - An Unexplored Literary Heritage

The Bonpos have a vast literature which non-Tibetan scholars are only just beginning to explore. Formerly it was taken for granted in the West that this literature was nothing but an uninspired and shameless plagiarism of Buddhist

texts. The last twenty-five years have, however, seen a radical change in the view of the Bon religion. This reassessment was initiated by David L. Snellgrove who in 1967 made the very just observation regarding Bonpo literature that “by far the greater part would seem to have been absorbed through learning and then retold, and this is not just plagiarism” (*The Nine Ways of Bon*, London 1967, p. 12).

Subsequently, other scholars have been able to show conclusively that in the case of several Bonpo texts which have obvious, even word-by-word Buddhist parallels, it is not, as was formerly taken for granted, the Bonpo text which reproduces a Buddhist original, but in fact the other way around: the Bonpo text has been copied by Buddhist authors. It does not, of course, mean that Bon has not at some stage been powerfully influenced by Buddhism; but once the two religions, Bon and Buddhism, were established as rival traditions in Tibet, their relationship was, it is now realized, a complicated one of mutual influence.

Bon tradition holds that the early kings of Tibet were adherents of Bon, and that consequently not only the royal dynasty but the entire realm prospered. This happy state of affairs came to a temporary halt during the reign of the eighth king, Drigum Tsenpo (Gri-gum btsan-po), who persecuted Bon with the result that a large number of Bon texts were hidden away so that they might be preserved for future generations. As far as Bon is concerned, this was the beginning of the textual tradition known as Terma (*gter-ma*, “Treasures”), concealed texts that are re-discovered at an appropriate time by gifted individuals called Tertöns (*gter-ston*, “Treasure-revealers”).

Although Bon was reinstated by Drigum Tsenpo’s successor and flourished during the reigns of subsequent kings as it had done before, it was once more persecuted by king Trisong Detsen (Khri-srong lde-btsan, 740-c.797 A.D.). While this king is portrayed in mainstream Tibetan tradition as a devout Buddhist, thanks to whose patronage the first Tibetan monks were ordained, Bonpo sources maintain that his motives for supporting Buddhism were on the one hand the selfish belief that he could thereby prolong his life, and on the other hand the argument put forward by certain evil individuals at his court that the Bonpo priests, already equal to the king in power, would certainly take over the whole government of the land after his death.

Whatever the truth of the matter may be - and leaving aside the question of

whether “later historians have made two persecutions out of what was in fact only one” (S.G. Karmay, *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon*, London 1972, p. xxxiii), both Buddhists and Bonpos agree that during the reign of Trisong Detsen, the Bonpo priests were either banished from Tibet or compelled to conform to Buddhism. Once again Bon texts were concealed, to be taken out again when the time would be ripe for propagating Bon anew.

The greater part of the vast body of literature which the Bonpos regard as forming their canon of sacred scriptures belongs to this class of Terma, regarded as having been hidden away during the successive persecutions of Bon and duly rediscovered by Tertöns in the course of the following centuries. Bonpos also claim that many of their sacred scriptures were transformed by the Buddhists into Buddhist texts, thus reversing the accusation of plagiarism. The Bonpos claim that the rediscovery of their sacred texts began early in the tenth century A.D. The first discoveries are said to have been made by chance. Wandering beggars stealing a box from the monastery of Samyé (*bSam-yas*) in the belief that it contained gold and later exchanging the contents - which to their disappointment turned out to be only Bonpo books - for food, has an authentic ring; the same is true of an account of Buddhists looking for Buddhist texts, who, on finding only Bonpo texts, simply gave them away. Gradually, however, the textual discoveries came to be surrounded by supernatural signs and circumstances: thus discoveries of texts frequently came to be preceded by initiatory preparations, often lasting several years, culminating in visions in which supernatural beings revealed the place where the Treasure was hidden. Often the Treasure is not a concrete book at all, but an inspired text arising spontaneously in the mind of the Treasure-revealer.

Those texts which were considered by the Bonpos to be derived, ultimately, from Tönpa Shenrap himself, were, finally, collected so as to form a Canon. This vast collection of texts (the only edition which is available today consists of approximately 190 volumes) constitutes the Bonpo Kanjur, as such forming an obvious parallel to the Tibetan Buddhist Canon, likewise styled “Kanjur”. While no precise date for the formation of the Bonpo Kanjur can be given, it should be noted that it does not seem to contain texts which have come to light later than 1386. A reasonable surmise would be that the Bonpo Kanjur (as well as the Bonpo Tanjur, i.e. the collection of texts containing commentaries to the Kanjur) was assembled by c. 1450, which would allow ample time for

the Bonpos to have felt the need of forming a Canon of their own following the final editing of a Buddhist Canon at the beginning of the preceding century.

This vast collection of texts, which in turn only forms a fraction of the total literary output of the Bonpos, covers the full range of Tibetan religious tradition. Only a handful of Bonpo texts have been explored at all, and of these only one major text - the *Zermig* (*gZer-mig*) - has been partially translated. Complete sets of the Bonpo Kanjur are now available in Washington D.C., Paris, Arcidosso and Oslo, presenting a formidable challenge to Tibetological research, not only in coming years but indeed in coming generations. The Bonpo Kanjur (and Tanjur) is in all likelihood the last major textual collection from Asia to remain almost entirely unexplored.

A particularly significant genre within Bonpo literature is that of historiographical texts. The importance of this genre resides in the particular perspective on Tibetan history which it presents, a perspective which is radically different from that found in Tibetan Buddhist texts. In Buddhist texts, the introduction of Buddhism in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. under the patronage of successive Tibetan kings is regarded as a great blessing, pre-ordained by the Buddha Shakyamuni and carried out by saints and scholars from the holy land of India. Thanks to Buddhism, or so the Buddhists maintain, Tibetans acquired a higher ethical code, the art of writing, the subtleties of philosophy, and the possibility of reaching spiritual Enlightenment - in other words, they became a civilized nation.

The picture is an altogether different one in Bonpo historical literature. The coming of Buddhism is described as a catastrophe. Writing in 1842, a Bonpo scholar, the abbot Nyima Tenzin, described the introduction of Buddhism as ultimately due to “the perverse prayer of a demon” and put into effect when the moment was ripe by “he who acted like a monk but retained the Five Poisons”, i.e. the Buddhist saint Shantarakshita. The suppression of Bon is referred to as the setting of “the sun of the Doctrines”, followed by dissolution of the Tibetan state and the spread of moral and social anarchy.

So far, only one historical text of the Bonpos has been made available in translation, viz. “The Treasury of Good Sayings” (*Legs-bshad mdzod*) by the well-known scholar Tashi Gyaltzen from Shar-dza in Eastern Tibet. He lived from 1859 to 1935, and thus represents the final stage of the synthesis of

Bonpo traditions regarding the great religious change in the eighth century. But his work had a number of precursors. Of these, only the so-called “Genealogy of the Kings (of Tibet) According to Bon” (*Bon-gyi rgyal-rabs*), published in India in 1915, has been available and utilized outside Tibet. In the last two decades several other historical texts have been published in India (and to a lesser extent in China), but neither edited nor translated. The “Genealogy” is the work of Lodo Gyaltsen of Khyungpo, but the dating of this author is problematical, although he seems to have been active in the fifteenth century. A later, but important text is the “General Origin of the Doctrine” (*bsTan-pa spyi-yi byung-khung*) composed by Kundrol Drakpa (b. 1700) at an undetermined date in the middle of the eighteenth century. A comprehensive study of these and other Bonpo texts would eventually add a completely new chapter to our understanding of Tibetan history.

In all these texts, a source, styled the *Drak-chang* (*Grags-byang*) or *Ling-drak* (*Gling-grags*), is consistently quoted as the most authoritative. Probably this title covers several texts rather than a single one, all of which would, as shown by Anne-Marie Blondeau, perhaps date from the twelfth or early thirteenth century.¹ They thus belong to the early period of Tibetan historical literature, which can, generally speaking, be considered to begin in the eleventh century. The longest and most elaborate of the texts referred to as *Drak-chang* is the *Grags-pa rin-chen gling-grags*, to which we now turn.

A Historical Text from the University Library of Oslo

Among the Tibetan texts preserved in the University Library of Oslo, there is a manuscript consisting of 95 folios with the title “The Chronicle of the Rise and Fall of Buddhism, Called *Grags-pa rin-chen gling-grags*, Enlightening the Minds of the Deluded”.

The existence of this text was first brought to the notice of Tibetologists in 1970, and in 1972 use was made of it in S.G. Karmay’s translation of “The

1 Anne-Marie Blondeau, “Identification de la tradition appelée *bsGrags-pa Bon-lugs*” in T. Skorupski (ed.): *Indo-Tibetan Studies*, Buddhica Britannica, Series continua II, Tring 1990: 37-54.

Treasury of Good Sayings” and its identity with the *Grags-byang* referred to in Bonpo texts established. No further mention of the text was made until 1990, when the French Tibetologist Anne-Marie Blondeau published an article in which an approximate dating of the text was suggested, together with a brief resumé of the contents, as well as of the contents of two other, shorter texts, likewise styled, in a general way, *Grags-byang* (cf. above).

The Oslo manuscript was long believed to be the only one in existence outside Tibet. The colophon of the manuscript states that it is a copy made in 1919 by a Tibetan scribe for Major W.L. Campbell who was the British Political Officer in Sikkim at the time. Presumably the Tibetan scribe was a Buddhist, which could explain the extremely frequent misunderstandings and garbled passages in the manuscript. In the 1980s, however, a second manuscript was brought to India from Tibet. Although many of the pages of this manuscript are badly torn, this manuscript is carefully and neatly written, and is by all appearances of a considerable age.

On the basis of these two manuscripts, I have been able to establish if not a critical edition, at least a reasonably clear and coherent text. It has accordingly been possible to make a study of its contents, a brief account of which will be given below.

The text is organised as a short basic text consisting of twenty-five lines, to which the main text is a commentary. The basic text is attributed to the eighth-century Bonpo saint Khöpung Drenpa Namkha (Khod-spungs Dran-pa Nam-mkha’). This figure, who is also known from Buddhist sources, plays a crucial role in the confrontation between the autochthonous religious tradition and the new religion, Buddhism, introduced from India by the Indian masters Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita, and favoured by the king, Trisong Detsen (Khri-srong lde-btsan). The situation which the text intends the reader to have clearly in mind is one in which the Bonpos are faced with the alternatives of converting to Buddhism or fleeing into exile. They accordingly hide their sacred scriptures, to be rediscovered by later generations when the time is ripe. As already indicated, this provides the legitimization for the formation of a corpus of canonical texts in later centuries. Drenpa Namkha, however, chooses to convert to Buddhism and becomes a Buddhist monk. Significantly, he ordains himself, an act which apparently is accepted by the king. The reason he gives for converting is that there is no difference between Bon and Buddhism in the final analysis. He thus becomes an exemplar for a

syncretistic tradition which eventually came to form a distinct school within the Bon religion.

The commentary to the basic verses seems to be anonymous. Its main concern is to explain the deeper causes, hidden in the early history of Tibet, of the suppression of the national religion, Bon. It is also concerned to depict in great detail the catastrophic consequences, in the form of the collapse of the royal dynasty and subsequent moral and social disintegration, of the refusal on the part of the Buddhists to accept peaceful coexistence with the Bonpos and their instigating the king to suppress Bon.

In his endeavour to discern the ultimate causes of the debacle of Bon and of the Tibetan state, the author presents a broad overview of the geography of the world as known to him and of the succession of the Enlightened Teachers, culminating in Tönpa Shenrap. He then deals with the ancestry and descent to earth of the first king of Tibet. Without going into details as far as the geographical map which the author spreads out before us is concerned (and much research remains to be done before fact and fiction in this regard can be confidently distinguished), it should be mentioned that he pays particular attention to Mount Kailasha (Tibetan: Tisé) in Western Tibet. This mountain, which even today is sacred to Bonpos, Buddhists, and Hindus alike, is described in Hindu Puranas as well as in Tibetan pilgrims' guidebooks. Our text, however, presents an original description of the mountain in which the *real* Mount Kailasha is suspended in mid-air and can only be seen by the eye of faith; the terrestrial Kailasha, styled Mount Yabakshara (Ya-bag-sha-ra), is nothing but a replica of the celestial mountain. Likewise the neighbouring sacred lake, Manasarovar, from which four great rivers flow, has a celestial counterpart. While the text clearly makes use of Indian concepts, presumably transmitted through Buddhism, this particular concept of the sacred would appear to reflect native Tibetan beliefs.

The second part of the text, dealing with the succession of the Enlightened Teachers, culminates in a brief outline of the life of Tönpa Shenrap, the Teacher of the present age. Of special interest is a short passage in which is found a description of how Shenrap emanates four so-called Wisdom-Sons of the Created World. The fourth of these - who collectively express the universality of Bon - is none other than Shakyamuni. Shakyamuni is presented in a manner which throws interesting light on the process of religious syncretism. He is sent to India by Shenrap in order to subdue a man-eating

demon who, posing as a monk - or, rather, as a tantric adept - deludes people with a false doctrine of *chö* (*chos*). This word is normally translated into the Sanskrit *dharma*, i.e. Buddhism. It is, as the text explains further on, this false *dharma* which later was introduced into Tibet by Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita. Shakyamuni, however, who successfully subdued the demon, propagated the *true* doctrine, the true *chö* (*dharma*), which in fact is nothing but another name for Bon. Thus Bon and *true* Buddhism (as opposed to the Buddhism which was established in Tibet under the patronage of the last Tibetan kings) are identical - which is one of the underlying themes of the entire text.

The third and at the same time major part of the text deals with the history of the Tibetan kings and the fortunes of Bon in Tibet. First of all the divine genealogy of the kings is described, leading to the descent to earth - more specifically, to the top of a mountain in Yarlung in the centre of Tibet - by the first Tibetan king, Nyatri Tsenpo (*gNya'-khri btsan-po*). We have here an authentic Tibetan myth of great complexity and with parallels in other parts of Asia. Nyatri Tsenpo is succeeded by a line of kings who all descend to earth like him, by means of a divine rope, and like him, return to heaven in the same way without leaving a corpse behind.

All these kings honour the priests of Bon and thus the realm is happy and secure. The text describes the harmony and well-being of the ruler, priests, and subjects, and gives lists of the various priests and saints whose presence provides these blessings. But these kings are succeeded by Drigum Tsenpo (*Gri-gum btsan-po*) who is the reincarnation of a demon who in a former existence had sworn that he would destroy Bon in a future life. Accordingly, Drigum Tsenpo expels the Bonpos from Tibet; but he is killed in such a way that he is unable to ascend to heaven, and thus becomes the first king to leave a corpse behind, which all subsequent kings are likewise compelled to do.

After the death of Drigum Tsenpo, Bon is once again established in Tibet, and the realm flourishes as before. During the reign of the fourteenth king following Drigum Tsenpo, Lhatho Thori, the first contact with Buddhism takes place - not in the form of scriptures miraculously descending on the roof of the palace of the king as the standard Buddhist story was to claim, but in the form of a symbolic relic-shrine (*caitya*) brought by a mendicant monk from India. It is significant that the Bonpo author does not attribute any supernatural circumstances to the first introduction of Buddhism into Tibet. It is only after

the reign of four kings following this event that the first Buddhist texts are brought to Tibet. This happens during the reign of Namri Lontsen (gNam-ri blon-btsan), whose historical existence in the latter part of the sixth century A.D. is beyond doubt. The king wishes to study these texts, but as this annoys his tutelary deities and calamities befall the country, Buddhism is suppressed and happiness restored.

Nevertheless, Buddhism is fated to become established in Tibet. Once again, during the reign of Mangsong Mangtsen (*Mang-srong mang-btsan*, 649-677), exactly the same happens: Buddhist texts arrive, the tutelary deities are annoyed, calamities occur, and Buddhism is suppressed. All this may be viewed as a prelude to the central story of the text, the triumph of Buddhism during the reign of Trisong Detsen (756-797). First, however, the author relates two stories, one of which directly explains the cause of what is now to take place in Tibet, while the other in a more indirect way illustrates the basic identity of Bon and the true *dharma* or Buddhism. Both stories hinge upon the idea that a promise, wish, or curse uttered under special circumstances will inevitably come to fruition in a later existence.

The story is about three Indian beggars who construct the great stupa of Jari Khashor (*Bya-ri Kha-shor*, i.e. the Bodhnath stupa outside Kathmandu) during the reign of king Trisong Detsen's father. At this time, China and India were unable to resist the Tibetan armies; the wily king of China, however, suggests that if only Buddhism could be introduced into Tibet, this would weaken the country and so prevent further attacks. On hearing this, the three beggars who are pious Buddhists make the formal wish that they may establish Buddhism in Tibet in their next lives. Consequently, they are reborn as king Trisong Detsen and the Indian Buddhist masters Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita (the latter is consistently referred to as "Bodhisattva").

The second story reinforces the notion that the Buddhism which these three persons established in Tibet was not the true *dharma* of Shakyamuni. Through a series of incestuous copulations, a demon is born who creates confusion by mixing the true *dharma* with evil spells. In the ensuing struggle, the king of India, who upholds the true *dharma*, is killed by a heretic, and the doctrine of Shakyamuni is only saved from total destruction by the intervention of the army of the king of Tibet and the Bonpo priests. When demons again create obstacles for the true *dharma*, a Tibetan Bonpo installs one of the tutelary divinities of Tibet as the protector of Buddhism in India, and thus Buddhism is

saved once more.

The author stresses that this assistance was given freely and generously by the Tibetans at a time when Buddhism was not to be found in Tibet. This creates a strong contrast to the intolerance and scheming ways of Buddhism - albeit the false variety of Buddhism - once it had gained access to Tibet during the reign of Trisong Detsen.

Arriving in Tibet, Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita persuade the king to practise Buddhism. The king will not listen to the warnings of his ministers but tries to subdue the neighbouring countries by means of Buddhism; he fails and disorder and revolts ensue. He is now willing to follow the advice of his priests and ministers; Padmasambhava and the Buddhist monks are expelled, happiness restored and the enemies of Tibet subdued.

Before long, however, the king again invites Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita to Tibet. They slander the Bonpos, convincing the king that they will usurp his power. Hence the king favours the Buddhists, Buddhist temples and shrines are built, and a special tax is imposed on the people. The great temple of Samyé (which is still a major religious centre in Tibet) is constructed. In order to settle the rivalry between the Buddhists and Bonpos once and for all, the king decrees that a contest be held. Champions of both sides and two neutral overseers are appointed. The king commands each side to kill by magic and then bring back to life a spokesman of the other side. The Bonpos, headed by Drenpa Namkha, successfully do this, but Padmasambhava is unable to do the same. However, although the neutral overseers praise the Bonpos, the king is reluctant to accord them the victory. On the contrary, he indulges in impure tantric practices with Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita; the pollution which is thereby engendered causes diseases to erupt, and the champions of Buddhism as well as Bon die. Only when the Bonpos perform rituals is the plague stopped.

King Trisong Detsen once again orders a contest between Bonpos and Buddhists, this time to test the power of their respective funerary rites. The Bonpos are able to bring back to life their champion who had died due to the pollution caused by the king; the Buddhist champion, too, is brought back to the world of the living, and in an interesting passage he says that in the land of the dead the rites of Buddhism had produced no food, only meditation on emptiness, whereas the rites of Bon had produced an abundance of food, etc.

The king regains faith in Bon, and Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita flee to India.

The two Indian Buddhist masters now practically disappear from the story, in stark contrast to the classical Buddhist version in which Padmasambhava is a superhuman figure whose spiritual power completely overwhelms all forces that are inimical to Buddhism. In our text, he is portrayed as an evil, scheming person who is able to lead the weak and indecisive king astray.

The king's mistrust of the Bonpos is once again aroused, and he now orders the Bonpo priests to convert to Buddhism, or leave Tibet; those who refuse will be executed. It is at this point that Drenpa Namkha ordains himself as a Buddhist monk, stating his loyalty to the king and the futility of discriminating between Bon and Buddhism.

Now follows the final decline of Bon. Bonpo texts are transformed into Buddhist ones, and the shrines of Bon are transformed into Buddhist temples. Padmasambhava returns, and the Bonpos leave Tibet, cursing the king, the ministers, and the Buddhists. However, the persecution of Bon results, as so often before, in the king falling ill and various calamities befalling Tibet; only when the Bonpos are invited back to Tibet, given their former ranks and privileges, and the proper rituals performed are the calamities stopped and happiness restored.

Although initially favouring co-existence with the Buddhists, the Bonpos now request the king to expel the Buddhists; however, he refuses and says that henceforth he will support both religions equally. He requests the Bonpos to at least visit Samye, the centre of Buddhism established by Padmasambhava and the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet. Reluctantly, the Bonpos agree but once there they express their utter contempt of the temple and its statues, in which they see nothing sacred at all. The king repeats that he and his subjects will practise Bon as well as Buddhism, but evil Buddhists insist that the Bonpos must be banished, and so, with the exception of Drenpa Namkha, they finally leave Tibet. However, in order to preserve the Doctrine of Bon for future generations, the sacred texts of Bon are hidden as "Treasures", to await discovery when the time is ripe.

Herewith the main story of the text comes to an end. But there is a kind of epilogue in the form of a prophecy uttered by Drenpa Namkha on the request

of the king, in which he explains in detail the retribution that will befall the king and the whole realm of Tibet in this and in future lives: the king's life will be cut short, his lineage will be extinguished, the Buddhist order will be corrupted, Tibet will be invaded by foreign armies, etc. A brief list of the kings succeeding Trison Detsen follows. The text ends abruptly with a colophon which simply states that "I, Drenpa Namkha, have committed this to writing".

Syncretism, Religious Change and Nationalism in Tibet

The *Grags-byang* is an extraordinary example of religious syncretism. I use this term in a broad sense to designate a religion which, within a relatively short space of time, develops as an identifiable, new entity on the basis of several other religious traditions. There is no doubt that in central Tibet, contact with Buddhism, starting in the seventh century A.D., very soon led to syncretistic developments within the native religion. But it is difficult to judge the nature and extent of this syncretism in the absence of documents which can be confidently dated to a period when Buddhism was not already present (no matter how restricted its initial influence may have been). It is entirely plausible that the conviction, which, according to the *Grags-byang*, motivated Drenpa Namkha's conversion, i.e. that there was no essential difference between Bon and Buddhism, was in fact present in the minds of at least a section of the native Tibetan priesthood at a very early date after the first contact with Buddhism. The notion that the true doctrine of Shakyamuni had been debased by demons in India and that this "false Buddhism" was now represented in Tibet by Padmasambhava and his allies, permitted this idea of identity between Bon and Buddhism to co-exist with a feeling of intense animosity against the advocates of Buddhism actually present in Tibet, the Buddhist monks who were the unrelenting competitors of the Bonpos at the royal court.

Perhaps a clearer perception of the nature of the Bon religion, regarded as syncretism, can be gained if it is viewed in analogy with other, better-known religions. I would therefore suggest - being fully conscious of the historical and doctrinal discontinuity involved - that the relationship of Bon to Buddhism

is not entirely unlike that of early Islam to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Islam, which arose at a time when Christianity was already a well established religion in the wider context of the Middle East, regarded itself as the final restatement of universal religious truth (embodied in the Koran) and Muhammed as the last and supremely authoritative representative of a succession of prophets who had all proclaimed the same message. At the same time, Muhammed was the specifically *Arab* prophet, the transmitter of God's will to the *Arab* people. Bon likewise regards itself as transmitting universal and eternal Truth, but a Truth which came to be specifically and above all the religion of the people and the kings of Tibet. Like Islam, which arose in an area which was only marginally part of the Judeo-Christian world and subject to other influences as well (Iranian, Gnostic), the syncretistic Bon tradition appeared in an area which was only marginally connected with the Buddhist world and which was probably (to what extent, remains to be determined) also influenced by non-Buddhist religious traditions (Iranian, Manichaeism, Taoist). More importantly, both Islam and Bon can to some extent be viewed as radical reinterpretations and subsequent restatements of native - Arab and Tibetan, respectively - religious traditions in the face of rapidly expanding, prestigious universal religions. Just as Islam counts Jesus among its holy prophets but maintains that his message has been perverted by the Christians, so Bon revered Shakyamuni but fiercely resisted the "false Buddhism" brought by Indian monks to Tibet.

At first sight, the central theme of the *Grags-byang* is one of religious history, or more accurately, religious change. There is no doubt that the triumph of Buddhism - which would not have been possible, at least in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., without the determined support of several Tibetan kings - meant a fundamental, indeed dramatic, change of world-view, religious practice and social values for the Tibetans. It would seem that the situation was not altogether unlike that which characterized the great change from the pre-Christian religion to Christianity in the Nordic countries a few centuries later.

The *Grags-byang* gives a retrospective view of this religious change. It must be repeated that it is by no means a historical document in the sense of being a document which supplies direct evidence concerning the events it describes. Nevertheless, it does contain some highly suggestive information which, one suspects, may to some extent reflect the realities of eighth-century Tibet. Thus it may be worth noting that according to the *Grags-byang*, the suppression of

Bon is followed by natural calamities, epidemics, and social disintegration as an inevitable consequence. The maintenance of material welfare, social harmony and royal power in Tibet becomes in fact the real motivation for upholding and practising Bon. On a deeper level the welfare and political power of Tibet is the real concern of the author of the text. Buddhism is depicted as profoundly anti-social. Without entering into a discussion of the error or justification of this view, it certainly represents the persistence of a perspective on Tibetan history which is radically different from what came to dominate Tibetan perceptions after the final triumph of Buddhism in the eleventh century. Further, there is no reason to doubt that it represents the view of the antagonists of Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century. Thus the text expresses a Tibetan nationalism which may, if one so wishes, be characterized as rudimentary or archaic, but which is nonetheless very real. It is, or so it seems to me, revealing that the motivation to which Drenpa Namkha confesses for converting from Bon to Buddhism, is his loyalty to the king: it is impossible for him not to follow the lead of the monarch. For archaic Tibetan nationalism, the focus of loyalty was the ruler of the realm, identified in a mystical way with the very land over which he ruled through the intermediary of the sacred mountain onto which his forefathers had descended from heaven and which remained the abode of the tutelary deities of the king and the country as a whole.

The rigidity and exclusiveness of traditional Tibetan culture, still perceived in the West as one of its fundamental characteristics, are part of the persistent Western myth of Tibet as a Shangri-La, as a realm which is out-of-this-world. The rhythm of cultural interaction and social change has of course been uneven in Tibet, as in any other country. In particular, this rhythm was slow in the centuries following the establishing of the theocratic rule of the Dalai Lamas in the seventeenth century. Yet Tibet has traditionally been at the crossroads of the great currents of history in Central and East Asia, and hence Tibetan culture is particularly composite and complex. It has integrated elements from the neighbouring Indian, Iranian, and Chinese civilizations, both in historical (i.e. post-seventh-century times), as well as prehistorical times, to form a unique and original civilization which in turn has imposed itself (at least in its religious aspects) on other peoples, especially the Mongols and those in the Himalayan region.

At the present time, the Chinese occupation of Tibet, starting in 1960, has entailed a process of profound social and cultural change. Tibetan culture is

threatened by extinction under the combined pressure of massive Chinese immigration and the pressure of an alien ideology - not perhaps so much that of Marxism as that of modern consumerism and a deep-seated Chinese conviction of cultural superiority. This process is characterized by the disappearance of important elements of traditional, pre-1950 society, but equally by the emergence of new elements, the most significant of which is a nationalism aspiring to establish a modern, democratic, and, above all, independent Tibet.

In this process there is, of course, no question of abandoning Buddhism; on the contrary, most Tibetans would certainly maintain that religion provides the personal and social values and existential meaningfulness on which Tibetan civilization has been based for centuries. Contemporary Bonpos, too, would endorse this view (although they would see Bon rather than Buddhism as the source of these values). At the same time, a basically secular need to assert national identity by discovering historical continuity stretching back to the pre-Buddhist period - exemplified by the exile Tibetans' introduction of a "royal era" as a historico-chronological framework beginning with the estimated year of descent to earth by the first Tibetan king, Nyatri Tsenpo - is increasingly evident among Tibetans, both inside and outside Tibet. In fact, this is a subtle but highly significant shift of emphasis from regarding the introduction of Buddhism to positing the establishment of a Tibetan polity as the supremely important event in the history of Tibet. This shift can be interpreted in several ways, but it certainly does reflect a Tibetan determination to establish a national history which is as ancient (and hence, prestigious) as that of India or China. In such a context, the *Grags-byang* may eventually assume a significance which no one could have suspected even a few years ago.

**FORMING THE NATION:
THE PROCESS OF POLYARCHIC LATERALITY AMONG
THE TIBETAN DIASPORA**

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Oslo

Introduction

This paper is based on data I collected among Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala (India) and Kathmandu (Nepal) in the spring of 1990. I use vernacular literature to complement the field data.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the democratic and integrative processes that loom large among the Tibetan diaspora. I shall attempt to show that these processes form the basis of Tibetan nationalism: they are characteristic of the policy of social equalization and lateral integration. The equalization policy has led to the newly-given universal franchise in the Tibetan exile community which is enshrined in the Tibetan Charter promulgated in 1991.¹

The concept of lateral integration is coterminous with the intra-ethnic consolidation policy: i.e. the recognition of the religious denominations and regional groups as equal constituents of a new Tibet. The Tibetan pursuit of pan-Tibetan integration is legitimized by the invocation of the Tibetan theory of primeval racial unity and the cult of Avalokiteshvara who plays a crucial role in the formation of Tibetan identity. Though the main theme of the paper is to analyze current political processes, a brief assessment of the erstwhile Tibetan polity is necessary in order to provide a background against which the present-day political reforms can be compared and understood. The renunciation of the former Tibetan polity as anachronistic and the loyalty-monopoly of the Tibetan national vision have triggered the present political processes.

The Chinese occupation of Tibet began in 1950 and led to the fateful national uprising in 1959, resulting in the influx of thousands of Tibetans into neighbouring Nepal, Bhutan and India. The official Tibetan reason for seeking political asylum in the Indian subcontinent has been to maintain group and

1. The newly promulgated Charter for exile Tibetans guarantees universal suffrage. The Charter is an interim "constitution" designed for the Tibetan diaspora (Dharamsala 1991). A draft constitution for a future independent Tibet has been written: Guidelines for Future Tibet's Policy and the Basic Features of Its Constitution (Dharamsala, 1992).

cultural survival. To ensure cultural survival necessitated a process of reconstruction, reformation and transformation of the traditional polity.² The challenge of embarking on such a project was formidable not only because of the scarcity of human and material resources, but above all because of the displacement of Tibetans into an alien cultural and social milieu where their cultural repertoire was no longer efficacious, but instead a potential object of stigmatization and ridicule. Hundreds of Tibetans perished during the initial phase of their exile due to the hot climate in India, psychological and physical exhaustion, poor dietary and living facilities and poor working conditions. Politically, Tibetans felt in the 1960s and 1970s that they were treated as political “lepers” by the international community.³

However, despite the initial problems of reconstruction, the Tibetan diaspora has been successful in the endeavour to rehabilitate Tibetans throughout India and Nepal into well-nigh self-sufficient settlements which function as centres of Tibetan survival (Franz Michael, 1985). Each settlement is a close replica and constituent of the overarching Tibetan government-in-exile. The self-sufficiency of each Tibetan settlement can be discerned in its being a spiritual, cultural, educational and occupational enterprise, the standard and extent of which, however, varies from one place to another.⁴

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2. Information on the set-up of the Tibetan administration in exile and education and rehabilitation facilities are found in the Dharamsala handbook *Tibetans in Exile*, 1959-1980, published by the Information Office of H.H. the Dalai Lama, Dharamsala, 1981.
 3. Disillusioned young Tibetans in the seventies talked about resorting to violence to attract international attention. Whether Tibetans would resort to armed struggle was discussed in the *Tibetan Review* (January-February) 1976: 3-4, 14-17.
 4. This notion is reflected in the title of Furer-Haimendorf's book *The Renaissance of Tibetan Civilization*, Arizona, 1990, Oracle.

Retrospective Glimpse

Before I assess the processual mechanisms of Tibetan survival at the cultural and political level, I shall briefly analyze the former Tibetan polity which has not only ignited polemics, but also has a direct bearing on the political journey Tibetans have embarked upon.

However, an absolute non-partisan assessment of this polity appears to be elusive. The ongoing debate is multi-faceted: i.e. it incorporates the concepts of serfdom, feudalism and theocracy. The feudalism thesis derives from a quasi-Marxist doctrinal interpretation of the Tibetan polity. The viability of this thesis rests on the economic reductionist postulate that social and economic schism is an axiom of feudalism. This approach is exemplified by the Chinese view which tends to be pejorative rather than descriptive (Grunfeld 1987:7). However, a debate on the inapplicability of feudalism to the former Tibetan polity has emerged. Goldstein, the exponent of the serfdom thesis, criticizes Aziz (1978), Dargyay (1982), Michel (1982) and Miller (1986) for their failure to discern serfdom in the structural morphology of the Tibetan polity. Michael Franz who denies the feudal nature of Tibetan society has this to say:

In order to fit Tibet into the Marxist-Leninist straitjacket of the uni-lineal doctrine of history according to which all human social existence must undergo the same stages of development from primitive through slavery, feudal and capitalist societies to arrive at the socialist and communist millennium, Tibet had to be “feudalistic”, described as a cruel, barbaric system of exploitation, and the Chinese “liberation” of the Tibetan people from these alleged “feudal” bonds, was supposedly to introduce them into a more advanced stage of development, the stage of socialism. (Michael Franz 1986).

However, Goldstein does not characterize the old Tibetan society as feudal and argues that feudalism and serfdom are not identical phenomena: i.e. they are autonomous social configurations that may coincide or antecede each other. Given that they are independent of each other, what then are their constituent morphological properties? Goldstein maintains that feudalism has been treated as a too general conceptualization so that its application to the Tibetan social

structure tends to be too inclusive rather than analytical.⁵ He seems to criticize the economic reductionist Marxist camp and its antagonists for their being equally guilty of not having treated feudalism and serfdom as disparate entities. Goldstein maintains that serfdom was a particular system of economic production and that it was an intrinsic characteristic of Tibetan society. He defines serfdom thus:

Serfdom ... is a system of economic production in which an elite controls both land resources and the critical labor force (serfs) it needs to produce foodstuffs from the land (1986:82).

I hold that imposing a feudal terminology on the old Tibetan polity would be cumbersome since Tibet lacked some of the fundamental features of feudalism (Thargyal 1985). The generative factor of feudalism was political decentralization that necessitated the establishment of patron/client relationships as a security mechanism (Bloch 1965:443). I agree that vassalage entailed fief, but I maintain that its political-cum-security imperativeness superseded its economic aspect. However, on which side the pendulum tilted depended on how imperative the need for security was at any given time: if the latter became less indispensable then the economic aspect would be rendered more predominant.

After having argued that the application of a feudal terminology to Tibet is cumbersome, my present purpose, however, is not to defend or refute the serfdom thesis, the viability of which may, hopefully, be debated in the future. However, regardless of whatever diagnostic tools we employ to dissect Tibetan society, the image of a class-ridden society is unavoidable.

What is the verdict of the Tibetans themselves? Ultra-conservative Tibetans would be loath to criticize it, but the Dalai Lama and the exile-educated Tibetan intelligentsia do not hesitate to point out the malady of their erstwhile society. Dawa Norbu has stated that the Tibetan society was rotten to the core owing to which Tibet could not survive (1973:74). The Dalai Lama has described it as “feudal” and “theocratic”: “Outside the monasteries, our social system was feudal” (1963:60) and “As a principal means of formalizing the move away from theocracy to full democracy, I made provision for the

5. Goldstein writes that also Sweezy and M. Bloch differentiate serfdom from feudalism (1986:81).

National Assembly to be able to remove the incumbent from office given a two-thirds majority in favour” (1991:186). Does the Dalai Lama’s assessment concur with the feudalism thesis? The apparent concurrence does not seem to build on the same foundation. The Marxist thesis of economic reductionism and exploitation is axiomatic whereas the Dalai Lama’s concern is remedial or reformative - the epitome of the Buddhist tenet of universal equality enshrined in the Tibetan Constitution (1963:1) and the inherent disposition of Avalokiteshvara of whom the Dalai Lama is a manifestation.

But critical Tibetan auto-analysis is not to be equated with acquiescing in the Chinese version of Tibetan political history, nor is it a sudden revelation of the weaknesses of the erstwhile Tibetan polity (Dalai Lama 1963:64-67). The political process the Dalai Lama and his compatriots have embarked upon is a logical continuation of the reforms the Dalai Lama began in 1950 and a necessary precondition for the equitable integration of the Tibetans, which must necessarily transcend the former Tibetan polity and the Chinese totalitarian rule in Tibet. The reform, attempted by the Dalai Lama in the 1950s, classified debtor-peasants into three categories of different economic ability: the poor peasants were exempted from the accumulated debt, the less well-off were exempted from paying the interest of the loan, while the well-off had to pay the entire loan back to the state. The Dalai Lama wished to neutralize the very foundation of social inequity by nationalizing all the private aristocratic estates and then the monastic ones, but his reformative endeavour was thwarted by the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

In other words, given that neither societal anachronism nor totalitarianism is conducive to an equitable Tibetan society and given that Tibetan national aspirations supersede other loyalties that are subversive to pan-Tibetan integration, the integration of Tibetans as a homogenous group is imperative. The notion of homogeneity invokes absolute uniformity which necessarily remains a visionary and even rhetorical eventuality rather than an empirical reality. In other words, traditionally entrenched denominational and regional loyalties need to be counterbalanced into a co-ordinated political constellation which I argue to be the epitome of laterality.⁶ This is precisely what the Dalai Lama and his government are endeavouring to do, though with varying degree of success. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to an assessment of the

6. Lateral integration accomodates regional loyalties to a certain extent so that they do not assume disintegrative proportions.

democratic processes the Dalai Lama has initiated and the concomitant preconditions of Tibetan nationalism. To exemplify the anachronism of the bygone Tibetan polity, I quote the Dalai Lama:

Certainly Tibet will not be the same again, but we do not want it to be. It can never be isolated from the world, and cannot return to its ancient semi-feudal system. I have told already of the reforms I had started to make before the Chinese stopped me; now in my exile, I have been carrying those reforms to their logical conclusion, with the help of experts on constitutional law, by drafting a new liberal and democratic constitution for Tibet, based on the principles of the doctrine of Lord Buddha and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1963:231).

Relegating the “ancient semi-feudal system” to a status of obsolescence and enshrining democracy as the guiding principle of Tibetan political destiny refute all accusations of Tibetan indulgence in revisionism.⁷ The renunciation of the “feudal system” has been accentuated by the equitable moral and philosophical tenets of Buddhism. Tibetans consider the new constitution as an unsolicited gift from the Dalai Lama. The following citation illustrates this point:

Tibetan democracy is different from that of other countries because it did not cost any struggles or human lives. It originated from the political incumbent himself. (Mangtso, 1990:3).

Polyvocality

As the above citation suggests, Tibetan democracy evolved “from above” rather than “from below”; hence it has popularly been described as “one man’s” democracy. However, there are several factors that constrain Tibetan democracy: economic insecurity, traditional normative decorum and lack of education.

7. A favourite Chinese denunciation tactic has been that the "Dalai clique" wanted to reconstitute feudalism. However, the question of the Dalai Lama's credibility as the epitome of Tibetan aspirations is no longer subject to the Chinese propaganda machine.

The term “polyvocality” means the expression of different opinions or, to paraphrase James Clifford, it means “many voices clamouring for expression” (1986:15). I employ it for its brevity and conceptual coverage.

During my fieldwork in Dharamsala in 1990 conformity was the order of the day. Though public dissatisfaction of individual politicians was simmering, the politically ambitious and job-dependent Tibetan adopted the dictum of “playing safe”. The rationale behind it was that criticism of any kind would be interpreted as personal and tendentious. Though polyvocality was considered to be a lofty ideal, everyone appeared to be averse to any form of criticism. However, due to the fervour of democracy in Dharamsala, there was a spate of polyvocality at this time.

A disgruntled and perhaps disillusioned Tibetan wrote the following:

Democracy cannot be measured in terms of the number of ceremonials; it is not democratic if the audacious occupy the upper seat; it is not democratic if the humble are bullied; and democracy cannot be measured in terms of the number of meetings held (Dasar, 1990:26).

Polyvocality appears to have become a trait of the exile-Tibetan intelligentsia, but the average Tibetan is constrained by the ambivalent interface of his traditional, political non-participation or indifference and the current “imposition” of political participation and responsibility. Emphasis on the importance of electoral numericality, polyvocality, etc. is whittling away the supremacy of the traditional hierarchy. This “upside down” process has been dubbed as a “head-and-tailless” process. The metaphor is germane because though the thinking head has not vanished, the “un-thinking” tail has acquired civil rights and responsibilities.

The involute character of the transitional period is engendered by a collision of two sets of normative values: the supremacy of traditional normative disposition versus the anthropocentric individuation of each social person. The latter phenomenon is a concomitance of democracy that engenders a normative collision between the suppression and expression of individuality.

Polyvocality was not tolerated in Tibet, though peasants commented on political and social events by the way of lampoons: satirical songs sung by peasants while working or fetching water. Polyvocality has hardly permeated

the world of the average Tibetan owing to entropy-resistant traditional norms which I shall come to later. However, polyvocality is not only enshrined in the Constitution (1963:1) but Tibetans recognize it as an inherent aspect of democracy. “We need to institutionalize a custom of criticism because the alter has the right to express his own opinion which must be respected” (Dalai Lama 1990:16). *Rangtsen*, the official media organ of the Tibetan Youth Congress, has this to say:

The kernel of democracy is the recognition of the people’s opinion and wish, and they must defend their inalienable right to polyvocality. This right is enshrined in the Constitution. If there is no room for the expression of patriotism and severe criticism then democracy is incomplete (1990:17).

The founder of another vernacular periodical entreats his fellow Tibetans thus:

The quintessence of democracy is the prerogative to criticize and the ability to practice it. With the aim of regaining our independence we have started to publish this periodical known as *Kul Wei Tam* (Kunsang 1990:3).

The Tibetan literati seem to be cognizant of the necessity of polyvocality, but Jamyang Norbu decries its shortage as follows:

People must be allowed full vent to express their opinions, hear those of others, criticise and discuss freely. Right at the moment this is not possible, for statements of any originality or boldness could quite easily be constructed as seditious and against the Dalai Lama, and its authors vilified (1990:17)

The opinion of Phuntsog Wangyal concurs with that of Norbu:

Hitherto it has been difficult for Tibetans to speak their minds: they fear being thought disloyal; they fear to offend the hierarchy. In this way, good ideas remain unspoken and the will of the people may remain unknown (1990:20).

I have deliberately used the above citations to amplify the ongoing debate on polyvocality. The last two quotations refer to the Dalai Lama’s Strasbourg proposal in 1988, which caused consternation among many Tibetans. So far I

have rendered the opinions of the Tibetan intelligentsia, which is crucial in transmitting information and shaping attitudes. However, Tibetans at the grassroots level are less prone to resort to polyvocality not so much because of censorship or information management, but because of the “in-built” disposition of deference. Here lies the crux of the matter. Deferential behaviour is based on two disparate platforms: contingent and transcendental.

Transcendental deference is preordained: the dialectic behind it is that the karma of a given person determines his station in life, but it cannot be transferred from one generation to another because the theory of cause and effect applies to the individual. If one analyzes the logic of karmic operation, the posterity of a given person cannot be in the same karmic situation which thereby renders the notion of kin-based racial superiority untenable. However, paternity-patrimony-oriented social groups became the measuring rod of class bifurcation in Tibet. The Fifth Article of Songtsen Gampo’s⁸ Civil Code corroborates the above class dichotomy as follows: “to show esteem and respect to elders and people of superior race” is the Fifth Article (*Tibetan Reader* IV 1986:59). However, the notion of racial superiority is contradicted in the Tibetan Charter: “Before law all Tibetans are equal regardless of sex, race, language, religion, monks or laymen, wealth, birthplace, social class and position” (1990:3).

Though the notion of racial superiority has no legal status, my contention is that the hangover of transcendental deference creates normative dissonance. In other words, the moral and normative embeddedness of the traditional Tibetan hierarchy is so pervasive that any expression of polyvocality is considered tantamount to committing apostasy or violating the foundation of social equilibrium. An illustrative case in point is the metaphor “head-and-taillessness”. Most of my elderly informants lamented that times have changed and likened the “cacophony” of democracy to the Communist destruction of the Tibetan social hierarchy. Though they do not subscribe to Communism nor believe that democracy is destructive, their ambivalent state of mind reflects the ideological transition they are undergoing.

Lamas and reincarnations constituted deferential objects of a different order.

8. Songtsen Gampo introduced Buddhism to Tibet in the 7th century and is one of the three Tibetan kings who built the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th centuries).

The law of karma is operational here too, but the notion of biological continuity is absent. Each religious hierarchy or lama was not biologically perpetuated though it entails spiritual continuity. However, a well-known exception is the Sakya hierarchy.

The emergence of the democratic initiative from the Dalai Lama himself is of supreme importance for several reasons. Firstly, the Dalai Lama's ecumenical prestige renders the initiative immune from being accused of favouring one region or sect at the advantage of another. Secondly, the Tibetan people would hardly have the courage to challenge the leadership of the Dalai Lama, not because of fear of retaliation, but because of their excessive allegiance and devotion to the Dalai Lama (Norbu, 1990:17). Most of my informants were critical of the previous Government, but everybody used the term *bla na med pa*, which means "incomparable", to describe the transcendental status of the Dalai Lama. An illustrative case in point is the following: a Government employee whom I interviewed in India criticized members of the Government severely, but he explained that the driving force behind his resolve to continue to work for it and his belief in the Tibetan cause is the Dalai Lama. While he was telling me this he was sanctimoniously pointing his hand towards the photograph of the Dalai Lama on the family altar. Despite their having become politicized to a certain degree it appears that democratic reforms have to be imposed on the Tibetans, owing partly to the psychological hangover of their traditional indifference to things political (Wangyal, T., 1981b:1).

The landmarks of the introduction of the Tibetan Constitution in 1963 and the Charter in 1991 are the institutionalization of a pan-Tibet parliament and the provision for the impeachment of the Dalai Lama by two-thirds of the parliament. Especially the latter Article is unprecedented and flabbergasting to most Tibetans (Constitution, 1963). Tibetans could not envisage the eventuality of impeaching the manifestation of their patron deity Avalokiteshvara who is their spiritual and national saviour and their source of solace, identity, unity and national aspirations. Tibetan people's representatives entreated the Dalai Lama to revoke the Article, but in vain. Likewise he was equally adamant when he was requested to revoke it in 1991.

Though the Article provides for the possibility of impeaching the Dalai Lama (Charter 1990:16), it is only an academic possibility because his stature will

probably remain the same even if he were shorn of all constitutional rights.⁹ Though the institution of the Dalai Lama cannot be secularized, the Tibetan people's newly-won right to impeach even the Dalai Lama indicates the non-immutability of any political incumbent (Tibetan Constitution 1963:1). This "anthropocentralization" of divine right entails the political horizontalization of the previous well-nigh immutable verticality that has been the object of Chinese criticism.

The Tibetan Parliament

The notion of electing common Tibetans as representatives is not an epoch-making feat in democratic countries, but it certainly constituted a watershed in Tibetan history. It not only neutralized the class-based political monopoly of the aristocracy, the reconstitution of which would have been a target for exogenous criticism from Chinese and others and non-conducive to pan-Tibetan integration, but it also rendered the legitimacy of the legislative body co-extensive with the pan-Tibetan territorial vision which I shall come to later. These phenomena loom large in the context of Tibetan nationalism whose precondition is a national integration that can be achieved only through democratic processes.

However, owing to the traditional bifurcation of Tibetans into political monopolists and apolitical majority, the initial phase of the Tibetan parliamentary system was marred by political inexperience, coupled with a dearth of appropriate candidates. The immediate remedy was to "elect" traditional leaders whose knowledge of the electoral system and democracy was limited. Thus despite the official status of the parliament, its nascent phase was spent as an appendix to the executive organ.¹⁰ Based on the model of the

9. Tsering Wangyal writes in the *Tibetan Review*: "Once discovered and recognized, nothing can displace the Dalai Lama from his office. Unlike the other world leaders he does not have to engage in intrigues against rivals because there is no rival." (Wangyal, T., 1978:4).

10. "At the beginning, i.e. for a period of three years, these representatives were allocated to the various offices of the Tibetan administration in order to get first-hand knowledge of their working, as also to acquire experience in administrative and official work as many of them did not have the requisite background to properly carry out their functions", *Tibetans in Exile 1959-1969* (1969:316-317).

American House of Representatives, the main responsibility of their parliament is to oversee and scrutinize the workings of the executive organ. Though the parliament ceased to be “an appendix” to the Government in 1966, it has been accused of having played a subservient role. This situation emerged primarily because of the ambition of leading representatives to become members of the Council of Ministers (*Kashag*). All members of the *Kashag* were appointed by the Dalai Lama at the nomination of the *Kashag* itself until 1991. This time-honoured system carried immense prestige and honour and thus a Minister was considered to be almost an extension of the Dalai Lama whose integrity is inviolable. The rationale behind this reasoning is that a Dalai Lama appointee acquired well-nigh immunity from criticism because of his/her having been appointed by the Dalai Lama.¹¹

The Dalai Lama considered it to be necessary to discontinue the tradition of appointing the Ministers by letting them be elected instead by the members of the parliament. The second phase of Tibetan democracy began in 1990 when the Dalai Lama introduced a Charter as the guiding principle of the Tibetan democratic process in exile. The revolutionary aspects of the Charter are the discontinuity of the system of appointing ministers, making the legislative organ the highest authority of legislation, the control of the government, and the extension of the election to Tibetans living in the West.

Enhancing the status of the parliament both numerically and legislatively adumbrates a dramatic transference of power from the Dalai Lama to the Tibetan people. The substantial increase of regional deputies (from 2 to 10) has had the effect of enhancing the strength of the people’s deputation, encouraging the formation of ad hoc committees for legislative and investigative purposes; and, as a consequence, reducing the possibility of nepotism, favouritism and manipulation.

11. Tsering Wangyal describes the predicament in the *Tibetan Review* as follows: “It is true that every important office-bearer in Dharamsala has to be approved by the Dalai Lama before taking office. But there is no logic in presuming this makes him invincible from public criticism” (Wangyal, T., 1979:4).

Lateral Integration

A process of laterality appears to be imperative if Tibetans are to fulfil their nationalistic vision. In fact, Tibetans have begun a program of laterality which must necessarily include a process of co-extensivity rather than verticality. Monolithic verticality is not conducive to pan-Tibetan integration.¹² Given that the principle of nationalism is to seek congruence between the political and the national unit, a policy of sectional non-participation would defeat the national vision. (Gellner's definition, 1983). However, implementing the policy of laterality has undergone setbacks from time to time (Wangyal, T., 1981a:1).

The notion of lateral integration is synonymous with the incorporation and consolidation of the three Tibetan regions or Cholkhas. An imagined confederacy of the three Cholkhas is the nationalist vision of pan-Tibetanism (Dalai Lama, 1988:6). The three Cholkhas are: U-tsang or Central Tibet (known today as the Tibet Autonomous Region); Dotoe (Eastern Tibet or Kham which today is incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Sichuan and Yunan); and Amdo (Northeast Tibet) which is incorporated into the Chinese province of Chinghai. But because of traditional, historical, political and stereotypical differences between these regions, a harmonious process of integration could not be taken for granted. However, an epiphenomenon of the Chinese occupation of Tibet is the necessity for the Tibetans to close ranks despite occasional intra-ethnic bickering and emotional outbursts.

The overarching policy of pan-Tibetan integration is compatible with the hitherto unknown determination of all the regions to participate in the Tibetan enterprise of lateral integration, but the pattern of their participation has become an intra-ethnic issue. The issue is two-pronged. More radical Tibetan intellectuals, the Tibetan Youth Congress and most central Tibetans opt for the discontinuity of electing regional and sectarian parliament members because it

12. The Dalai Lama and many of his fellow countrymen pressed for the revival of the post of prime minister (*srid blon*), but many Tibetans were against it because they argued that a prime minister would be redundant or he would reduce the power of the Dalai Lama or the Tibetans in Tibet might not approve of it. However, the basic predicament seems to be the disproportional demographic distribution of the three regions. A prime minister is bound to come from one region. As a solution to the problem a Tibetan suggested that they should appoint three prime ministers, i.e. one from each region. Though the suggestion did not have any chance of being implemented, it did indicate the regional problem.

is detrimental to pan-Tibetan unity. An ex-soldier informant opined that sectarian and regional loyalties thwart Tibetan unity and explained that only Tibetan unity can bring independence. He added that unity is like a fist which is the result of the co-ordination and consolidation of the five fingers: otherwise the isolated fingers radiate in different directions and the strength of each individual finger is limited. This was my informant's analogical model for Tibetan unity.

However, Tibetans from the other two regions have argued for the inadvisability of imposing uniformity on the election system.¹³ They have given various reasons, but the main problem is the disproportionate demographic distribution of the three regional groups in exile. Central Tibetans constitute about 70 per cent of the Tibetan diaspora population while the other regions are small minorities. In the 1991 election, the respective electoral strength of the three regions was: U-tsang, 70.11 per cent (32,114 voters); Dotoe, 25.65 per cent (11,762 voters); Amdo, 4.23 per cent (1,923 voters). A non-regional election system would deprive them of their present equal electoral rights. Their apprehension derives from the notion that their attenuated electoral strength would deprive them of their equal say in the parliament.¹⁴ The following illustrates their apprehension: after repeated pressure from the Tibetan Youth Congress, people's representatives were elected on a non-regional basis in 1981, but this system was short-lived. Before a year had elapsed, members representing Dotoe requested the Dalai Lama to dissolve the parliament and appoint the people's deputies personally. But having to do so defeated the purpose of the democratic process.

Unity-in-Diversity Integration

Though the ultimate nationalist aim is to achieve complete de-regionalization, the current Tibetan intra-ethnic constellation is not amenable to it owing to the above reasons. Hence a policy of unity-in-diversity seems to be the viable

13. I have argued that neutralising the regional election system is not conducive to the present demographic distribution of the three regions in exile.

14. A novel and important political phenomenon is the intra-ethnic determination to participate in the Tibetan parliament rather than to criticise it.

alternative. The concept of diversity refers to regional and sectarian sensibilities and loyalties and the recognition of their existential legitimacy. Unity is inherent in the reciprocal inter-dependence of the regional groups in their joint pursuit of an imagined united confederacy. My dependence thesis is viability-dependent: reconstituting the former polity has been declared morally unjustifiable, nor is it practicable; to paraphrase Gellner, the breach of the national congruence is intolerable; and to live in eternal exile is diametrically opposed their nationalist doctrine.¹⁵ Regardless of whether the Tibetan nationalist vision may be realized or not, nurturing it engenders moral and cognitive consonance which is compatible with the supremacy of the nationalist doctrine. Thus the policy of unity-in-diversity does not stigmatize or ignore the minorities because this would be detrimental to the pan-Tibetan vision. Hence, the Dalai Lama has emphasized the importance of the equitable regional representation which is enshrined in the new Tibetan Charter.

The Charter demands that each region should elect ten representatives, two of whom should be women. Looking at the electoral strength of each region in the last election, the minority regions constituted only 29.88% of the voters. I hold that the regional demographic imbalance is overlooked as the basis of proportional electoral representation not because of its unimportance, but because the imagined confederacy of Tibet compels Tibetans to transcend electoral numericality and give priority to the regional constituents of the imagined nation. Undoubtedly, it is also a pacifying mechanism of intra-ethnic co-ordination, as electing parliament members on the basis of the imbalanced regional electoral strength would estrange the two minority regions. Two important points help us to understand the seemingly favourable treatment of the two minority regions. Many western and central Tibetans could escape into Nepal and India because of the geographical contiguity, whereas not many Tibetans from Kham and Amdo could escape due to the large distance between them and the above countries. The other point of consideration is that

15. An intense feeling of nostalgia is expressed in a poem entitled "Flicker of Hope?". I shall quote only a part of the poem written by Thupten Dawa:

O Tibet! Land of my fathers,
 You know too well my inner thoughts,
 My turmoils, urgings, and cravings.
 You know I don't belong anywhere
 Save in your arms,
 Those mountains.
 (*Rangtsen*, Number 1, Autumn 1975:19).

both Amdo and Kham are outside the Tibet Autonomous Region so that nursing their sensibilities and aspirations appears to be high on the agenda.

Moreover, traditionally these regions were not always submissive to the Tibetan government in Lhasa. Though their religious allegiance to the Dalai Lama was unquestionable, their political inclinations did not always concur with those of Lhasa. The time of intra-ethnic appeasement and emendation has come. I argue that the importance of the empirical numericality in exile is moderated: the equitable regional prerogative enhances the future variables I have just dealt with. Nor is a policy of complete de-regionalization conducive to pan-Tibetan integration. Thus the notion of laterality is germane here. Polyvocality is an intrinsic trait of democracy, while spontaneous unanimity is a rare concurrence. Universal consensus is discernible in the Tibetan delineation of the boundary of the nation in their mind: the future Tibet should comprise the three regions or Cholkhas. Consensus is hard to achieve when it concerns the degree of autonomy they should demand, but all Tibetans concur in the future consolidation of three Cholkhas (Dalai Lama 1988). Though imperial territorial ambition (7th-9th centuries) and polycentric prerogative belong to different epochs and are thus incompatible, the Tibetan imperial greatness legitimizes and justifies the Tibetan nationalist vision. Despite that the Tibetan polity is undergoing a metamorphic process, the continuity of the notion of divine lineality, the Dalai Lama being a manifestation of the imperial king Songtsen Gampo, invokes Tibetan national potential and historical continuity which enhance the existential legitimacy of the Tibetan nationalist vision. Historical replication is anachronistic, but A. Smith writes: "History has become the court of appeal, and historicism the invaluable guide and spur to any national territory" (1983:1569).

The symbolic indispensability of the three regions is based on their assumed attributive and complementary qualities. The special attribute of U-Tsang is religiosity; those of Dotoe and Amdo are heroism and industry respectively. These attributes of the three Cholkhas invoke a metaphysical triad, viz. *Rig gsum mgon po* or The Three Lords. They are Avalokiteshvara (the Lord of Compassion and the patron deity of Tibet), Manjushri (the Lord of Wisdom), and Vajrapani (the Lord of Power). The analogy is this: just as each of the three lords is an autonomous manifestation of his spiritual father, each region is a social and cultural entity with its own ascriptive or assumed attribution. Just as all the three qualities must be the inherent properties of the same Bodhisattva, one regional attributive quality presupposes the other. Their

inherent presupposition is also seen in the deification of the three ancient religious Tibetan kings known as the Three Ancestral Cousins. Each king is believed to manifest one of the Lords. The same dialectical unity is seen in the kings being individual monarchs, but of the same paternity. This symbolic interpretation of unity-in-diversity legitimizes the policy of laterality.

Sectarian Laterality

Sectarianism no longer seems to be a debilitating issue, but the elevation of the pre-Buddhist Tibetan faith, Bon, to the status of being a peer of the four main Buddhist sects indicates a parallel process of laterality. The adherents of Bon, the Bonpos occupied an unenviable status of marginality and stigmatization in Tibet and the same tendency continued in exile until 1977 when they were given the opportunity to send their representatives to Dharamsala. A Bonpo respondent regretted that they had to wait until the Dalai Lama had to advise the Kashag to include them in the Tibetan parliament. Though the Bonpo community in exile is numerically insignificant the official legitimization of their status as a religious group having the same rights as the Buddhist sects is of paramount importance.

A case in point is the Dalai Lama's visit to the Bonpo community in 1988, which engendered an unprecedented feeling of recognition and legitimacy of the Bonpos. The Dalai Lama sent an unequivocal message to the Tibetan community at large that stigmatizing the Bonpos was not only undemocratic, but also self-defeating. His donning of the ritual paraphernalia of the Bonpos during his visit to their community indicated the religious equality of the Bon faith. Here I quote what the Bonpos wrote:

Just as the monks and laymen of the centre had prayed for, the patron deity of Tibet came to the Bonpo settlement in 1988:

On the 10th of the 12th month of the following year The Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize Committee Awarded the Peace Prize to the Dalai Lama.

The sun that will let the Tibetan truth shine, shone; The mandala of Tibetan independence reached its highest point. (Bon Calendar, 1990)

Here I shall underline only two essential points; the phrase "as prayed for" and

the sentence “the sun that will let the Tibetan truth shine” are pregnant with symbolism. The former symbolizes the consummation of a much longed-for demonstration of the recognition and legitimacy from the Tibetan pontiff. The latter is polysemic: the above referent of the “sun” is the Dalai Lama whose enhanced international stature will fulfil Tibetan national aspirations. The second meaning of the metaphor can be interpreted as the sun being equally distant to humanity just as the Dalai Lama is equidistant to the different religious denominations: a tribute to the Dalai Lama’s impartiality.

Most of my informants considered that the prevalence of sectarianism was minimal: it did not threaten the unity of the Tibetans in exile. Tibetan history is familiar with sectarian power struggle which has not entirely vanished, but it does not debilitate Tibetan unity. My respondents argued that the sects should not be doctrinal rivals because they represent different methods of achieving the same goal, nirvana. A high lama compared these methods with the branches of a tree whose trunk is their basis. A similar analogy is given in a Tibetan textbook. The doctrine of Buddhism is compared with the aerodynamic principles of flying, whereas the religious sects are compared with aeroplanes that differ in size, shape, speed and colour. The complementary contribution of the sects is compared with the multi-coloured petals of a flower.

National Aspirations

I have dealt with the exile Tibetan vision of a pan-Tibetan confederacy and integrative and democratic processes that are conducive to the Tibetan national aspiration. They presuppose the genesis of Tibetan nationalism. So far I have dealt with the empirical present-day processes of nationalism, but to legitimize and heighten the feeling of nationalism requires the invocation of primordial legitimacy. The cult of Avalokiteshvara constitutes the epicentre of primeval Tibetan racial unity. The concept of Avalokiteshvara being the Buddha’s emissary to salvage Tibet from its abysmal state of heathenism and Avalokiteshvara’s primordial paternity of the Tibetans, render Tibet and the Tibetans an incommensurate entity. Tracing the redemption of Tibetans and their primeval paternity to Avalokiteshvara presupposes their racial and

cultural unity. The following is a part of a Tibetan song written by an unknown Tibetan in Dharamsala in the 1970s. It illustrates this phenomenon:

We the siblings of Tibet,
of the same flesh and blood,
Inhabitants of the three Cholkhas.

Avalokiteshvara's centrality in Buddhism is profound, but the Tibetan cult of Avalokiteshvara personalizes him as the creator and saviour of the Tibetans. Despite Buddhism being a crucial homogenizing factor, it is in itself inadequate to render Tibet incommensurate. Emphasizing one's belief in Buddhism is a demarcating mechanism vis-a-vis non-Buddhists, but Asia has numerous Buddhist countries. Extending Tibetan national homogeneity to other Buddhist countries would be antithetical to the polycentric imperativeness of nationalism. Hence the cult of Avalokiteshvara legitimizes an interpretation of Tibetan uniqueness, the invocation of which is essential in the generation of Tibetan nationalism. However, before proceeding further I shall characterize Tibetan nationalism, as the form and intensity of nationalism diverges from society to society. What triggered Tibetan nationalism is the incongruence of the political principle with national unit: i.e. to paraphrase Gellner, when the rulers of the political unit belong to a nation other than that of the majority of the ruled, then feelings of nationalism arise, but Tibetans diverge in their approach to the aim of their nationalist aspirations.

Tibetans agree that no Tibetan is unpatriotic, but two groups of Tibetans have taken different stands on the question of Tibetan independence. The pragmatic group led by the Dalai Lama argues that Tibetans cannot regain complete independence from China because the latter would never forgo Tibet. Hence an accommodative approach to the Sino-Tibetan impasse is more viable, such as that proposed by the Dalai Lama in the Strasbourg Proposal in 1988. The proposal demanded complete autonomy for Tibet but let China retain the responsibility of defence and foreign affairs. The term "independence" did not constitute the vocabulary of the proposal, but the Chinese authorities claimed that it in reality demanded independence in disguise. After failing to receive reciprocal Chinese response, the Dalai Lama withdrew the proposal in 1991. However, the Tibetan diplomatic channel is still open.

The other constellation is characterized by uncompromising nationalists who aspire to complete independence for Tibet. The rationale behind their stand is

the non-negotiability of the sovereign status of Tibet. They argue that neither their ancestors nor posterity would understand it if the Tibetans are content with home rule at the expense of complete independence.

An interesting discussion was in progress in the Tibetan parliament in Dharamsala (spring 1992). The debate is about the diction and the content of the 15th Article of the Charter. It runs thus: the priority of the Tibetan government-in-exile is to struggle “until the truth shall prevail”. The phrase “truth shall prevail” is considered to be a less conspicuous way of saying that independence will come. The virtue of this phrase is its dialectical elasticity that is consonant with the continuation of Sino-Tibetan dialogue. It appears that opting for dialectical elasticity has been a consequence of the Tibetan necessity for dialogue and the Chinese threat to freeze the Sino-Tibetan diplomatic avenue should the Tibetans keep on demanding complete independence.

However, independence-minded Tibetans have argued for the removal of the above ambiguous phrase. More than 15 representatives have voted for its replacement. The new content of the Article should be that the sole aim of the exile Tibetan government should be the complete independence of Tibet. Their independence upsurge has been inspired by the demise of Communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The Dalai Lama’s accommodative stance has been affected by the influx of Chinese settlers in Tibet. It has been claimed that there are more Chinese in Tibet than there are Tibetans. A policy of cultural assimilation and rendering the Tibetans a minority in their own country reduces the Tibetan chance for survival. A counter-argument is that this is an empirical threat to Tibetan survival, but given that the Chinese are determined to neutralize Tibetan identity, the situation will not improve even if Tibetans abandoned their demand for complete independence.

As I have argued earlier, the Dalai Lama himself is the introducer of polyvocality. The Strasbourg proposal did not receive universal unanimity. Several organizations and individuals expressed dissatisfaction at the proposal. Though I do not possess the facts and figures as to how many Tibetans were for or against the proposal, it triggered unprecedented polyvocality.

Conclusion

Whether Tibetans are struggling for complete or accommodated independence, a policy of lateral integration is imperative. The notion of lateral integration is coterminous with intra-ethnic unity which can be engendered through democratic processes. The unity-in-diversity policy of the Tibetan polity is diametrically opposed to the erstwhile class-monopolist polity that has been described as “feudal” or “theocratic”. The excesses of the traditional polity would not be compatible with the basic democratic tenets of Buddhism and the present Tibetan vision of a democratic Tibet.

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