

An Overview of Tibetan History, Part 8: Religious matters and problems throughout the history

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Religious problems and tensions occurred very early in Tibetan history. When Buddhism was introduced in the 640s through the Chinese Princess Wencheng who was married to Songtsän Gampo, the range of Buddhism was mostly limited to the aristocracy. However, Buddhism and Bön, the native religion, started to be in a competitive state from the early beginning. While Buddhism was already a highly developed religion in the Chinese dynasties, the Tibetan religion was still in a Shamanic tradition (which is known as “Black Bön” nowadays). When Trisong Detsen, the Tibetan emperor from 755 to 794, asked Padmasambhava to come to Tibet and translate all Buddhist texts, the interest in Buddhism was so strong that a religious struggle was about to break out. According to other sources, Padmasambhava was invited by Bhutanese rulers, however Bhutan was part of Tibet at that time. The story of Padmasambhava is believed to be glorified within the 12th century, while in reality he probably was forced to leave. It is not known whether he really travelled through all of Tibet and even whether he came much further than Bhutan, since the major problem nowadays is the fact that we have no independent sources, and even nowadays most of his curriculum vitae is propagated through Buddhist texts or – especially in the West – through admirers of Tibetan Buddhism. We lack of scientific evidence of almost all of his life story. Uncritical heroic stories spread by those who venerate him are just not trustworthy enough for a critical analysis of religious history. Padmasambhava is believed to be the founder of the Nyingma school. The Nyingma school belongs to the ‘old transmission’ and is the eldest documented Buddhist school, practised by the Tibetans. Unlike other schools, the Nyingma school is splitted and thus very heterogenous, which makes it difficult to speak of ‘one Nyingma tradition’, but rather of several Nyingma lineages, which shows that the school was scarcely spread and developed mostly independent. The main importance of the Nyingma can be found in Bhutan, which was their center from the beginning. No wonder, since we only know that Buddhism came to Bhutan in the 8th century, but we do not really know whether it reached much of Central Tibet at all.

During Trisong Detsen’s reign, Tibet lost its territory in Central Asia, as well as in Nepal, leading to the decline of the Yarlung Dynasty.

When Langdarma came into office in 838, Buddhism was officially persecuted, since the Tibetan ruling elite wanted to re-establish Bön religion. Langdarma was killed three years

later by either a Buddhist monk or a Buddhist hermit – we do not really know – leading to the end of Imperial Tibet.

In the 11th century, Marpa – a famous translator – founded the Kagyü School. It is believed that he was the disciple of a famous Sakya school translator. The seat of the Sakya school was founded in 1073. There are two more schools, the Jonang school that was founded in the early 12th century and the Gelug school (founded by Je Tsongkhapa) in the 14th century.

During the Era of Fragmentation, the religious representatives wanted to gain worldly influence – except the Nyingma school that has no religious representative since the tradition never stood in a dogmatic tradition and never gained for influence. The Nyingma thus kept out of politics, while the Sarma (the schools of the ‘new translation’) shared a tradition closely to Western religion at that time. The lamas were regarded very holy and one had to follow them and one can argue whether questioning the ‘authority’ of a lama would have been impolite (a very problematic question until today).

The Sakyas, who have their origins in Xigazê, could gain political influence through Kublai Khan, who was interested in Tibetan Buddhism and willing to convert. The 7th Sakya Trizin ¹ Drogön Chögyal Phagpa (ཚོས་རྒྱལ་འབྲུག་པ་སློབ་གྲོགས་རྒྱལ་མཚན, chos rgyal ‘phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan; 八思巴) was asked to instruct Kublai Khan in Buddhism in 1253. Drogön Chögyal Phagpa was just 18 years old at that time. He was soon asked to be responsible for all religious matters of the newly conquered Tibet, while Kublai Khan claimed the worldly reign ². Both became that strong partners that after the creation of the Yuan Dynasty the Sakyas now received the power over Tibet under dominance of Drogön Chögyal Phagpa (who died only 10 years later) who was in service for the Monglians ³. Tibet was now under religious command.

With the rebellion of Changchub Gyaltzen against the Sakyas, the religious struggle started again. Changchub Gyaltzen was a very influential worldly governor within the Sakya service. As governor of Phagmodru district in Nêdong and holder of the Lang lineage, he preserved the legacy of Phagmo Drupa Dorje Gyalpo (1110-1170), the founder of Phagdrü Kagyü within Dagpo Kagyü. After the rebellion against the Sakya and the creation of the Phagmodrupa Dynasty in Lhasa, political fragmentation as well as religious fragmentation was about to come. A civil war broke out in 1434, leading to the split between two famous families, the Lang and the Ger (the latter one controlling Rong and Shang (near Xigazê)). According to new sources, this happened in 1446, rather than in 1435 ⁴. The Ger clan, establishing the Rinpungpa Dynasty in competition to the Phagmodrupa, were the patrons of the Karma Kagyü school founded by Düsüm Khyenpa (the 1st Karmapa Lama) in the 12th

century – known as “black hats”. The Karmapa lamas always had strong ties to the Chinese Empire, being advisors to the Chinese court. Another school that tried for influence were the Gelugpa. Gendün Gyatso (1475-1542) introduced the Zhügu system for Gelug monasteries, in which a reincarnation of a previous master was set up, rather than quarreling over religious positions. The Gelug came in touch with politics through Altan Khan who titled Sönam Gyatso as 3rd Dalai Lama, giving Gendün Drup and Gendün Gyatso posthumously the titles “Dalai Lama”. Altan Khan tried to weaken Ming China, the latter one was allied with the Tibetans of Zang, and the Gelug that tried to get power in Wü now thus were an ally for the Mongolians, leading to strong ties between the Mongolians and Gelug, a key point for understanding the later events in 1642. The Kagyü and Gelug school stood in a seemingly everlasting competition in sought for power. The political situation between the two worldly dynasties was tensed and complexed even further. In 1491, a Rinpungpa came to throne in Phagmodrupa’s Lhasa since the Phagmodru heir was still a minor. Until 1517, the Rinpungpa hold power in Lhasa. The Gelug were now prohibited to celebrate festivals. When Ngawang Drakpa Gyaltzen entered the Phagmodru throne in 1576, the dynasty was almost completely powerless and defunct. He supported the Gelug school, although his family line was in a Kagyü alliance traditionally. It seemed to be a turning point in history, since the Gelug and Kagyü rivalry became even stronger now. The 4th Dalai Lama was a Mongol prince and the Mongolians now wanted to establish rule over Central Tibet. Güshi Khan invaded Tibet, dismissed the Phagmodru rule, and defeated the Tsangpa Dynasty (the successor dynasty of the Rinpungpa which fell in 1565). The Gelugpa school was now in power in whole Central Tibet persecuting all other schools in seek to unite Tibetan Buddhism in one school. The Nyingma monks had to flee to Bhutan, since they were especially persecuted for belonging to the ‘old translation’. The 5th Dalai Lama forcibly converted the Jonang monasteries into Gelug schools, and the Jonang were harshly suppressed. For centuries, it was believed that the Jonang were extinct. Recent research however led to the surprising discovery of at least 40 monasteries with at about 5000 monks in the Jonang tradition mostly in Qinghai’s Amdo area and Sichuan’s Gyalrong area ⁵, since Central Tibet could never establish reign over Dokam after the fall of the Yarlung Dynasty. One reason for suppression might be the fact, that the Jonangpa had strong ties to the Kagyü school of the Tsangpa rulers, which was an indicator for rebellion and rivalry against the Gelug, who had troubles to consolidate power. Another reason might be the fear that Zanabazar, a Khalkha Mongolian and zhügu of the Jonangpa, could have claimed Tibet since he had some hereditary rights, an indicator for a war between the Khalkha and Khoshuts. To prevent the war, all possible supporters (keep in mind that one

had to be loyal to the leading lama of one's school) of the Jonang were wiped out in the power sphere of the Dalai Lama ⁶.

As a joke of history, although the Dalai Lama suppressed the Jonang and Nyingma and never had any importance for these schools, many Western sources emphasize on the Dalai Lama's "importance", or even mention his name in nowadays context although the Tibetan Buddhist schools are still opposing the Gelug school.

During the Dzungar invasion (1717-1720), Bön adherents became the victim from Dzungar suppression, which was seemingly supported by Gelug clerics at first. Both, Bönpas and Nyingmapas were executed. According to local myths they had black tongues for reciting magical mantras. Thus, every Tibetan had to stick out the tongue when seeing a Dzungar official. In this way, the Dzungars hoped to indicate Bön and Nyingma followers ⁷. The Dzungars imposed such a rough policy on Tibet that most Tibetans were in fear. The Chinese appointed Kelsang Gyatso, a Tibetan from Litang kingdom in Sichuan, to be the 7th Dalai Lama. When the Chinese defeated the Dzungars, they were celebrated as liberators. The Gelug clerics accepted the Chinese choice of the Dalai Lama. Soon after, a rivalry between the spiritual leaders and the worldly leaders arised. The Dalai Lama sought to regain complete control, as a new government system sponsored by the Chinese, made two Tibetan generals – Polhaney (Po-lha-nä) and Khangchennä – the two ruling ministers of the cabinet. After the Dalai Lama fraction assassinated Khangchennä, a civil war broke out. One of the reasons why there were tensions between the government and the clergy was the restoration of Nyingma monasteries by the cabinet. As a result of the civil war, the 5th Penchen Lama Lobsang Yeshe was made the head of spiritual matters. The Penchen Lama has its seat in Xigazê and despite the fact that political figures from Xigazê and Lhasa always had struggles, the religious key figures were no exception to that. The position of the Dalai Lama was restored in 1751. Although the political tensions between Lhasa and Xigazê were kept up, both sides could not easily renounce each other, since the Dalai Lama and Penchen Lama are in a relation to each other. In 1762, the Penchen Lama gave pre-novice ordination to the 8th Dalai Lama, which is one of his duties.

The other Buddhist schools felt so disadvantaged that Jamjang Kyênzê Wangbo (འཇམ་དབྱུང་མཁྱེན་བརྩེ་འདུལ་པོ་, 'jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po) – sometimes alternatively spelled Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo – and Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thayä (འཇམ་མགོན་ཀོང་སྐུལ་སློབ་གྲོགས་མཐའ་ཡས་, 'jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas) – pronounced Jamgön Kongzhü Lochö Tayä – founded the Rime movement which was proclaimed in the 19th century. The Rime approach combined the main teachings of the Sakya, Kagyü and

Nyingma and by joining the three teachings they wanted to strengthen against the Gelug who were excluded from the teaching. Thanks to the Rime movement, the non-Gelug schools could probably be preserved from being extincted by the Gelugs at that time. It is amazing to see that the two major Sarma teachings joined with the only non-Sarma teaching – the Nyingma, all three identifying themselves as ‘red hats’. The Rime movement also embraces Bön teaching. Their competitor are the Gelugs, known as ‘yellow hats’, the only Non-Rime member – since the Jonang were thought to be extinct.

As a joke of history again, in modern literature many Gelug key figures, such as the Dalai Lama, are depicted as important supporters of the Rime which shades a wrong light on the movement. Rime opposes the Gelug, because they were suppressed by them. Despite that, it is sometimes even referred to and criticised as Gelug instrumentation to synchronize all Buddhist teachings (which would mean that Rime is a way to suppress the individual schools of Tibetan Buddhism). This misinterpretation leads to a lot of trouble in analysis. Since the Rime movement was founded to oppose the Gelugs, their methods are far different than the Gelug approach and even have a certain kind of opposition (or at least are in a state of opposition, although its general goals of course are – more or less – the same). It was founded as a way to preserve unique non-Gelug traditions. Therefore, it would be wrong to depict the Gelug as Rime sponsors and saviors of Buddhism!

The competition between the Dalai Lama and Penchen Lama went on and in 1906 the Dalai Lama was enthroned from the Potala Palace and the Penchen Lama was made head again, which was established until 1908. After the fall of the Qing dynasty, a new civil war between the Dalai Lama faction and the other groups represented by the Penchen Lama who supported the Chinese government, broke out. The latter one was and is far more important than the Dalai Lama for historical reasons (although having less political power in Tibetan history).

The 9th Penchen Lama Tubdain Qoigy Nyima had to flee from Tibet to Inner Mongolia and was granted to build a monastery in Qinghai by Ma Bufang later. During his visits to Central Tibet (such as in 1936 to search for the new reincarnation of the Dalai Lama), he was accompanied by Chinese soldiers to ensure his security.

Despite the surrounding of Lhasa, the Gelug are extremely present in Western Sichuan, in the former Kham kingdoms. Litang and Dêgê both were important centers for the Rime as well, and thus probably in disfavor with the Gelug. The relation between the Gelug and the Rime movement in this area is not yet well researched however. Between 1930 and 1950, the Kham areas east of Wü-Zang and Kongpo were seemingly in strange conditions. On the one hand, the area was known as Xikang Province and governed by an ethnic Tibetan who was Pro-

Chinese. On the other hand, the province was fully splitted de facto between Tibet and Sichuan (in 1932). And to a certain degree, the kingdoms still had autonomy although their formal autonomy ceased between 1905 and 1908. All these statements are true to some degree, but the situation is very complex and needs more research.

After the establishment of Communism in China under Mao Zedong, the religious fractions of Tibet reconciled their religious quarrels and the local administrative regions were merged together, for instance the Province of Tibet consists of West Tibet (Ngari), Central Tibet (Wü-Zang), North Tibet (Qangtang), Kongpo and Lhoyü (which is part of South Tibet), and West Kham (including Powo region).

The 20th century was a very eventful period in the cultural Tibetan regions and many things still need research. Further research questions could be the situation in Eastern Kham during the Chinese Xinhai Revolution and the following civil war (“at which time did the kingdoms come to an end?” – since Xikang was founded around 1905 to 1912 and some kingdoms seemingly faded away during Zhao’s campaign, while others remained), as well as the relation among the Kham in Western and Eastern Kham after the factual split in 1932. Another field of research could be the relation among religious figures in Qinghai between 1912 and 1949, not only towards Tibet Province but also towards the Muslims in the North and the then-ruling Ma Clique.

Notes:

1. The Sakya Trizin is the head of the Sakya school.
2. For further information on this issue, see Rossabi, Morris: Khubilai Khan – His Life and Times, Berkeley 1988
3. compare Roerich, George: The Blue Annals, Delhi 1976, p. 216
4. Czaja, Olaf: Medieval rule in Tibet, Vienna 2013, p. 233
5. Gruschke, Andreas: The Cultural Monuments of Tibet’s Outer Provinces: The Gansu and Sichuan Parts of Amdo Vol. 2, Bangkok 2001, p. 72
6. for further information, see Stearns, Cyrus: The Buddha from Dölpo – A study of the life and thought of the Tibetan master Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltzen, New York 2010
7. Norbu, Namkhai: Bon and Bonpos, in: Tibetan Review 12/1980, p. 8