# RELIGION IN TIBETAN SOCIETY - A NEW APPROACH
## *PART ONE : A STRUCTURAL MODEL*

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Over the last few years, the Theravada Buddhist societies of Asia have been the object of much anthropological attention and several major studies (e.g. Spiro 1967, 1971, Tambiah 1970). This work has led to important advances in our understanding of religion in Theravada societies, particularly with respect to the central problem of the relationship between doctrinal and popular religion. While the divergence of opinions still obtaining in this field suggests that we are some way as yet from any definitive analysis, if such be possible (cf. Terwiel 1976), we are very much better informed than, say, twenty years ago about both the religious practices of the ordinary members of these societies, the roles of the various kinds of religious specialists, and the place of scriptural Buddhism.

Anthropological work on the Mahayana Buddhist religion of Tibet is by contrast at a much earlier stage of development. The main reason has been, no doubt, the difficulties of access to most Tibetan populations. As the map shows most Tibetans now live within the boundaries of the Chinese People's Republic, and even the settled populations of Tibetans within India, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan live in areas that have been subject to considerable restrictions of access. The only Tibetan population whose religion could be regarded as well studied by anthropologists is that of the Sherpas (cf. Fürer-Haimendorf 1964, Funke 1969, R.A. Paul 1970, S.O. Paul 1970).

This is not to discount the very considerable amount of material on religion which has been obtained by specialists in other disciplines. This material has been the product of research by orientalists and students of the history of religions, working with both refugee informants and literary texts. It is unfortunately true, however, that this research outside our disciplinary boundaries has so far had little impact on the anthropological understanding of Tibetan religion. By and large, English-speaking anthropologists, if they have looked at Western literature on Tibetan Buddhism at all, have contented themselves with Waddell's outdated study (1967).[1] His book was an important pioneer effort at the time of its

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1 In a recent paper by Ortner (1975) reference is made to two of Snellgrove's books (1957 and 1967), but the one ritual text discussed in detail by Ortner (1975:157) is a hymn to Tara taken from Waddell rather than, for example, the much more appropriate ritual sequence translated by Snellgrove (1957:245-261), or one of the many texts in Beyer's book (1973). Elsewhere in the same paper (1975:154-55) Ortner

first appearance in 1894, but it reveals little understanding of the inner meaning of Tibetan religion to the Tibetans, and of course does not take into account the vast amount of research published since its appearance, and especially within the last few years.

I would suggest that we have not been able to make much sense of religion in Tibetan society because our ideas about Tibetan Buddhism have been much too crude, and we have therefore not understood how Buddhism and popular religion are interwoven in Tibet.[2] Such an understanding requires an interdisciplinary competence with regard to material in anthropology on the one hand, and in oriental studies and the history of religions on the other. I would not claim to be making more than a preliminary attempt here, but I think that even this is well worth while, and helps to make more sense of the ethnographic material available.

It is also important because of the light that Buddhism in Tibet can throw on the nature of Buddhist and Hindu societies in South and South-East Asia generally. There are close historical links between Tibet and southern Asia as a whole; I hope to show in a later paper that my approach to Tibetan religion can be generalized to build up a framework within which the whole problem of popular and literary religion and culture in South and South-East Asia can be usefully considered. I believe that this will throw new light on the much more extensive material already available on Theravada Buddhist societies, to which I made reference above. However, my purpose in these two papers is restricted to outlining a model of the Tibetan religious system, and applying it to the one Tibetan society for which reasonably adequate information is available, that of the Sherpas.

The model of Tibetan religion is essentially a structural model, and it derives from many sources, including my own fieldwork and that of other anthropologists, Tibetan literary sources, and scholarly work by Western Tibetanists. I feel that for the purpose of constructing a model there is no reason to restrict oneself to data of any particular kind. On the other hand, in testing a model it is desirable to apply it to a more homogeneous body of data, and the Sherpa material is intended to demonstrate the model's plausibility for a particular Tibetan community.

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refe… …ry of a ritual text given to Fürer-Haimendorf by a Sherpa lama (cf. Fürer-Ha… …4:193ff.) which is so garbled as to be virtually meaningless. In fact I agree … …cts with Ortner's conclusions. My point is that her argument could have …much more compelling if she had used actual translations of appropriate … …nd that such translations were in fact available. A case in point is Ekvall's … which in effect rules the monastic sector out of consideration by demanding … …igious observances must be performed universally by all Tibetans to be worth … of anthropological consideration. This is like saying Christianity without re… …ence to the clergy, or African religion without the …rs and other religious spe… …ists.

Although I concentrate here on structure, a complete understanding of religion in Tibetan society would certainly also involve the study of social processes. As is emphasized below, Tibetan society was in no way static. To the extent that we can speak of a structure at all it is only because this structure has constantly been re-created and never in quite the same form – by the actions of individuals in successive generations. The question of *why* certain institutions, symbols, concepts should be adopted, or used in particular ways, would require explanation in terms of the logic of the situation from the actors' point of view. I have occasionally shifted below to this level of explanation. However my emphasis here is on structure, not process; on the *langue* of Tibetan religious practice, not the individual *parole*.

*Tibetan Society*

Most of what I am going to say in this paper refers to 'traditional' Tibetan society. This is of course an anthropological fiction. Despite the popular image of Tibet as static, Tibetan society, Tibetan politics, Tibetan religion have been changing ever since our earliest detailed knowledge of them in the 7th century A.D. We can however as a first approximation regard the developments over the period between say 1700 and 1950 as developments within a single system. The people at the top changed, the detailed structure of government might alter, but the overall principles remained more or less the same. The roots of this system go back perhaps to the Sakya rulers of the 13th century and the *Phag mo gru pa* kings of the 14th. By contrast, the effects of the Chinese occupation since 1950, and of the departure of most of the traditional elite in 1959, have been so radical that the difference between contemporary Tibet and pre-1950 Tibet is of another order to the developments of the previous few centuries.

Of the 5 or 6 million ethnic Tibetans in 1950, perhaps two or three million lived within the state ruled by the Dalai Lama from his capital at Lhasa. Two or three million more lived in a variety of other political entities. Most of these were in the eastern part of Kham and in Amdo, two large regions to the east of the Dalai Lama's territory (see Map). Here there was a patchwork of small states over which neighbouring Chinese warlords exerted some kind of general control. For all the subtleties of the China-Tibet dispute, there is no doubt that the Dalai Lama's regime was *de facto* independent of China between 1912 and 1950, and that Chinese control had been nominal throughout most of the 19th century. The precise border between the Dalai Lama's territory and the area under Chinese control was, however, subject to dispute throughout recent times.

The map gives an approximate indication of the total area occupied by Tibetans that is, people linguistically and culturally Tibetan. The modern Tibet Autonomous Region corresponds in general outline to the pre-1950 territory of the Lhasa regime. As the map shows, much of the Tibetan population of modern China falls within the neighbouring provinces of Ch'ing-hai and Ssu-ch'uan (Szechuan). In addition, the map indicates smaller populations of Tibetans within the modern states of India (including Kashmir) and Nepal. The Tibetans of Nepal include the Sherpas, whom I shall discuss at length. Sikkim, recent-

ly occupied by India after a century or so of protectorate status, and Bhutan, could also have been considered, under their traditional systems of government, as Tibetan states, although the situation in Sikkim particularly is complicated by the large number of indigenous and immigrant non-Tibetans.

The Tibetans of all these regions spoke dialects of the Tibetan language which, in the extreme cases, were barely mutually comprehensible. All used the same written language – classical Tibetan – and the same Indian-derived script, and all were either Buddhists or adherents of the quasi-Buddhist Bon religion.[3] The only significant exceptions here were the Islamicised Tibetans of the far west (Baltistan), who were Muslims and wrote their own dialect in the Persian script when they wrote at all. There were also a few Tibetan Muslims in Lhasa and other large towns.

The Tibetan population had a sharp hereditary class division into aristocrats (T *sku drag*)[4] and commoners (T *mi ser*), though movement between the divisions was not entirely closed, and most aristocratic families were of relatively recent origin. All commoners were in theory at least attached to one or another lord (T *dpon po*), though the 'lord' status could be occupied by a monastic estate or by the central government rather than by an aristocratic family. The commoners were traditionally divided into pastoral nomads, agriculturalists and artisans. Most of the population was agriculturalist, though there were large numbers of pastoralists in some areas, particularly on the great plains north of Central Tibet and in Amdo. Artisans were relatively few in number.

Of the various states mentioned above, Tibet proper, that is the Dalai Lama's realm, is the only one for which very much information is available about the traditional political system though there is enough data on Bhutan, Sikkim and the lesser principalities to suggest that the basic organizational principles were similar.[5] My description refers primarily to the Dalai Lama's realm and follows Goldstein's account in most respects.

The Dalai Lama's realm did not have the degree of centralised control characteristic of a modern state or of many traditional Asian monarchies. 60% or 70% of the population lived on aristocratic or monastic estates which had considerable autonomy with respect to

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3 On the Bon religion, which has been a source of considerable confusion among Western scholars, cf. Snellgrove 1961, Stein 1972, Macdonald 1971, Kvaerne 1976a and 1976b. The question of Bon is also discussed briefly in the second of these papers.

4 T followed by italics indicates Tibetan terms in transliteration (following Wylie 1959); S indicates Sanskrit. Tibetan and Sanskrit proper names and some other common words (e.g. lama) are used in the text in phonetic transcription without special indication.

5 For the Dalai Lama's regime, cf. Goldstein 1968 and 1971a-d, Rahul 1969, Cassinelli and Ekvall 1969. The political system of Bhutan is discussed in Rahul 1971. Carrasco 1959 gives a general survey of information on Tibetan polities known at that time.

the central government at Lhasa. This was particularly true of the largest estates such as those of Sakya and Trashilhunpo.[6] The estate lords collected taxes from their tenants in their own right, and judged such disputes as were brought before them. The central government also imposed taxes, and judged disputes brought before it. It differed from the estates mainly in size, in its function as a final court of appeal, and in its maintaining troops, primarily for external defence. In addition its officials investigated certain crimes on their own behalf, notably murder. The weakness of the central government was reinforced by the fact that most of its officials were either aristocratic estate-owners or closely linked with major monasteries, and so had little interest in supporting the central government against themselves.

The Central Government maintained officials at a number of district headquarters (T *rdzong*) throughout the Dalai Lama's territory. The bureaucracy was in some respects modelled on the Chinese; there were schools for training officials, and a complex system of ranking for various posts. However recruitment to the bureaucracy was entirely from two sources; the aristocracy, who had a hereditary 'obligation' to act as bureaucratic officials, and a few major monasteries. Most important posts had both a lay (aristocratic) and a monk official of the same rank.

While the commoners were internally segregated in status according to a system mostly concerned with tax obligations, there seems to have co-existed with hierarchical aspects of the Tibetan system a marked emphasis on equality in relationships among commoners, particularly within the village community. Most villages were in any case attached to a single 'lord'. Political and ritual offices within the village rotated steadily among the villagers, or at least among those of the higher (T *khral pa* 'taxpayer') status group. In communities such as the Sherpas where (until recent times) there has not been effective control by a central government, this egalitarian emphasis is very noticeable (cf. Furer-Haimendorf 1962, 1964).

Something like a fifth of the male population in traditional Tibet was in the monasteries, the highest proportion in any Buddhist society. The monasteries were grouped into a number of monastic orders – four main orders, with further subdivisions – which differed primarily in questions of ritual practice. These differences were not very important from the point of view of the laymen, who tended to be unsectarian in the lamas and monasteries they respected and made use of, but all monks were attached to one or another order and sub-order. Each of these orders had traditional lineages of teachings going back to the Buddhism of mediaeval India; each had its own ritual texts and its textbooks on doctrine and philosophy, which were duplicated by printing from woodblocks or metal plates.

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6 On Sakya cf. Cassinelli and Ekvall 1969 and also Norbu 1974 which gives a less idealized view. Goldstein 1971d:170-171 suggests that Cassinelli and Ekvall overemphasize both the autonomy of Sakya and the extent to which it differed from other monastic estates.

The Dalai Lama was (and is) the most senior lama of the largest of these orders, the Gelukpa, as well as the political ruler until 1959 of a large part of Tibet.

The monasteries of the Bon religion effectively formed a fifth monastic order. This religion contains some indigenous elements, as does Tibetan Buddhism itself, but appears to go back mainly to Indian and Central Asian traditions of the seventh and eighth centuries, reshaped by the Tibetans and strongly influenced by Buddhism itself. The Bon tradition is particularly close in ritual practice to the Nyingmapa, the oldest of the four main Buddhist orders.

I shall refer indiscriminately to inmates of religious communities of all these orders as 'monks', though in fact only a minority were fully ordained *dge slong* (T; S = *Bhiksu*) and, except in the Gelukpa order, there were some communities of married religious persons. There were also some nuns, in separate communities, though their number was small in comparison to that of the male religious.

Monastic organization, like the rest of Tibetan society, involves both hierarchical, and egalitarian elements. Thus some posts (e.g., abbot) might be reserved for persons of elite rank, here meaning the 'incarnate lamas' to be discussed later, while others rotated through all persons of appropriate status.

*Tibetan Religion*

Buddhism co-existed in Tibet, as in other Buddhist countries, with beliefs in a whole pantheon of local deities and spirits. Indeed the control of these supernatural beings was one of the principal functions of Buddhist ritual practitioners such as the lamas. One cannot consider Buddhism in Tibet in isolation from this function, but in order to understand how the lamas exercised their control something must be known of the doctrinal and ritual aspects of Tibetan Buddhism.

Buddhism in Tibet is Mahayanist in philosophy and theology, tantric in ritual procedures. The relationship between Mahayana and tantra and other phases of Buddhism and Hinduism is a complex issue; I will restrict myself to what is needed in the present context.[7] Mahayana and tantra are both of Indian origin, though as noted below there have been some important indigenous developments in Tibet, in particular with regard to the concept of the lama. The normative aim of Mahayana Buddhism is the attainment of Enlightenment, Buddhahood; the prescribed motive for doing so is not (as in Theravada) to escape from the suffering of the world but to become able to free others from their suffering. The philosophy of the Mahayana – at least of that school emphasised by the Tibetans, that is the Madhyamika school – is a kind of antiphilosophy. It holds that all

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7 Cf. Samuel 1975, where references are given for all of the discussion following. The issue of the relationship between Tibetan religion and religion in South and South-East Asia in general will be discussed in detail in a subsequent paper.

philosophical assertions about the nature of reality can be shown to be false by logical deduction. The true nature of things (S *paramartha satya,* ultimate truth) is assessible only to the direct transcendent insight of a Buddha. The Buddhist philosophical schools themselves can at best claim to represent provisional truth (S *samvrtti-satya,* literally 'false truth')

As a corollary, teachings, practices, ritual techniques are of value in Tibetan Buddhism in so far as they help to bring the practitioner towards Buddhahood; the teachings are not ultimately true in their own right. Rituals, disciplinary rules, doctrine are *thabs* (T; S = *upaya*), methods, to attain enlightenment.

The pre-eminent methods are those contained in the Buddhist tantras. The tantras generally consist of a basic text of Indian, or in some cases possibly Tibetan, origin, around which has gathered a large corpus of commentarial material and liturgical texts. Each tantra is centred around a particular tantric deity, though all these deities are regarded as manifestations of the same underlying Buddhahood.

Tantric practice involves the acceptance of vows and tantric consecrations from a tantric teacher. This teacher is, in Tibetan tradition, to be regarded by his disciple as being himself a Buddha. The basis of most tantric rituals is the self-identification of the performer of the ritual with the principal deity of the tantra concerned. The repetition of this process, carried out through visualization, recitation, and hand-gestures, enables the disciple gradually to realize within himself the qualities of the deity. Insofar as he carries out the process successfully (and lengthy and arduous training is required for this) he can use the superhuman powers of the deity for specific ends such as restoring the life force (T *bla*) within men, defending them against malevolent deities or spirits, and guiding the consciousness of a person after death so that he receives a good rebirth. While the powers are strictly speaking irrelevant from the point of view of attaining Enlightenement (they may be justified as helping to relieve the sufferings of living beings) they are at the basis of the lama's importance for the lay population of Tibet.

The layman, and even the average monk, cannot hope to attain such powers in his own right. As in Theravadin countries like Burma and Thailand the primary religious duty specified for the layman is the accumulation of 'merit', through performing good actions (such as building or restoring Buddhist shrines, becoming a monk, giving food to monks) and avoiding bad actions. This is explicitly recognized in doctrinal texts as the lowest of a progressive scale of religious motivation.[8] The first or lowest kind of person attempts to gain a 'good' rebirth as a man or a god, and to avoid rebirth in the hells or as a ghost or animal, through acquiring 'merit'. The second kind tries to escape from samsara, the cycle of rebirth, altogether. The third and highest wishes to become a Buddha in order to save all beings from their sufferings. This last is the motivation of the Bodhisattva, and

8 Samuel 1975:77. The basic scheme is given in Atisa's *Bodhi-pathapradipa* (translated in Chattopadhyaya 1967:525-535). Cf. also Berzin 1972, Guenther 1971.

everybody must eventually reach this level before they can finally escape from the cycle of rebirth.

The first and second levels are therefore mere intermediate stages, to be eventually gone beyond. However it is acceptable to work with one of the lower motivations and to trust that in a future life, as a result of one's good karma, one will be able to practice religion at a 'higher' level; and this is what most people are presumably assumed to do. It will be noticed that the motivation of 'normative' Theravada Buddhism—Nibbanic Buddhism in Spiro's phrase (1971)—is here to be superseded by the bodhisattva motivation.

It can also be seen that the system has strong elitist implications; only a minority are capable of 'serious' religious pursuits as defined by the system, the rest are in some sense dependent upon them for their salvation, although in Tibetan Buddhism everyone ultimately has to work out their own salvation.

This dependence is expressed in some forms of Mahayana Buddhism through the cult of celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas, superhuman beings who are capable of intervening to help their devotees or who will guarantee those who rely upon them a safe and happy rebirth in some celestial paradise. Cults of this kind are especially familiar in the Far East, in the so-called 'Pure Land' Buddhism of China and Japan. They are not unknown in Tibet: Avalokitesvara, Padmasambhava and Tara in particular are the object of continual ritual attention as well as specific appeals for assistance. However, the Tibetans' dependence on these celestial and superhuman beings is in general closely linked to their dependence on beings who though perhaps regarded as superhuman are very much physically present; the lamas. Access to superhuman power, either for material assistance or for spiritual ends, is usually mediated through the lamas. Who then are these people?

*The Lamas*

Many Tibetan religious terms are direct translations of Sanskrit terms. In some of the more interesting cases, however, words which may have Sanskrit equivalents have come to mean something rather different in Tibet, either because of indigenous concepts and practices with which they have become associated, or because of developments within Tibetan Buddhism itself. 'Lama' (T *bla ma*) is a word of this type. Its literal Sanskrit equivalent, somewhat surprisingly at first sight, is *guru*. In fact the word lama *is* used for gurus in the traditional Indian sense; but those people the Tibetans call lamas are also a number of other things. These can best be taken in turn, beginning with the *guru* meaning itself.

(1) *The lama as guru.* Somebody known as a lama is by definition a guru, a religious teacher. 'He is my lama' means 'I am taking religious instruction from him'. In order to practice religion, as a layman or as a monk, one must have a guru or possibly several gurus. As I have already mentioned, the guru, particularly in tantric practice, is to be regarded as actually being a Buddha. From the preliminary ritual sequences (T *sngon 'gro*) of tantric practice onwards, much of what the student does is centred about

his personal lama. This is true even, in fact especially, when the lama is not present. The student visualizes his guru in the form of a tantric deity, makes symbolic offerings of the entire universe to him, prostrates towards him, and asks the lama to bless him and teach him. He must perform these actions over and over again in his private practice, of ten the number of 100,000 times or multiples of this. Behaviour in the lama's presence is strongly ritualized, and obedience to the lama's requests is of great importance.

Now the lama – any lama – is by definition someone who can act as a religious teacher, and who can thus be seen as worthy of such reverence and ritual behaviour from his students. Most laymen too are in at least a nominal student-guru relationship with one and often several lamas, since lamas often give major tantric initiations at large public ceremonies, which lay people may attend, even if not seriously prepared to perform the practice concerned. The ceremony will still have its effect, perhaps in enabling one to do the practice in a future life, and in any case the empowerments and blessings received in the course of the ritual are worthwhile in their own right, and attendance is a meritorious act. The Dalai Lama's public tantric initiations may be attended by tens of thousands of people, though tantric initiations are also given to small groups of monks or laymen intending to perform the tantric practice concerned, which is the original purpose of the initiation.

(2) *The lama as performer of tantric ritual for laymen:* Mention of these large public initiations brings me to the second main facet of the concept of the lama. The lama is the performer *par excellence* of tantric ritual. The connection between (1) and (2) is logical; someone competent to *teach* tantric rituals is also presumably the most competent to *perform* them. However, the connection does not seem to have been a particularly strong feature of Indian tantric Buddhism; as far as I know the lama's major role as performer of rituals for the benefit of the lay population is a Tibetan development. It is apparent in the development of tantric initiations into occasions for large-scale participation by laymen; it is even more obvious in the 'life-consecration' ceremonies carried out specifically for the purpose of empowering and strengthening the life-force (T *bla tshe*) of those which represent the attraction for laymen who are not going to perform the practice with which the initiation is concerned, are so to speak extracted and made into a separate ritual sequence whose only purpose is to minister to the *this*-worldly interests of the layman.[9]

There are two other classes of tantric ceremony of particular importance in this connection; the rituals concerned with protection against malevolent superhuman beings, and those concerned with guiding the consciousness of a person after death. The first in particular have a wide range of forms and kinds, of which the most spectacular are the monastic dances (T *'cham*) in which the monks, led by the most senior lama, impersonate and incarnate an assembly of tantric deities. The entire ritual sequence lasts for two or

9 The fullest account of one of these rituals is given by Beyer 1973:375-398. Other descriptions are given by Snellgrove 1961:141-146 and Waddell 1967:444-448.

more days, and is performed annually by many monasteries. Without going into these rituals in more detail here, it should be noted that all depend upon the ability of the lama – as performer of tantric rituals – to become, for the duration of the ritual, the tantric deity and to employ its powers for good.[10]

Not all tantric rituals are performed by lamas. In particular, monks participate in many of these rituals, though their function is primarily to 'back up' the lama's central role. There are also minor ritual practitioners such as the village magicians (T *sngags pa*) who specialize in healing ceremonies, control of the weather, etc. Yet the lama is the *prototypical* performer of tantric rituals; anything a *sngags pa* can do a good lama ought to be able to do better. The choice of *sngags pa* rather than lama might be dictated by case of access, lesser expense or perhaps occasionally the dubious morality of the ritual to be performed, since some *sngags pa* specialize in 'black magic'.

A more interesting case is that of the hermit-yogi, who has retired to practice tantric meditation in solitude. Tibetans will frequently attempt to get such a yogi to perform major rituals for them, or to assist at their performance. However while the hermit's isolation and lengthy and arduous practice may guarantee for his performance an effectiveness greater than that ascribed to some lesser lamas, his power is of the same kind as the lama's. In fact if such a yogi acquires a reputation for sanctity and tantric attainment he may well attract disciples, and eventually become a lama and head of a monastic establishment in his own right.

(3) *Lama as head of monastery.* This brings up a third major aspect of the lama's role, one closely related to the first, that of guru. A lama is most often, but not always, the abbot (T *mkhan po*) of a monastery, or, in the case of large monastery with several people of this status, a high monastic offical. Some lamas may indeed control a whole group of monasteries. (Parenthetically the use of 'lama' in some Western literature to mean simply 'monk' is mistaken and misleading, as has been frequently pointed. The normal Tibetan word for monastic inmates in general is *grwa pa,* literally 'student', and while there are degrees of lama-hood, as it were, lama and monk are contrasted roles).

As director of a monastery or group of monasteries, important lamas are – or were, since this refers mainly to traditional Tibet; it is not so true in those areas where something like traditional Tibetan society still obtains today – controllers of large monastic estates, with numbers of attached peasants. They were also persons of considerable importance in the Tibetan political system. The Lhasa regime was, in a historical sense at least, a kind of monastic estate writ large itself, with the Dalai Lama at its head. The Lhasa assembly (T *tshong 'dus*) under the old regime was dominated by lamas from the three great monasteries of the Lhasa area.

(4) *Incarnate lamas.* Most, but not all, lamas of importance were so-called 'incarnate lamas'. The Tibetan term for them is *sprul sku,* pronounced 'tulku', another example

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10 Beyer 1973 gives the best account so far of Tibetan tantric ritual as a whole.

of a translated Sanskrit term (S *nirmanakaya,* 'physical manifestation of Buddahood') which has acquired a somewhat modified meaning in Tibetan. In particular most abbots of larger monasteries were such 'incarnate lamas'. The incarnate lama system was in one of its major aspects a way of selecting high monastic officials. According to this system, a dead office-holder is replaced by a person believed to be his reincarnation. Various procedures have been evolved for finding and identifying such reincarnations. This system does not appear to have been used in India. The first recorded Tibetan instance was probably in 1284, but the system only became widely used some centuries later. In recent years the total number of such reincarnating lamas must have been well over a thousand in Tibet and Mongolia, though a closer estimate is difficult. Not all were equal in status. Generally the older a line of incarnations -- the further back to the original lama, frequently the founder of the monastery – the higher its status, though some quite recent lines have high status because of particularly holy incumbents at one time or another. The most important incarnation lines were traced back retrospectively through earlier Tibetan and Indian teachers. Since someone who was capable of controlling his own rebirth was *ipso facto* very advanced in religious practice, and also able to remember past lives, such a lineage secured for the present incumbent all of the glory, prestige and assumed ability of his past selves. The Dalai Lama's retrospective lineage goes back from the first Dalai Lama (1391-1475; the present Dalai Lama is the 14th) through various famous teachers to include also four of the early kings of Tibet who are particularly associated with the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet (ef. Lange 1967, 1969). Thus the Dalai Lama's claim to rule Tibet, initially dependent on the military defeat of the previous ruling dynasty by the 5th Dalai Lama's Mongol allies, was strengthened by the claim that the Dalai Lamas *were* in fact the greatest of the early Tibetan kings returned to life.

Of course, it was always possible to suggest that an incarnation had been wrongly identified, and many religious disputes in Tibetan history have centred on this point, but it was rarely if ever possible to remove the status from someone to whom it had been given. Frequently two or more claimants might establish themselves as reincarnations, each attracting some of the following of the old lama. In fact a development of the incarnation concept allowed for multiple reincarnations of a single person; body, speech and mind could incarnate separately, for example.

The term *sprul sku,* 'incarnate lama', has another sense more closely related to the meaning of the original Sanskrit term. All lamas, as mentioned above, are to be considered as Buddhas, but some are more particular manifestations of specific Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. Thus the Dalai Lamas, and also the Gyalwa Karmapas, who are the oldest of all incarnate lama lines, are both manifestations in this sense of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, who is looked upon as a special protector of Tibet. Both are of course also incarnate lamas in the first sense as well. Avalokitesvara (Chinese Kuan-Yin, Japanese Kwannon) is one of the major figures in the popular devotional Buddhism of the Far East. The fact that in Tibet he is physically present - from the point of view of the Tibetans - in the person of the

Dalai Lama and the other high lamas suggests why it is not possible to consider the devotional aspects of Buddhism in Tibet independently of the cult of the lamas.

Not all abbots of monasteries and heads of monastic orders were chosen through finding reincarnations, even in modern times. In particular, some of the highest posts in the dominant monastic order, the Gelukpa order headed by the Dalai Lama, were elected - or more precisely selected by the monastic authorities in a complex process involving divinatory techniques. While an incarnate lama might be chosen, he was chosen for his ability, not because of his incarnate lama status, and many of these posts were occupied by persons who were not incarnate lamas. Some posts in the older orders were hereditary, including the headship of the important Sakya monastic order which at one time ruled Tibet. Where an incumbent was a celibate monk without children, the succession usually went to a brother or brother's son. However the Sakya heads were at the same time incarnate lamas in the second sense discussed above (manifestations of bodhisattvas).

### *The Tibetan Pantheon*

I propose to divide the Tibetan pantheon into four classes. These are in generally descending order of power, and also of benevolence towards mankind. This classification is in some respects oversimplified; the boundaries are not absolutely strict and all the classes can be subdivided almost indefinitely. The gods of the various classes differ in nature and function; to some extent they are also of different historical origin.

1. *Tantric gods.* These are the forms which are visualized and identified with in the course of tantric meditation. Most are of Indian origin, though further elaborated by the Tibetans. They include the Five Jinas, Amitabha, Vairocana and so on, and their corresponding consorts, related bodhisattvas, and so on, as well as the central deities of the various tantric mandalas and their extensive retinues. Avalokitesvara, Tara and Padmasambhava fall into this category.[11]

2. *Protective gods* (mgon po). These deities are mostly 'supreme' Indian deities by origin (Siva, Kali, Visnu in tantric Buddhist versions). Their primary function is as protective deities of monasteries and temples. Unlike those in the following class these gods have 'gone beyond the confines of this world' and reside in the various Buddhist heavens. Some

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11 There are some respects in which Avalokitesvara and the other gods who are the object of some popular cult can be regarded as forming a separate group from the patron deities of the tantric cycles (Cakrasamvara, Hevajra etc.) who are of relevance primarily to those who have taken the appropriate initiations. In addition I have not mentioned the peaceful/fierce (T *zhi ba / drag po*) distinction which R.A. Paul (1970, 1976) and S. Ortner (1975) discuss at some length. While both these distinctions are real enough, I would suggest that they are structurally unimportant in comparison with the overall distinction between Buddhist tantric gods on the one hand and local deities on the other.

gods of Tibetan origin are likewise believed to have gone beyond this world, for example Gesar, and these may also be invoked as protective deities in some contexts.

3. *Local deities.* These are indigenous Tibetan deities, such as those associated with the mountains, which were of importance from very early times. They are supposed to have been 'converted' to protectors of the Buddhist teachings by Padmasambhava and other early missionaries, but their good nature is certainly not to be relied upon. In tantric rituals they are commanded to obedience by the celebrant, who takes on the role of Padmasambhava himself, or some other tantric deity, for this purpose. Stone cairns on mountain passes are connected with these deities (being their residence and also in a sense their prison). Some of these cairns are the object of annual offerings by neighbouring villagers. In the form of deities associated with lineages and households, these gods also have shrines inside and on the exterior of houses, and receive daily offerings from members of the household. Details of their cult vary considerably from one part of Tibet to another. If offended they can cause misfortunes of various kinds.

4. *Malevolent spirits.* A large class of unambiguously harmful beings are not strictly *lha* ('deities') at all. They are responsible for most illness and misfortune, and one of the primary functions of tantric ritual is to provide defence against them.

*The Meaning of the Pantheon*

In terms of Buddhist philosophy the tantric deities of class 1 (forms or manifestations of the Buddha) are at first sight of a totally different nature from the protective deities, and still more from the mountain gods and other local spirits. However there is justification for treating them as part of a single, if sharply stratified, 'pantheon'. For one thing, the Tibetans use the term *lha* – which I gloss as 'god' or 'deity' – for all of the first three classes. Also, while a tantric master will normally take the form of a 'tantric god' (class 1) the same methodology would enable him to assume any other form, such as a protective god or lesser spirit, or for that matter a human being or animal. From the point of view of gaining enlightenment there is nothing to be gained from taking on one of these lesser identities, though one might become a protective deity (class 2), as in the monastic dances, to defend against lesser gods and spirits.

Ultimately all these forms are of much the same nature even from the point of view of Buddhist philosophy. The lama *consciously* visualizes and/or takes on the role of tantric deity, while local gods, ordinary men, or animals *unconsciously* act out their own identities. The identity of tantric deity is 'good' for one (enlightening, uplifting), that of a malevolent spirit or an an ordinary man is bad for one, but neither is 'true' except to the extent that we create it or accept it.

Here as always with Tibetan Buddhist philosophy it is not possible to give a conclusive statement. The lamas have multiple levels of explanation at their disposal, thanks to the doctrine of *upaya,* and can switch readily from a framework in which Avalokitesvara is real and existent to one in which he is a construct of the meditator's mind. I am not clear

myself how distinct these levels are to most monks, let alone most laymen, though I would certainly not underrate the philosophical skills of lamas trained in the great monastic universities. (Mediaeval scholasticism is alive and well in Tibet, or was until the Chinese took over.) However I am not so interested here in the ontological status of these deities in Mahayana philosophy, but rather with their mutual relationships and their relevance for the everyday life of the Tibetans. Some of this has already been indicated above. An overall picture can most conveniently be given in tabular form, looking here from the perspective of the layman (see Table).

*Table: The Tibetan layman and the pantheon.*

| Motive (goal pursued by layman): | Who carried out by: | Gods and super-human entities involved: | Nature of interaction or ritual: |
|---|---|---|---|
| **(A)** ***This-worldly*** | | | |
| 1. Health, prosperity in this life (i) Strengthening life-force | lama (or yogi) assisted by monks | tantric god | lama in form of tantric god conveys strength to layman |
| (ii) protection from local deities, malevolent spirits, wandering ghosts etc. | (a) lama assisted by monks or *sngags pa* | tantric god and local god or malevolent spirit etc. | lama or *angags pa* in form of tantric god protects against local deities, exorcises etc. |
| | (b) monks or layman | | recitation of scriptures, so increasing merit. |
| | (c) monks or layman | tantric god | recitation of mantras, thus invoking protective power of tantric god. |
| | (d) layman, occasionally a village specialist | local god | offerings to local god. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2. Control over environment (weather etc) | *sngags pa* or lama | tantric god | *sngags pa* in form of tantric god controls weather |
| 3. Divination | medium | local god | god possesses medium and is questioned. |
| (B) *Concerned with future lives* | | | |
| 4. Obtaining a good rebirth | (a) monks and lamas | | offerings to monks and lamas increase good karma. |
| | (b) lama (assisted by monks) | tantric god | Lama is form of tantric god, guides consciousness of dead man to rebirth |
| (C) *Concerned with salvation* | | | |
| 5. Liberation, Enlightenment | lama | tantric god | by practising non-tantric or tantric meditation, by receiving initiations, by becoming a monk (all under guidance of lama who is Buddha = tantric god). |

A similar table could be drawn up from the point of view of the monks or of the lamas themselves. Most of the above items would still apply though their relative importance might be different. The second class of deities, the protective deities, are relevant primarily from the perspective of monks and lamas, since they are invoked as protectors of monasteries, and other religious sites, as a monastic alternative mechanism, one might say, for 1.(ii) in the table above. They are also guardians of the Buddhist doctrine, and as such may punish breaches of tantric vows, etc.

I have not previously mentioned the 'mediums'. These are typical spirit-possession oracles, like those in many other cultures; the god possesses the medium and speaks through him, while the medium is in a state of trance. The most important of these mediums were installed in monasteries and consulted by the state; the gods involved were important local deities. Village mediums would be possessed by minor local gods. Possession by a malevolent spirit can be disgnosed, but the remedy is exorcism, and the person possessed would not normally become a medium. In addition to the mediums, a variety of other divinatory techniques were employed by Tibetans (cf. Ekvall 1964).

*Lamas and Monks: Discussion*

The table above is the core of my presentation of the Tibetan religious system as a series of roles and functions in structural relationship to each other. In the following paper I will attempt to demonstrate the validity and appropriateness of this picture through looking at a particularly well-studied Tibetan group, the Sherpas. First however I shall discuss some aspects of the system I have outlined.

The table given above is essentially a presentation of the Tibetan religious system as the Tibetans view it. While individual Tibetans might not give this listing of religious and quasi-religious functions in their society, they would I think recognize the items in my list. They might not regard them all as 'religious' (i.e., concerned with T *chos,* S *dharma*), or as of equal religious importance, and they might not know much about some of them – category (C) is very much the preserve of lamas and trained monks – but the categories would be meaningful to them. I would not myself claim that all items on this list are 'religious' – which depends entirely on your definition of religion – only that they are best understood as part of a single total system.

I have not attempted here to explain what any of these things (spirit possession, lamas acting as tantric gods) 'mean' in terms of Western psychology or phenomenology. This would be a valid enough pursuit – the reader is directed to the work of R.A. Paul (1970, 1976) for some plausible Freudian interpretations of Tibetan gods – but it is not my present purpose, which is merely to render these interactions more or less intelligible to the reader so that their functioning as a total system can be appreciated.

The lamas are obviously well entrenched in this system. Their participation is necessary for the pursuit of many worldly and almost all other-worldly aims; salvation (enlightenment) is unthinkable without their teaching. In Tibet it was entirely true that knowledge meant one thing in one person's hands, another in someone else's. Even if a layman had religious knowledge, he needed a lama to tell him what to do with it, because the doctrine of *upaya* meant that religious knowledge had value only in particular contexts. Religious knowledge was not ultimately true, and therefore was valid – i.e., useful – only when someone of sufficiently high attainment stated that it should be used. The fact that lamas were to be seen as Buddhas, and the support to their high religious status given by the incarnate lama concept, meant that Lamas were the only people entitled to make such judgements. A Tibetan layman or monk would not normally even read a religious text without prior sanction from his religious teacher.

Of course, a lama is anyone who establishes a claim to be a lama; but in practice the *de facto* lamas, the heads of the major monasteries, keep the character of the body of lamas as a whole relatively constant. To become a lama you needed training from lamas, even if you then went on to become a solitary hermit–yogi. Even if such a yogi established an autonomous claim to be a lama through attracting his own disciples and founding a monastery, he necessarily patterned his activities and behaviour on the pre-existing model, the 'root paradigm', of what a lama should be, and became a lama like all the other lamas.

The historical development of this religious system is of considerable interest, and I hope to go into it at greater length elsewhere (cf. Samuel 1975). Briefly, before Buddhism came to Tibet, the Tibetan pantheon seems to have consisted essentially of the lowest two of the four classes mentioned above. The local gods, class 3, especially the major gods associated with the mountains, protected the people, if properly approached, against the malevolent spirits and causers of ill-fortune comprising class 4. The early kings of Tibet were incarnations or manifestations of the mountain gods. In the gradual transformation which took place into the modern Tibetan religious system, much of the terminology and functions relating to the kings as manifestations of mountain gods were progressively taken over by the lamas as manifestations of tantric deities.

In the period following the collapse of the early Tibetan kingdom at the beginning of the 9th century, the monasteries seem to have become mediators between the large number of small princely states into which Tibet was then divided, somewhat in the fashion of the saintly houses of some Islamic societies (cf. Evans–Pritchard 1949, Barth 1959, Gellner 1969). At the same time princely patronage led to the growth of monastic estates and the progressively greater influence of the monasteries themselves. Thus it was natural that the abbots of a major monastic order should become mediators between Tibetans and Mongols, and then Mongol viceroys over Tibet itself, and that in the post–Mongol period Tibetan royal dynasties should maintain power only through their alliances with major monastic orders. The culmination of this process was reached when the Dalai Lamas in effect *became* kings of Tibet with Chinese sanction. They completed the transformation from the early royal system by retrospectively identifying themselves with the greatest of the early kings, who were themselves now seen as manifestations of tantric deities.

While the role of the lamas in the Tibetan religious system is clear enough, and has obvious links to their predominant position in Tibetan society in general, the role of the monks is somewhat less clear. A lama – *except* in the Gelukpa order, which was dominant in the Dalai Lama's realm and much of East Tibet – does not have to be a monk. The traditional functions of monks in Theravadin countries, to act as recipients for lay generosity, to aid in the acquiring of merit by reciting scriptures, to carry out minor protective rituals, and in some societies (Burma, Thailand) to act as a *rite de passage* to adulthood, can either be carried out as well in Tibet by the lamas themselves, or, as in the case of the *rite de passage* function, do not apply. However while in those parts of Tibet, such as the Sherpa country and Dolpo in North Nepal, which have not come under significant Gelukpa influence, one certainly finds married lamas, one also finds both celibate lamas who have taken monastic vows, and monasteries with celibate monks, even if the monasteries are not as large as some of those in Central Tibet were.

The 'mediating' function of the monasteries which I mentioned above was still significant in some areas in recent times. Ekvall and others mention lamas mediating between warring nomadic groups (cf. Ekvall 1964). Particularly in nomadic areas, monasteries offered a place to store property and produce safely during the winter or when travelling on long journeys. However it is again not obvious why celibate monks are necessary in

these contexts – non–celibate Sufi holy men did well enough for the Berbers, the Bedouin and the Pathans – and in any case this situation obtains mostly in the nomadic regions.

In fact one could reverse Allen's question (1973) about Newari Buddhism, 'How does Buddhism exist without monks? and ask about the Tibetans, 'Why do they need monks at all?' Monasticism is of course the classical way to Buddhahood, but this is no real answer; the Newars do without it, and indeed tantric practice offers the Tibetans a means of working towards enlightenment without celibacy.

In fact celibate monasticism does have several functions within the Tibetan religious system and within Tibetan society as a whole, though I am not certain how to evaluate their importance at present. Removing a significant proportion of males to monasteries, along with polyandry, means that estates and property can in general be passed undivided from generation to generation, a matter of some explicit concern to the Tibetans (cf. Goldstein 1971 b). Population reduction in itself does not seem to have been a major problem; it would in any case be much more efficiently dealt with by imposing celibacy on females than on males. Decreasing fertility of the land may however explain particularly high incidences of monasticism in some areas, such as Spiti and Lahul (cf. Carrasco 1959).

Brand's suggestion about monasticism in Thai society (1975) has perhaps some relevance here. Brand argued that monks were important to the Thai monarchy as a means of indirect legitimation. Monks enabled the king to be the maker *par excellence* of donations to the monastic community. It might be significant that two Tibetan monarchs were critically concerned with the development of monasticism in Tibet. Trisong Detsen in the 8th century arranged for the first Tibetan monastery to be built and the first seven monks ordained, and Yeshe 0 in the 11th century sponsored Atisa's mission to Tibet explicitly for the purpose of reforming monasticism and reimposing celibacy. In later periods, the Chinese emperors patronised the Kagyupa orders, most of whose lamas were celibate, and the exclusively celibate Gelukpa, who became the rulers of Tibet.

I would suggest that the celibacy of the lama himself, the fact that he has taken monastic vows, is a kind of assurance of his own spiritual purity. Celibacy also leaves the way clear for succession by reincarnation rather than inheritance, and here again there is more prestige attached to being the third reincarnation of Lama X (and so in full possession of all Lama X's accomplishments) than to being Lama X's great grandson. ('Charisma' might be a better word than prestige, though I have not got space here to discuss the application of Weber's sociology of religion to Tibet in general so would prefer to avoid the term). The prestige of a lama is of course important to his monks too. It assures the prosperity of their monastery through a constant influx of lay donations.

Such a view is supported by the recent success of monasteries and celibate incarnate lamas at the expense of hereditary lay lamas in Sherpa country. The growth of monasteries began early this century, according to Furer-Haimendorf's argument probably as a response to the agricultural surplus caused by the introduction of the potato (1964:10). In the 1950's hereditary village lamas were already plainly lower in prestige than the incarnate

abbots of the new monasteries. By 1971 a single monastery headed by a high status incarnate lama, a refugee from Tibet from a monastery with which the Sherpas had traditional connections, had become by far the largest monastery in the region, and was obviously prospering to some degree at least at the expense of other establishments with less prestigious incumbents.[12]

However there are a couple of loose ends in my argument. The hereditary head lama of Sakya, and several high Nyingmapa lamas, all have very high status in the Tibetan religious system although they are not celibate. There is no simple answer here and no reason to expect one. Celibacy is one and only one of a number of ways in which a lama can establish high status; incarnation status of either of the kinds discussed above, personal reputation for sanctity, the importance of the lama's monastic office and the size of his following are other factors that enter the reckoning and may predominate. The most that I would suggest is that celibacy *is* an important factor, and that perhaps explains too why the sexual side of tantric practice, so prominent in some recent Western presentations of tantra ('Enjoy Sex the Tantric Yoga Way!') is not conspicuous in Tibet. The relatively few high lamas who are not celibate doubtless do practice ritual intercourse in the tantric manner (cf. Desjardins 1969), but they do not do it in public, and their wives and consorts form no part of their public persona. Generally speaking the Tibetans today would rather not talk about these matters, though much of this may be a response to Western (and Indian) attitudes. The lamas have shown in recent years that they can be as adept at presenting themselves to their new Western following as they ever were with the Tibetans.

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12 Cf. Snellgrove 1957, Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:126ff. and Paul 1970:414-420. For the situation 1971 I am relying on my own observations, though from Paul's account L. Rimpoche (as Paul calls the lama in question) had already gained great influence in the whole region by 1967.

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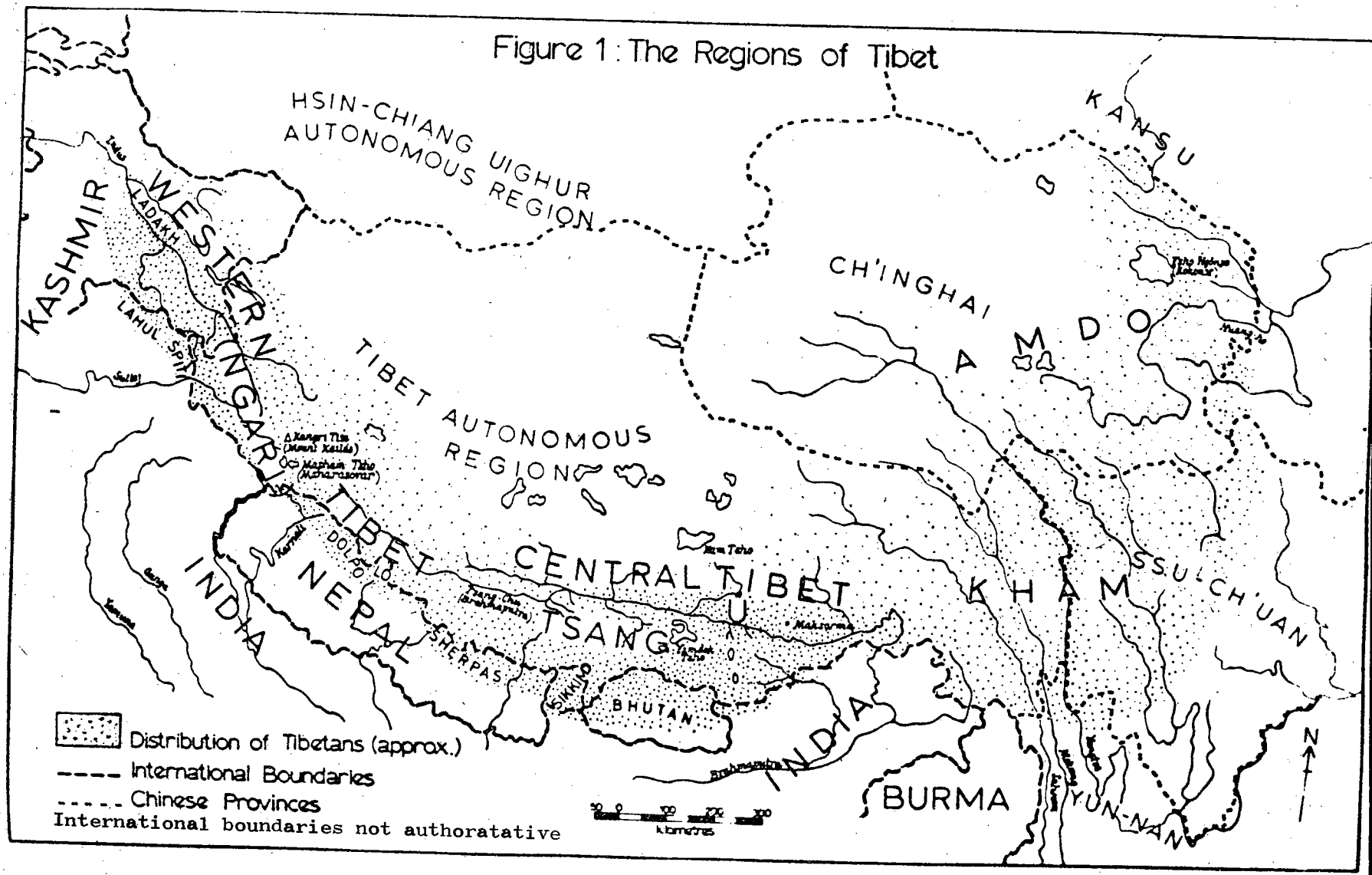
Figure 1: The Regions of Tibet
HSIN-CHIANG UIGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION
KANSU
CH'INGHAI
KASHMIR
WESTERN TIBET
LADAKH
LAHUL SPITI
TIBET AUTONOMOUS REGION
A M D O
KHAM
SSUCH'UAN
CENTRAL TIBET
U
TSANG
NGARI
DOLPO
SHERPAS
SIKKIM
BHUTAN
NEPAL
INDIA
INDIA
BURMA
YUN-NAN
N
Distribution of Tibetans (approx.)
International Boundaries
Chinese Provinces
International boundaries not authoratative
kilometres