VAJRA BROTHER, *VAJRA* SISTER: RENUNCIATION, INDIVIDUALISM AND THE HOUSEHOLD IN TIBETAN BUDDHIST MONASTICISM

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This article challenges two connected notions in the study of Tibetan Buddhism: that Buddhist monasticism is characterized by a pronounced move towards individualism, systematically detaching monks from relational social life; and that Tibetan Buddhist doctrines of karma represent an alternative mode of identity to those constructed within household life. By comparing the ritual practices and inheritance patterns associated with household groups in Ladakh with tantric ritual forms in local Buddhist (Gelukpa) monasteries, it is argued that they demonstrate pronounced structural similarities, centred on the shared symbolic construct of the household/temple as the source of socialized agency. An analysis of the meditative disciplines of Gelukpa monasticism is used to show how such training serves not to renounce kinship and household values, but to transform them into modes of religious authority, essential to the social position of monks (*trapa*) and incarnate lamas (*tulku*) in Tibetan Buddhism.

Regardless of how long we spend living together,
Good friends and relations must some day depart.
Our wealth and possessions collected with effort
Are left behind at the end of our life.
Our mind, but a guest in our body's great house,
Must vacate one day and travel beyond –
Cast away thoughts that concern but this lifetime –
The Sons of the Buddhas all practice this way.

In Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, the training of monks almost invariably involves discourses such as the one above (from Thogme Zangpo's *Thirty-seven practices of all the Buddha's sons*, a key monastic text; H. H. Dalai Lama 1993). Religious critiques of particularistic household kin relations are a familiar theme in Buddhist studies, structured as they are in terms of the doctrines of karma and the impermanence of secular identities: a well-known oral teaching tells of a woman doting upon her newborn child whilst feeding a fish to the household cat; the teaching then outlines how the child is the rebirth of the woman's greatest enemy, whilst the fish she is feeding to her cat is the rebirth of her own father, and the cat the rebirth of her mother.

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In the third chapter of her widely read monograph on the Tibetan Buddhist communities of the Solu-Khumbu region of Nepal, *Sherpas through their rituals*, Ortner tackles the complex ideological relationship between the 'ascetic ideal' of Buddhist monasticism that produces this kind of moral teaching, and the social realities of householder existence. Explicit in her solution is the notion that lay *social* life is opposed, at least in spirit, to the solitary and celibate ideals of asceticism (1978: 33). For Ortner, Buddhist ideology in Sherpa regions was characterized by a pronounced 'anti-relational' ideology: 'the religion in its highest ideals proposes one and only one solution to the problems of human experience: to break all social bonds, to refuse to form new ones, and to concentrate all one's energies on seeking enlightenment' (1978: 52). In Buddhist asceticism, Ortner argues that 'the individual is the locus of this idealised autonomy' (1978: 38), a tendency towards autonomy which culminates in the attainment of Buddhahood.[1]

In the two decades that have followed the publication of *Sherpas*, this mode of sociological analysis has received wide critical acceptance. Goldstein and Tsarong's analysis (1985: 21, emphasis added) of monastic life in Kyilung Monastery in Ladakh, for example, asserts:

> By structurally excising monks from the intimate web of kinship ties and obligations *and deflecting them from the development of functionally equivalent intimate groups and relationships in the monastery*, the monastery produces and reproduces an atomistic structure based on solitary social isolates. In doing this it allows each monk to pursue his own spiritual and personal development without thought of the needs of others, i.e. without the encumbrance of interlocking sets of obligations and responsibilities to others.

In struggling to define the sociology of the monk as religious renouncer, therefore, such studies have characterized that renunciation in terms of the monk's 'departure' from a realm of social interconnectedness, recreating the renouncing monk as a rationalized and unconnected individual, divested of particularistic ties (Day 1989: 71) and intent upon the process of internalized temporal becoming and the attainment of enlightenment through the individualistic accumulation of karmic merit (*gyewa*, dge.ba).[2] (Pronunciations in italics are Ladakhi spoken dialect, followed by the established Tibetan transcription according to Wylie 1959.)

For those accustomed to anthropological discussions of Indian religion, this will have a familiar ring. Indeed, much can be learnt from pre-existing literature on the South Asian renouncer, characterizations of which derive largely from Dumont's (1970) seminal assertion that the Hindu renouncer was an 'individual-out-of-the-world', the exponent of a lifeworld transcendent of, and in opposition, to the 'transient world' of the caste-embedded Twice-Born householder. In the Hindu context, Dumont has been criticized largely for his monolithic and uncritical use of key religious concepts, most particularly the notion of the 'transient world' that renouncers depart, and for depending too much on representations of renunciation by Brahman householders. Burghart has argued that Hindu renouncers construct 'the world' in highly varied ways, and that renunciation should not be taken as a departure from social life as a whole: instead, it often involves entry into specific sects and fraternities, and can even, such as in the case of the Kabir Panthis, involve the attainment of 'desirelessness' through the maintenance of 'celibacy-in-marriage' (Burghart

1983: 643). Indeed, in Burghart's view, even the Brahmanical texts Dumont used do not portray the Brahmanical ascetic as standing 'outside' caste, but as *encompassing* the organic world of particularistic (and thus transient) caste relations by taking the world 'into' himself in an act of symbolic bodily incorporation (see also Gellner 1992: 344).

In the Buddhist case, the monk has been seen as departing from the world not of social relations, but of the life of the householder: monastic ordination involves entry into a fraternity of the 'homeless' (Carrithers 1979; Collins 1982, 1988; Tambiah 1981). Here, the life of the monk is far from being socially atomistic: firstly because, through monastic ordination he enters a world comprised of kin-like teaching lineages (Carrithers 1979: 295); but also because his renunciation of productive and reproductive endeavour forces him into daily reliance on householders to supply his bodily needs. Such a dependence applies irrespective of the historical shift in Buddhist monasticism from eremetic to cenobitic existence, although the latter does imply continued social and political relations with specific groups of laity (Strenski 1983).

In principle, the same kind of criticisms can be laid against the notion of the monastic 'isolate' in Tibetan Buddhism: the social dimensions of the monk's existence have too often been characterized in terms of what monks are *not*: that their reality is 'anti-relational' (Ortner 1978: 33), 'sealed off' from other subjectivities (Mumford 1989: 16), and characterized by a sexual abstinence equated by Paul (1982: 34–6) with the symbolic 'defeat, death or castration' of the monk's own familial ambition. Paul's rather extreme Freudian view highlights some of the difficulties with this kind of analysis: for example, by defining monasticism negatively in terms of householder values, we cannot explain the high regard in which monks are held by that very householder population. The only obvious answer to this question lies in locating within monks the highly valued Buddhist doctrine, whose emphasis on individualistic karmic destiny and salvation is inherently valued despite its profound otherness to the lifeworld of laity. This argument is often taken further in asserting that such doctrines are most revered when embodied in the form of high status re-incarnate lamas or *tulku* (sprul.sku), such as the Dalai Lama – a figure whose mere existence 'epitomises the unimportance of hereditary status' (Kolås 1996: 54).

Apart from the fact that explaining the high status of monks in terms of the social irrelevance of their religious doctrine seems somewhat unconvincing, such interpretations tend to over-emphasize karmic processes as the basis of Buddhist religious identity: in this regard, as I will argue later, they ignore crucial distinctions between ordinary monks (*trapa*, grwa.pa) and incarnate lamas.[3] Similarly, the portrayal of the monk-laity relationship as a simple dichotomy seems at odds with a far more evident representation of a Buddhist religious career as an on-going transformative process *in terms of* the 'transient world' of householders. Arguably, such a transformative dynamic, which will be examined in greater detail later, is ill-served by the procrustean analytic bed of internalized individualism.

More substantially, the picture of the monk as isolated karmic individual and of the incarnate as the logical extension of that process simply do not fit with the ethnographic facts of Tibetan monasticism, even in the case of the

highly 'clerical' Gelukpa order. Indeed, even in comparison with the later South Asian analyses which stress 'homelessness' as the key doctrinal mainstay of Buddhist monasticism, ordinary Tibetan Buddhist monks still maintain limited status as members of household groups, whilst incarnate lamas act as the central 'masters' of household-like estates.

Rather, I argue that the disciplines of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism are aimed at systematically *transforming* (rather than replacing or repressing) the social identities and ties of household life, whilst retaining their transformed symbolic core as the basis of ritual authority.

In this sense, it is the household, as a multivalent symbol of identity and social agency, which marks the centre of ritual life in *both* the village and in the high 'tantric' rites of Tibetan monasticism, moulding complex spheres of exchange and inheritance around it in both contexts. This can be seen through a comparison of ritual practices surrounding household groups in the Tibetan Buddhist communities of Ladakh in Northwest India, with that of the tantrically trained monks of local Gelukpa Order Buddhist monasteries.

Household estates and p'a-spun *groups*

As with much of the Tibetan cultural area, village life in Ladakh centres on households as the principal legal and inheritance units. Much of rural Buddhist Ladakh consists of interspersed mountain villages, each served by one or more Buddhist temples, either standing alone or as part of larger monastic establishments (*gompa*, dgon.pa), belonging to one of the four major orders of Tibetan Buddhism. Monasteries in the agricultural regions of Southern Ladakh are generally supported by villages consisting of a series of land-holding household estates (*tr'ong-pa*, grong.pa), each centred on a single central house (*k'ang-chen,* khang.chen), occupied by the estate head, his or her spouse and their immediate offspring. This central house usually has between one and four offshoot houses (*k'angbu*, khang.bu), where non-reproductive members of the household estate – such as grandparents or unmarried sisters who have become ordained or unordained nuns – are expected to live (Phylactou 1989).

The developmental cycle of household estates involves a centrifugal tendency. Children are born in the *k'ang-chen* and grow up either to marry and remain in the *k'ang-chen* or enter celibacy: if entering celibacy, they leave the central *k'ang-chen* and enter monastic quarters (*shak*, shag) in a nearby monastery if men, or peripheral *k'ang-bu* or equivalent nun's quarters if women. As the main heir enters his or her majority and marries, the ageing parents pass on control over the central *k'ang-chen*, and themselves move out into peripheral *k'ang-bu*, where they are expected to live increasingly celibate lives in preparation for death. The move from central household to *k'ang-bu* or *shak* is attended by a shift in productive and reproductive involvement in the household estate. Whilst the *k'ang-chen* ideally has fields enough to sustain a continuing surplus (which it is legally obliged to use for the sponsoring of village-wide rites and festivals), *k'ang-bu* are only allocated enough fields for subsistence purposes, and monastic quarters are given only a single field per

resident monk, which is ideally worked by his relatives, leaving him to pursue the religious life.

Thus, whilst the central house is the focus of reproduction and the fulcrum of inheritance, celibacy is the desired role for most offshoot house inhabitants and the essential prerequisite for life as a monk. Individual estate members shift away from reproductive and productive endeavour, and towards reproductive and productive dependence – as celibate grandparents and lay nuns in the *k'ang-bu*, or monks in their monastic quarters – as they depart the central house and head up the religious status ladder.

This emphasis on the household reiterates itself in the existence of sets of household corporations (Aziz 1974; Gutschow 1993): household estates are associated with a *p'a-lha* (pha.lha) or household god, shared as the locus of ritual action by a group of 2–10 estates called a *p'a-spun* (pha.spun) or 'father's kin'. *P'a-spun* members are cremated in the same funeral furnace, and generally claim to be 'of one bone' (*ruspa chig chig*), where bone (*rus*) is a bodily substance transferred patrilinearly. Within the *p'a-spun* group, one estate will have a main shrine dedicated to the *p'a-lha* located on the upper floors of its central house: this is composed of a vase (*bum-pa*) filled with grain and precious minerals; a central 'life-wood' (*la-shing*, bla.shing) and several ritual arrows are placed pointing down into the vase, wrapped in a ceremonial scarf and juniper. The shrine receives daily offerings from the household head, and every King's new year (*lo-sar*, lo.gsar) the main heir of the household cleans the shrine, replaces the juniper and scarf, and brings new arrows from the main shrine rooms of each of the *p'a-spun* estates (Dollfus 1989). The contents of the *bum-pa* are examined during the rite in order to prophesy the fortunes of the upcoming year: if the contents have swollen, the harvest and wealth of the *p'a-spun* will increase; if shrunken, then hard times are ahead.

The actual status of the *p'a-spun* group has been the subject of some controversy. Early writers such as Carrasco and Prince Peter saw them principally as patrilineal kin groups (Carrasco 1972: 38) who had a responsibility for 'financial support in difficult times' (Prince Peter 1963: 381). In Prince Peter's formulation, kinship was primary, whilst shared burial rights and the worship of a single household deity were only present 'by corruption'. More recent analyses have questioned the *p'a-spun*'s genealogical coherence: groups can rarely if ever trace patrilineal links back to a common ancestor (Crook 1994), with residence rather than lineage providing the crucial determinant for *p'a-spun* membership (Brauen 1980; Gutschow 1993; see also Aziz 1974). In a wide-ranging review, Brauen has whittled away further at the validity of using kinship as the determining analytic category for understanding the *p'a-spun*, concluding with the assertion that the core feature of the activities of the *p'a-spun* was their worship of a single household god whose presence defined residential groups as exclusive ritual units (Brauen 1980: 55). In contrast to authors such as Prince Peter, therefore, Brauen saw the *p'a-spun* as principally a *religious corporation*.

Disagreements over the essential 'nature' of the *p'a-spun* – whether kin group or religious corporation – arguably reflect our own conceptual preoccupations rather than events on the ground. As analysts such as Holy (1996)

and Schneider (1972) have argued, the conceptual demarcation of such fields as distinct is principally a Western cultural preoccupation, and therefore to be evoked with care. However, the persuasiveness of categories such as 'kinship' and 'religion' can also draw us away from appreciating the *operational* realities of the *p'a-lha* and *p'a-spun*. The reification of such analytic categories leads us into the kind of Durkheimian territory from which the *p'a-lha* deity, as a totemic figure, is seen as merely representative of the collective lived reality of the *p'a-spun* group, and away from an understanding of the *p'a-lha* as an identity which, in itself, is seen to shape and mould the very activity of the group as 'operators' of its presence. This interaction is most obvious in the way the deity is seen as providing supernatural backing for important household activities: as Brauen (1980: 55) notes, 'the *p'a-lha*'s support is always sought before going on a journey, before embarking on any other big undertaking and in the quest for good health and prosperity; also to bring luck, for instance, on the occasion of a forthcoming marriage.'

But the deity, if readers will excuse the misconstruction, is more convincingly found in the detail of *p'a-spun* life. *P'a-spun* involvement with member households is far more specific than Prince Peter's 'financial support in difficult times' would suggest. Rather, involvement takes two forms: firstly, ritual actions during weddings, to 'attain' a bride as a new member of the *p'a-spun*; and secondly, ritual action following births and deaths, to 'replace' the agency of the *p'a-lha* following ritual pollution. During weddings, and particularly the large virilocal weddings (*bagston*, bag.ston), *p'a-spun* members provide food and labour on the day itself. More specifically, they provide a small group of men (called *nyo-pa*, nyo.pa) who will go out to 'fetch' the bride from her natal home. Arriving at the bride's house, their leader, the *tashispa* (bkra.shis.pa, 'auspicious one'), will 'hook' the bride by the collar, using a ritual arrow taken from the groom's house. The arrows used here are the same as those embedded in the grain pot in the *p'a-lha* shrine, and, in the hooking, the *p'a-lha* itself is described as 'choosing' the bride, thus melding the identity of deity and group representative within a single action. The *nyo-pa* then return with the bride to their village, where the groom awaits: this journey, as Phylactou (1989: 253) notes, is made at night so that, when the party crosses streams or passes near local deity shrines, they are not seen by the gods, and therefore do not offend them.

Here, therefore, the *p'a-spun* members *operate* the 'agency' of the household god (see also Day 1989: 140), choosing new members. At the same time, the transfer of such new members is seen as dangerous, potentially angering local deities. This combination of divinely sanctioned action by *p'a-spun* members, and dangerous relations with local and household deities on the part of household members themselves, characterizes all those moments in which *p'a-spun* intervention occurs. This is especially so in the case of ritual pollution (*dip*, sgrib) following birth and death in individual *p'a-spun* households. As with many South Asian societies, birth and death pollution requires secluding the members of individual households for substantial periods (see Brauen 1982; Day 1989; Norberg-Hodge 1994; Phylactou 1989: 157).[4] As I have argued more extensively elsewhere, *p'a-spun* involvement on occasions of death, birth and marriage is more accurately seen as a response to the perceived dislocation of householders from sources of divine agency, incurred by such life

events (Mills 1997: Ch. 10). Whilst necessary to the reproduction of households, birth, death (and, to a certain extent, marriage) momentarily dislocate the established hierarchies of respect which relate embodied householders to the household deity. As a result, household members become polluted, restricting their authority to perform crucial household functions, particularly hospitality, travel (especially approaching local shrines and crossing streams, both of which are centres of purification concern), working in the fields, and performing ritual functions such as daily offerings at the household shrines. Pollution effectively nullifies their capacities as householders and confines them within the household; transgression of these pollution limits is felt to incur the retribution of the household god and a whole range of local spirits on the village as a whole (Day 1989; Mills 1997), and transgressors historically received substantial fines from the village council if caught (Ribbach 1940: Ch. 1).

When pollution strikes individual households, only two groups are felt to be immune to its effects: *p'a-spun* members, who congregate at the house to perform quotidian tasks like cooking, daily offerings and so forth; and monks, who visit to perform purifications (*truus*, khrus) and offering rites (*sangs*, bsangs). Combined, the two groups replace those sets of ritual agencies which household members would normally perform, but cannot for reasons of pollution.

The *p'a-spun* therefore appears as a corporate group crucial to the principal life-cycle rites of member households. Its principle of membership lies not within direct genealogical links or shared economic endeavour, but rather in ritual relationships with households as matrices of divine agency. The maintenance of correct ritual relations are seen as essential to the functioning agency of the household, marking out residential territories and establishing and authorizing kin identities within the *p'a-spun* group. The *p'a-lha* acts as an indigenous rubric of and for the social and ritual agency of the household, a symbol of residential identity which is both operational and representative. It is operational in the sense that the success and failure of household endeavours are crucially linked to ritual acts of respect towards the *p'a-lha*, with the dislocation of those relationships undermining household agency through ritual pollution. It is representative in the sense that the state of the god's shrine is itself felt to be an indicator of the success and failure of household activities through the annual inspection of the *bum-pa* for grain levels. Thus, the agency of household and *p'a-spun* group members is in many senses relational, their identity as ritual actors being bound up with broader groups.

It is in comparison with this kind of relational household existence that Buddhist monastic endeavour is often viewed as individualistic. This interpretation, however, ignores the crucial role of tantric Buddhism in the ritual life of Tibetan monasticism, which, I would argue, structures monastic life in kin-like ways, a process I shall turn to now.

Tantric Buddhism in Tibetan monasteries

Unlike many forms of Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism does not conceive of Buddhas as wholly 'removed' from the human world, but as having the poten-

tial of manifesting themselves in that world in various forms. This 'presence' of Buddhahood is taken to its logical extreme in Vajrayana, or tantric, Buddhism, a level of ritual training which forms the centrepiece of Tibetan Buddhist religiosity, both at the village level and within the highest circles of ecclesiastical and monastic power.[5] In tantric training, religious acolytes become authorized through *wang* (dbang), a ritual initiation that 'embodies' in initiates the nascent ritual capacities and essences of important Buddhas. Such initiations are received from high religious teachers who have themselves been initiated, thus creating 'lineages' (*rgyud*, brgyud) of religious adepts, lineages which are seen as essential to determining the veracity and ritual power of practitioners. The integration of such elements into Buddhist practice is crucial to any understanding of the social status of Tibetan renouncers. As Gellner (1992: 307) has noted for the Newar Buddhists of Kathmandu, where Vajrayana Buddhism is practised within a non-monastic context, 'Tantric Buddhism permits the introduction of a significant degree of particularism – that is, local, kin and caste-based exclusivity – into a universalistic doctrine'.

In the broader structure of Gelukpa monasticism, tantric initiation is principally conferred on monks by highly trained incarnate lamas (Samuel 1993: 280–6) who are also monastic but of an entirely different status from ordinary monks. Such incarnate lamas – amongst which the most famous in our terms is the Dalai Lama, who is seen as the manifestation of the Buddha Avalokitesvara – traditionally had the highest standing in Ladakhi and Tibetan social and governmental life, and retained their title from lifetime to lifetime, being seen both as the rebirths of their predecessors and the manifest 'bodies', or *tulku* ('manifestation body'), of particular Buddhas.

In the context of such tantric initiations, novices are instructed to 'visualize' the initiating incarnate as the Buddha whose essences are conferred upon the student. In most 'higher' initiations, novices are instructed during the rite to 'visualize' their initiator or *lama* as a tantric Buddha in sexual union with a divine female consort.[6] Such imagery (which in the West had been mistakenly perceived as primarily sexual) is in fact primarily *reproductive*. Thus, for example, in tantric initiations to the ritual cycle of the Buddha Kalacakra, novices are instructed to visualize themselves entering the mouth of *lama* (as Kalacakra), passing down through his body and out into the vagina and womb of his female consort. The novices are then told to visualize themselves as being symbolically reborn as a 'second' Kalacakra out of the womb of the female deity.

This symbolic rebirth is, however, more than merely the re-birth of a new individual: it is associated with the simultaneous visualization of an entire celestial abode (*p'otang*, pho.brang), a divine household (most commonly represented in the mandalas of Buddhist deities) which is held to be part of the mental, verbal and physical attributes of the deity (Dhargyey 1985: 57). As with lay households, this divine mansion creates a whole structure of symbolic kin around it: tantric novices who receive initiation together subsequently refer to one another as '*vajra* brothers and sisters' (*dorje mingbo, dorje sringmo*) and have specific sets of religious obligations to each other, and to their initiating *lama* (Samuel 1993: 124). However, unlike household kinship networks, these religious relations (particularly between initiator and student) are described as continuing from lifetime to lifetime, hence the Sanskrit

epithet *vajra*, denoting the unbreakable quality of Buddhahood. The equation of household and tantric lineages is explicit in tantric lineages and extends to the case of re-births: lines of incarnates are usually referred to as *sku-rgyud* (sku.brgyud) or 'lineages of emanations', one of three principal derivations of the terms *rgyud*, or 'lineage', the other two being *lop-rgyud* (slob.brgyud) or the transmission of tantric teachings and initiations, and *dung-rgyud* (gdung.brgyud) or household/family lineage.

Doctrines of rebirth, whether of incarnates or the students linked to them, mean that unlike the Christian context described by analysts such as Asad (1993) and Iossifides (1991), in Tibet such 'religious kinship' is not merely a secondary trans-signification of more 'primary' kinship systems based on physical birth. Rather, physical birth is itself reconstructed, becoming the major register of the transcendent religiosity of high lamas (Aziz 1979). Thus, two culturalized forms of descent – kinship and religious lineages – superimpose in the case of the birth of incarnates: incarnates are born as deities because they have (in previous lives) been ritually 'reborn' as effective tantric yogins at initiation ceremonies, whilst at the same time tantric novices are ritually reborn in initiations through 'descent' from incarnates who have been born as deities.

That tantra represents an alternative manner of generating kinship-like structures is also suggested by the relationship between tantric deities and monastic institutions. At Lingshed monastery in Ladakh (where I carried out fieldwork between 1993 and 1995) communal ritual practices centred around the evocation of the tantric Buddha Yamantaka ('Vanquisher of Death'), the central tantric Buddha in most Gelukpa monasteries. Whilst it was felt that, ideally, all monks should perform an annual meditation retreat devoted to the worship and meditative evocation of this deity, this was seen to be impractical for a monastic establishment devoted to the performance of tantric rites (such as exorcisms) on behalf of local villages. On the other hand, for the self-same reason, the retreat could not be ignored entirely, as Yamantaka's powers were essential if the monks, as part of those duties, were to be able to coerce Yama, the Lord of Death, to exorcise local malign influences on the villagers' behalf. As a compromise, the head monk, or *lopon* (slob.dpon, in this case, not an incarnate) performed the annual two-week retreat, carrying out four offering rites to Yamantaka every day. The *lopon*'s retreat occurred in his own monastic quarters. For its duration, however, protective white *torma* (gtor.ma – ritual offering cakes) were placed at the boundaries of the monastic precincts in each of the four directions, and no women or female animals were allowed to enter. During this period, just prior to the Buddhist New Year, all active monks congregated every morning in the main courtyard to fast and perform purificatory prayers.

From this retreat, the *lopon* builds up sufficient ritual power, or *las-rung* (las.rung) to *act* as Yamantaka in village and monastic rites throughout the upcoming year, enabling him to lead all monastic gatherings in which Yamantaka is evoked, and this ensured the ritual power of the gathering *as a whole*. Conversely, the *lopon* could not perform this function alone, but only as head of a gathering (*ts'ogs*, tshogs) of monks. Moreover, the *lopon* could nominate particular senior monks, who had in previous years performed the retreat, to act on his behalf, regardless of whether they had performed the

retreat that year. Thus, the meditational acts of the *lopon* acted as the basis of communal, rather than individual, ritual activity, and the ritual power that arose from this solitary retreat was, within certain limits, able to be distributed within the institutional collective of the monastery.

Similar considerations apply to incarnate lamas, in the sense that, as manifestations of tantric deities, *tulku*s are also the focus of significant pollution concerns. During one of his previous incarnations, the *tulku* Ngari Rinpoche (the non-resident owner of Lingshed monastery) entered Drepung monastic college in Lhasa for religious training. Through a variety of mishaps, he was not recognized as an incarnate lama, and carried on his monastic education as an ordinary monk. As a result, he was the object of serious disrespect at various points, performing duties which were polluting to one of his status. This was only uncovered following an outbreak of *dze*, or leprosy, that affected his entire college, and was declared by a local oracle-medium to have been caused by the non-recognition and disrespectful polluting of an incarnate, for whom a search was then instigated.

So, in both the case of Ngari Rinpoche and Lingshed monastery's non-incarnate *lopon*, the ritual capacity of certain religious virtuosi to manifest Buddhahood, whilst being *focused* through particular individuals, is also seen as *encapsulating* surrounding monastic institutions as relational groups. The structural similarity between this and the manner in which members of the *p'a-spun* perform the divine will of the household god, for example by carrying the ritual arrow during weddings, is more than coincidental. Conversely, just as the social and kinship activities of householders are curtailed without the ritual 'authorization' of embodied divinity, thus are the ritual and religious activities of monks curtailed by the absence of the 'authorization' of tantric Buddhas. The enlightened ritual agency of tantric Buddhas thus seems to relate to monastic institutions according to many of the same structural principles as the ritual agency of household deities relates to the practices of household groups.

Similarly, the structural equivalence of household and celestial mansion reveals the manner in which both laity and monks routinely embody symbolic kinship identities, not as a reflection of individualized essences contained within them, but as the embodiment of divine agencies located elsewhere: in the household god shrine, the *lopon* in retreat, the incarnate lama. The divine 'essence' of groups cannot thus be reduced to individualized sharing of essences, but rather the co-operative embodiment of ritual or divine agencies, usually centred on the household/temple as a symbolic complex.

Monastic relations with household groups

The dominance of the household/temple metaphor in both lay and monastic domains has more than symbolic significance. Both categories of monastic inmate (ordinary monks and incarnate lamas) have distinct relationships with land and inheritable property, which directly and indirectly reflect their relationships with secular households on the one hand, and the celestial mansions of tantra on the other.

As we saw earlier, ordinary monks were usually given up to Lingshed monastery by household estates at a young age, and they inhabit modest, segregated quarters located around the temples of the monastery. Quarters are owned and maintained by the natal household estates of resident monks, of which they remain an economic part, being able to be bought and sold to other estates. Upon entering the monastery, monks lose their rights to inherit estate property, but continue to receive economic support in two capacities: firstly, as members of their natal households, they often have individual fields (called *trapa'i zhing*, or 'monks' fields') allocated to them and worked by their nearest relatives; and secondly, as ritual practitioners who perform prayers and tantric rites in the monastery temple or when visiting the houses of ritual sponsors (*zhin-dag*, sbyin.bdag).[7]

This dual economic relationship between monks and household estates reflects the ambiguous status of ordinary monks. Whilst, as ritual performers they are segregated from certain crucial household processes (inheritance, production, reproduction), they also remain members of, and live within, the household estate. By contrast, high incarnates inherit the property and religious students of the previous incarnation in their line, an estate referred to as the *labrang* (bla.brang), which in the case of very high lamas in historical Tibet included a large number of monasteries and huge tracts of land (Goldstein 1973). The *labrang*, or 'lama's resting place' (Das 1991 [1903]) is unrelated to the incarnate's family status, but is built up across several lifetimes from the accumulated offerings that *tulku* receive in their status as tantric initiators and embodied manifestations of Buddhahood.

This last detail is of crucial importance. Many analysts have located the importance of *tulku* in their status as *re*-births, rather than incarnations: incarnate lamas are thus portrayed as being the pinnacle of the 'ascetic ideal' of Buddhism which, by reproducing through re-incarnation, 'epitomises the unimportance of hereditary status' (Kolås 1996: 54). Thus, the karmic law that Buddhism propounds as a way of conceiving the social world is transformed in analysis into a religious ideal, whose embodiment is taken to be the epitome of Buddhism. Thus, the *tulku,* as the pinnacle of the monastic hierarchy, become the exponent of an almost exclusively karmic endeavour, the product of endless virtuous acts that gradually increase their capacity to 'choose' their own rebirth.

This is a misconception. The term *tulku* does not primarily connote a 'reincarnated body' but 'manifestation body': that is, the manifestation of tantric Buddhahood, rather than the reincarnation of previously holy religious virtuosi. This distinction is important, since whilst the 'manifestation bodies' of tutelary deities inherit substantial properties, clients, students and political powers from their predecessor, mere recognized *re*-incarnations do not. Many monks and laity are recognized as the reincarnation of previous monks and so forth, and they are often held in high esteem if this is so; in certain cases, limited gift-giving relations have been set up between households if someone from one household is held to have been re-incarnated in another. But this is *not* the grounds for *inheritance* of a previous life's household property. The incarnate's inheritance of the *labrang* is located in his continued manifestation of divine power: mere karma is *not* the basis of this aspect of the *tulku*'s economic and ritual status.

Karma, tantra and monastic training

But if the tantric elements of Tibetan Buddhism constitute relational dimensions to religious striving, how do these connect with what Samuel (1993: 16–18) referred to as the 'clerical' aspect of Tibetan monasticism, which he identifies principally in three key elements of Buddhist training: renunciation, *bodhicitta* and transcendent insight? This issue is crucial, if only because of the widely held prejudice that tantric ritual forms are in some sense at odds with, or a corrupt addition to, the more broadly accepted traditions of Buddhism that are found under Samuel's 'clerical' rubric.

The influence of tantric forms in Tibetan Buddhism can be traced back to Buddhism's introduction to Tibet in the seventh century, and the centralized synthesizing of tantric and non-tantric elements has been a major pre-occupation of Tibetan scholars since that time (see Hopkins 1977; Mullin 1996; Thurman 1985). Like Obeyesekere's (1963) 'Sinhalese Buddhism', the integration of these two elements into a synthetic whole has occurred at all levels of Tibetan religious life, placing tantric practices firmly within the disciplines of Mahayana Buddhist religiosity, which are seen as the preliminary requirements (*ngon-dro*, sngon.'gro) to tantric training. Thus, Gelukpa training emphasizes amongst others the *lam rim*, or 'graded path' moral and meditative topics, which follow the standard pattern of training in renunciation, *bodhicitta* and insight into 'emptiness', followed by tantric studies.

This synthesis of tantric and non-tantric elements has profound implications for the interpretation of those non-tantric elements that are the usual fare of Buddhist studies. Specifically, it requires a reassessment of the role that the karmic critique of household life plays within the monastic agenda of religious training, one wherein such critiques represent only one part of a more complex trajectory of identity reconstruction, rather than the presentation of a value in itself. Specifically, monks' partial social and economic segregation from village life must be seen in the light of wider philosophical, moral and meditative trainings – on compassion, 'emptiness', and then tantric practices – making the initial critique of the householder life part of a wider ritual process designed to generate ritual authority over precisely those domains (Turner 1969), through the systematic *transformation* of household relations.

I want to elaborate this point. Thogme Zangpo's text, at the beginning of this article, shows how lay household relations are critiqued in terms of a karmic logic which emphasizes the impermanence of such relations. Such exhortations, like the contemplations and meditations based on them, are meant to generate *yid-jung* (yid.'byung), the renunciation of a desire for worldly existence, in which the monastic renouncer constructs a new 'view' of lay kinship networks, contextualized within a totalizing karmic logic.

But this is far from the end of the matter. Renunciation alone is seen as insufficient to attain enlightenment unless conjoined with *chang-chub-kyi-sems* (byang.chub.gyi.sems, Skt. *bodhicitta*), the compassionate wish to attain enlightenment for the sake of all other sentient beings. This 'compassionate mind of enlightenment' is one of the central pre-occupations of Mahayana Buddhist writings, and numerous meditative disciplines are given over to generating it as a conceptual and emotional disposition. Principal amongst these is the

argument that asserts that, through an infinite number of rebirths, all beings have been the meditator's own mother and therefore deserve compassion and a strong sense of obligation. Thus, Thogme Zangpo states:

> In each incarnation, through all of our lives,
> We've been cared for by others with motherly love.
> While these mothers of ours are lost in samsara,
> How cruel to ignore them and free but oneself!
> To save other beings, though countless in number,
> To free their sorrow, these mothers of old,
> Produce Bodhicitta, the wish to be Buddha –
> The Sons of the Buddhas all practice this way.

The purpose of argument here is different, aiming not at renunciation but at compassion or, more accurately, at a transformation of the *context* of those feelings of compassion and obligation that monks would normally feel for their mothers, into a more universalized understanding of motherhood as a property of all sentient beings. As with the training of Christian monastics (Asad 1993; Iossifides 1991), Buddhist training thus does not seek to deny particularistic lay experiences, but to transform them into 'universalized' religious aspirations. The relational identities of the monk's natal household are not 'individualized' into a tendency for social atomism, but reconstructed as equally relational, but *non-particularistic* religious values. This process of transformation, rather than denial, equally applies in the next stage of meditative training, meditation on emptiness.

Bodhicitta, the 'mind of enlightenment', doctrinally has two components: compassion (*thug-je*, thugs.rje) and the meditative realization of emptiness (*stongpa-nyid*, stong.pa.nyid). Disciplines towards the former we have already examined; the latter, whilst highly complex, can be paraphrased as meditation upon the absence of the inherent or self-sustaining identity of either objects or persons. At first glance this would appear to be emphatically anti-relational – dissolving the world around the religious individual into mere illusion – if it were not that one of the major objects of such meditation is the self (*dag*, bdag), which is also critically transformed as an object of conceptual and emotional thought.

Once again, this is not merely a doctrinal statement of a Buddhist truth that is alternative to lay constructions of the person, but a systematic logical transformation of such existing constructions. Thus, one of the central teaching texts of the Gelukpa Order, Jamyang Sheyba's *Great Exposition of Tenets*, instructs monks on the three stages of meditation on the emptiness of self (Hopkins 1983: 44–51):

i) bringing the emotional sense of having a self into close analytic focus, usually by remembering one's reaction to being slighted or unfairly treated;

ii) analysing this 'self' to determine if it can logically exist *in the manner in which it is emotionally felt to exist* (such analytic, rather than synthetic arguments, are felt to logically negate the possibility of such an existence);

iii) through concentration, establishing one's understanding of the *logically* contradictory nature of one's own notion of self within the emotional 'sense' of self evoked in (i), thus transforming it.

So, the self is not simply dismissed within Buddhist meditation. Rather, established emotional senses of self are critiqued in their own terms: selflessness becomes a *product* of meditation on the self, rather than its opposite. This makes 'doctrines' such as selflessness to many extents relative and dependent on pre-existent constructions of identity (see also Carrithers 1983: 290).

The process of critiquing and transforming conventional notions of personal identity, and of transforming the conceptual and emotional structure of relational values such as kinship, is not, however, the final end of Gelukpa training, but is rather a means to an end. The nature of that end lies in the ritual authority to manifest certain forms of tantric Buddhahood, an authority which begins with the tantric initiations discussed above, but pre-supposes familiarity with renunciation, *bodhicitta* and emptiness.

The adoption of the nascent identity of a particular celestial Buddha – referred to as 'divine pride' (*lha'i nga rgyal*) – in tantric initiations and practice continues this theme of the transformation of secular identities and relations. The nature of such divine identities is seen as two-fold, representing the unification of compassion and the knowledge of emptiness. In other words, following from the preceding arguments, the 'divine pride' of the tantric initiate is seen as a semantic transformation of existing secular dispositions and kin identities.

Thus, the ritual construction of tantric identity as an enlightened Buddha is preceded by the systematic deconstruction and transformation of conventional household-based dispositions and emotions, as the monk concentrates his meditations on karma, compassion and emptiness. As a corollary, initiation into the tantric Buddha's celestial mansion, or *p'otang* (following which the consummate tantrist is seen as being able to view all aspects of the world as representative of the physical, verbal and mental attributes of Buddhahood) is preceded by conceptual disciplines which highlight the impermanence of ordinary 'worldly' households. More than this, however, the 'successful' ritual process of tantric training, by transforming not simply the Buddhist adept's social persona, but his relations with the world, also transforms the world in which he exists, recreating it in the guise of the celestial palace or a Buddha's 'pure land' (*dag zhing*).

It is the final reconstruction of the meditator as tantric Buddha and meditator's world as Buddhist paradise, rather than the preceding deconstruction of household identities (highlighted by those that equate monasticism with individualism), that marks the conceptual shift of monks to positions of true ritual authority. This final 'consciousness' can perhaps be equated with Mumford's (1989: 19) final stage of religious discourse, the moment of 'historical becoming', when the 'individual life-sequence' is transcended in a 'Rabelaisian unmasking . . . that celebrates the future of the world rather than a destiny that is separated from the world'.

Such a shift of ritual status has, however, varying levels of attainment, depending on the degree to which particular monks are seen to be able to ritually 'embody' such Buddhas. Thus, whilst most monks in the Gelukpa order receive tantric initiation after 10–15 years of training (i.e. around 20–25 years of age), and can thereupon start participating in tantric rites such as those used at funerals and exorcisms, it is only once monks have received substantial subsequent training that they can begin to act as ritual officiants during

such occasions. A monk such as Lingshed monastery's *lopon* can only actually lead particular tantric rites once he has received all his monastic vows, and has performed a short retreat associated with the necessary tantric Buddha. Ordinary Gelukpa monks, even if they have attained the status of *lopon*, can only perform those rites whose practice has previously been instigated by an incarnate lama. Such incarnates (discussed more fully elsewhere: Mills 1997; 1998) are seen as having completed such trainings prior to their present rebirth and are thus seen to be *born* as the manifestation of tantric Buddhas, 'embodying' them in a far more direct way than ordinary monks, thus representing the consummation of the ritual process of Buddhist training. This consummation – the result of ritual processes which locate the incarnate's authority within frameworks of lineage, inheritance and 'sexual/reproductive' yogas – is thus a precise symbolic transformation of the key features of lay household symbolism.

Conclusion

In summary, a central danger in the sociological analysis of Tibetan monasticism lies in over-emphasizing karma as the focal ideology of Buddhist religious training, in constructing it as an end in itself, a Buddhist ideal. This undermines the study of its *use* as part of a broader ritual and social agenda concerned with the transformation of social realities essential to the construction of ritual authority. Part of this misplaced emphasis lies in the tendency to see the mechanics of karma as positively valuing a certain kind of person, the anti-relational individual. This kind of analytic essentialism has important correlates.

Firstly, it presupposes that the existential status of the individual precedes that of the individual's relationships with others (Strathern 1992: 26), and therefore that removing the individual's status within established networks of social relations will leave a (more idealized) individual. In the Tibetan case, this implies that a person removed from the householder's relational world must thereby be a non-relational individual, ignoring (as Burghart 1983 has so clearly shown in the Hindu case) the possibility that renouncers can recreate their own relational worlds from their new vantage-point.

Secondly, it equates kinship with biologically linked groups, precluding the recognition that Tibetan kinship is organized around the household as a symbolic and social entity, rather than a genealogical one. As a result, the possibility that the 'household', the symbolic basis for relational identity, could be constructed in social domains that lack actual physiological procreation (such as monastic life), has been neglected.

Finally, it is based on the misplaced assertion that the principle of identity, whether kin or religious, is to be found in the continuity of essence or, in more familiar anthropological parlance, shared substance. Disregarding momentarily the kinship idiom, this is most obvious in the constant difficulty which many analysts have in getting away from the idea that the most important features of re-incarnation must derive from the continuity (through karma) of some kind of personal essence. This emphasis on substance as the basis of identity constantly deflects us from the possibility that the on-going

operation of structures of (in this case, divine) agency more accurately describes the salient features of 'identity', wherein relational group membership is a function of performance, rather than being.

By comparison, I have shown how Tibetan Buddhist communities have two different modes of kinship, both associated with substantial ritual responsibilities: lay household inheritance groups, and those groups based around tantric initiations and incarnation.[8] These groups create different senses of lineage, but both are centred on divine forms and located in house/temple complexes.[9] These are the focus of ritual respect, religious corporations and pollution concerns, and have substantial relations with indigenous notions of embodiment and social/ritual agency.

Furthermore, fully established tantric and lay 'households', the *tr'ongpa* and the *labrang*, are the focus of inheritance patterns centred around the ritual operation of divine agency. Monks, by contrast, are at the stage of transition *between* these two modes of ritual presence, being neither lay inheritors nor inheritors of *labrangs*. As a ritual process, monastic training disciplines the transformation between these two, a transformation seen as incomplete in the ordinary monk (although the 're-integration' of the monk, as elevated ritual actor within the village context, occurs to a limited extent with his authoritative performance of pre-established ritual purifications and offerings on the part of local lay households). Thus, the ordinary monk's 'individuality' is a chimeric reflection of the transformative process of religious training, a process which is most fully completed in the incarnate lama, the *tulku*.

NOTES

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[1] Ortner's assertion is principally sociological, rather than a discussion of the nature of Buddhist personhood. Whilst most schools of Buddhist thought deny the possibility of an inherently existing person (see Collins 1982), this should not in the first instance be taken as an argument against her position.

[2] Echoes of this perspective can also be found in Mumford's *Himalayan Dialogue*, where he equates renunciation (as 'removal from the samsaric world') with 'being extricated from the net of external relations' (1989: 24–5). Mumford's concern, however, is with indigenous modes of *representing* social life, and thus concentrates on discursive, rather than structural, issues.

[3] Ortner has identified this issue in a recent 'deconstruction' of her individual-relational opposition (Ortner 1995).

[4] Birth pollution lasts one month for mother and child, and seven days for the husband. Death pollution for laity lasts one month for the spouse of the deceased; no death pollution accrues in the case of monks, and the embalmed bodies of incarnates are seen as the source of blessing rather than pollution. Periods of pollution are brought to a close with ritual ablutions.

[5] Here, the notion of tantra as a fringe influence or 'little tradition', in Tibetan Buddhism and its immediate Indian antecedents, must be dispensed with (Samuel 1993; Sanderson 1991).

[6] Most Tibetan Buddhist commentators categorize tantric cycles according to Bu-Ston's fourfold division of *kriya*, *carya*, *yoga* and *annutarayoga* tantras – of which the Kalacakra cycles is of the last, 'highest yoga tantra' class.

[7] Similar arrangements have been reported in many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, both in contemporary and pre-modern Tibet (see Carrasco 1972: 123–4).

[8] *P'a-spun* are specific to Ladakh/Zangskar, although variants exist in most Tibetan regions. The issue here, however, is that *general* understandings about kinship groups, households and inheritance patterns (of which the *p'a-spun* are an example) are mirrored within monastic structures.

[9] In the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism, incarnate and household lineages are often dissolved into single corporate entities.

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Frère Vajra, soeur Vajra: renonciation, individualisme et la maisonnée dans la vie religieuse monastique bouddhiste tibétaine

Résumé

Cet article conteste deux notions associées dans l'étude du bouddhisme tibétain: le fait que la vie religieuse bouddhiste se caractérise par un mouvement déclaré vers l'individualisme, détachant systématiquement les moines d'une vie sociale relationnelle, et le fait que les doctrines bouddhistes tibétaines sur le karma représentent un mode d'identité alternatif à ceux qui sont élaborés dans la vie domestique. Après avoir comparé les pratiques rituelles et les patrons d'héritage associés aux maisonnées du Ladakh avec les formes rituelles tantriques dans les monastères locaux (Gelukpa), je soutiens qu'elles indiquent des similarités structurales prononcées, centrées sur une construction symbolique commune de la maisonnée et du temple comme source d'action du sujet dans la société. L'analyse des disciplines méditatives dans la vie monastique Gelukpa sert à montrer que cette formation n'a pas pour but le renoncement aux valeurs associées à la parenté et à la maisonnée, mais de les transformer en modes d'autorité religieuse essentiels pour définir la position sociale des moines (trapa) et des lamas incarnés (tulku) dans le bouddhisme tibétain.

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