

*Tibet and the Southeast Asian
Highlands: Rethinking
the Intellectual Context of
Tibetan Studies*



This chapter was a plenary address to the Sixth Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies (IATS), which took place in Norway in 1992. Much of it still seems to me to be of relevance twelve years later.

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If size is an indication of maturity, then Tibetan studies has undoubtedly come of age by 1992. The number of papers given at the Sixth IATS conference, is enough to establish the point. Whether Tibetan studies has yet come of age intellectually is quite another issue, on which I hope to provoke some reflection.

Over the last few years, scholars of Asian societies have become increasingly conscious of how their work is shaped by the specific historical modes of enquiry within which they work, and by the social and political commitments that go along with

those modes of enquiry. It can hardly be argued that these issues are irrelevant to Tibetanists, yet, on the whole, this move to reflexivity has had very little impact on Tibetan studies. Tibetanists, in fact, have tended to avoid self-conscious reflection on the social and political commitments implicit in their discourses. The problem was stated in James Stone's reflections on Tibetology, published in the *Tibet Journal* in 1984, but the invitation he offered to consider the role of Western Tibetanists as "leopards in the temple" (the phrase comes from a parable by Franz Kafka) has scarcely been taken up in subsequent years. I begin by asking why this is so.

Some reasons are apparent if we look at the response of Tibetan studies to the two major critical impulses behind this move to greater self-awareness on the part of Asian studies more generally: feminism and anti-colonialism. Few of us who work in Western academic institutions can have avoided extensive contact with both dimensions of critique.

Despite Barbara Aziz's pointed remarks at the Fourth IATS conference at Munich (Aziz 1988), and the writings of a number of American feminist scholars of Tibetan Buddhism, such as Rita Gross (1984), Anne Klein (1987a, 1987b), Janet Gyatso (1987) and Jan Willis (1984), Tibetanists have generally ignored the issues raised by feminist thought. It is not hard to guess why this might be so. Although Buddhism in Tibet has had a marginally better record than the world's other major religious traditions, Tibetan monastic Buddhism is thoroughly enmeshed with notions of male supremacy. Few Tibetanist scholars have either the desire or the courage to embark on a substantial feminist critique of the central institution most of us are studying. Yet without such an undertaking, the potential of the feminist critique to lead to a radical rethinking of Tibetan studies is blunted and defused.

This is not, I think, simply a question of blindness or cowardice. It is related to the awareness of many of us that Tibetan Buddhism at this point in history is deeply bound up with the political and human survival of the Tibetan people. To

attack Buddhism is to run the risk of weakening the Tibetan struggle for autonomy and liberation.

This brings me to the anti-colonialist impulse, as typified by works such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). There are a number of perhaps obvious reasons why Tibetanists have failed to buy into this debate, and most of them are again connected with the continuing Chinese presence in Tibet. This presence means that Tibetan scholarship is by its very nature political, and in a way different from that characterising the work of most Asianists.

Certainly, anyone who writes on pre-modern Tibetan society or on Tibetan history cannot avoid being aware of the possible interpretations or constructions placed upon what we say by parties in the dispute. Generally, too, Tibetanists have their own commitments in the Tibetan situation, and may be unwilling to acknowledge the fragmentary or conjectural nature of their interpretations for fear that this may weaken the polemical force of their arguments.

Such motives may help to explain why there has been little explicit reflection on the assumptions behind the discourse or discourses of modern Tibetan studies. Commitments to one side or another tend to be tacit and treated as not needing serious questioning, whether these commitments are to the Tibetan or Chinese sides of the political dispute, or to one or another Buddhist position within the Tibetan religious arena. The gravity of the political situation in which the Tibetans have been caught tends to force a relatively straightforward allegiance to one or the other side. One has only to look at Melvyn Goldstein's attempts to steer some kind of a middle way through the political minefield (1989, 1991, 1992), and at recent Tibetan refugee reactions to his writings (Thonden 1991, Norbu 1992), to realise that such a feat verges on the impossible.¹

My intention here is not to distribute blame in this situation, at least not among Tibetanists. I am as much caught up in it as many others. I would, however, like to note some of the respects in which these factors may have affected the nature of Tibetan studies today. It is, I think, easy to see some areas of concern.

Problems with Tibetan Studies

Perhaps the most important of these areas of concern, since it has played such a large part in perpetuating the static and unreflective nature of Tibetan studies, is the pervasive tendency to treat Tibet as an isolate and to avoid relating it to larger regional discourses. Tibetanist conferences and publications tend to be inward-looking affairs, and Tibet tends to be constituted as an autonomous and largely isolated cultural and historical region.² This tendency to stress Tibetan cultural and social autonomy has an obvious relationship with the political situation of Tibet.

Politics infiltrates the academy in a variety of ways. Consider, for example, the choice which publishers, journal editors, conference organisers, and individual academics have occasionally to make about the region of Asia within which Tibet should be included—East Asia? South Asia? Central Asia? The matter may sound trivial but it has immediate political implications. Where Tibet is treated as part of East Asia (as, for example, by the Association of Asian Studies in the USA), Sinologists inevitably act as 'gatekeepers' for Tibetan studies. Sinologists decide who speaks, who gets published, and who is regarded as a legitimate authority. For many Sinologists, Tibet is an embarrassment they would rather not know about.

Treating Tibet as part of South Asia or of Central Asia may involve less acute political problems but all three alternatives run a similar risk of marginalisation. The issues important to Indianists, Sinologists and Central Asian specialists are, for the most part, not central to the study of Tibetan societies.

A particularly striking aspect of this problem is the almost total lack of integration between Tibetanist and Sinologist discourses. This is understandable, given the politics and given the very different skills and competences required for Tibetan and for Chinese studies, but it is certainly regrettable. Tibetanist and Sinologist accounts of Khams (or 'Western Sichuan') in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, seem scarcely to be talking about the same place. There are very few

scholars with the competencies or the interest to bridge this particular gap.³

Another major area of concern is the largely unquestioned dominance within Tibetan studies of Buddhist discourse and interpretations—particularly those of monastic Buddhism. It would be absurd to deny the salience of monastic Buddhism in Tibetan society, or the importance, usefulness and significance of the substantial body of research, study and translation carried out on Buddhist aspects of Tibetan culture. Buddhist discourse, nevertheless, dominates Tibetan studies to an extent such that other important topics have been seriously neglected by comparison. Monastic dominance, after all, is probably quite recent for many Tibetan communities (Ramble 1993), and the assumption that Tibetan villages are necessarily organised according to Buddhist precepts may be seriously misleading (see Ramble 1990).

Those aspects of Tibetan religion and culture that are marginal to monastic Buddhism have received comparatively little attention. Domestic ritual is a classic example, as Barbara Aziz noted some years ago (Aziz 1978: e.g. 253), and the same is true of most other aspects of the Tibetan household. Even the recent revival of Bon-po studies tends to focus on those aspects of Bon that are, in effect, a variant of monastic Buddhism.

Another, closely related, problem is the tendency within Tibetan studies to privilege the dGe-lugs-pa state at Lhasa over other Tibetan polities and to treat it as typical of Tibetan societies. I have written about this at length elsewhere (Chapter Two above, and Samuel 1993), arguing that it has created major distortions in our views of Tibetan societies. The Tibetan region in pre-modern times consisted of a variety of small and medium-sized polities, along with stateless areas, and was characterised by a low degree of political centralisation. The dGe-lugs-pa state was only one factor within this larger picture, but is still often treated as if it were the whole picture.

For the reasons I outlined earlier, it seems unlikely that feminist or anti-colonialist critiques will lead to much movement to greater self-reflection among Tibetanists on these and similar

areas of concern. Consequently, it may be worth looking to other and less politically problematic directions of critique in order to gain some perspective on Tibetan studies as a field of intellectual enquiry. It is for this reason that I make the suggestion implied in my title. What would we make of Tibet if we were to see it as part of the Southeast Asian highlands?

Problems with the Anthropology of Tibetan Societies

The literature on highland Southeast Asia that I shall be looking at was primarily written by social and cultural anthropologists, and before moving to it, it is worth having a closer look at the anthropological literature on Tibetan societies. For historical reasons, this literature has remained relatively separate from most other work in Tibetan studies, though it has shared to some degree in the problems outlined above.

A major reason for this distinctive emphasis of anthropological research on Tibetan societies is that most of it has been carried out on Tibetan populations in Nepal or, more recently, Ladakh, rather than in Central Tibet, Khams or A-mdo. Anthropological research on pre-modern Central Tibetan society consists of a handful of refugee studies, all referring to communities along major trade routes in gTsang: Aziz on D'ing-ri (1978), Goldstein (1968, 1971a-d) and Dargyay on the rGyal-rtse region (1982), Cassinelli and Ekvall on Sa-skya (1969). Work on Khams and A-mdo is even more limited, the only substantial studies being those of Robert Ekvall, working with A-mdo nomadic pastoralists (1952, 1968, see Samuel 1993). While these sources can be supplemented by Tibetan literary sources and travellers' accounts, the attempt to create an overall picture of Tibetan societies from such limited and scattered sources faces a wide range of methodological difficulties. It is not surprising that anthropologists have mostly avoided any attempt at a large-scale picture of Tibetan societies in favour of a traditional anthropological emphasis on the individual communities they have studied.

As a consequence, in practice, the anthropology of Tibetan

societies has been dominated by contemporary ethnography in Nepal, and more particularly among the Sherpas. This body of work has been the main counter to the dGe-lugs-pa state emphasis of the political historians: thus we have had a choice between Sherpa-centrism and Lhasa-centrism.

Much of this research is very valuable, but the question of the relationship between these communities in Nepal and the vast range of communities, for example in Khams, of which we know next to nothing in terms of detailed field work, is very much unresolved. In addition, the discourses of Sherpa-centric anthropologists and Lhasa-centric textual scholars are so different that the two groups largely talk past each other. Some years ago, I suggested that in some respects the Sherpas might be a more 'typical' Tibetan society than the people of Lhasa (Chapter Two, above). My impression is that the textualists regarded this statement as absurd, while the anthropologists saw it as self-evident. Neither reaction was quite what I had hoped for, which was a genuine discussion of the extent of variation among Tibetan societies.

The ethnographic literature on Tibetan societies in Nepal has its own difficulties, in particular the lack of any coherent theoretical focus. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf treated the Nepal Himalaya as a zone of culture contact between Tibet and South Asia (1966), and in a sense it evidently is. Yet this does not take us very far towards a theoretical understanding of how these societies work. Mid-range highland peoples such as the Gurung (Mumford 1989; McHugh 1989), Tamang (Steinmann 1987; Holmberg 1989), Magar (Oppitz 1981, 1986; de Sales 1991) or Lepcha have identities of their own which we are only beginning to delineate. They are not just mixtures of 'Tibetan' and 'Indian' influences. Trade throughout the Himalayan region is significant, as Fürer-Haimendorf among others has demonstrated (1975), but its relationship with other aspects of society, above all religion, still awaits effective analysis (see Chapter Two above, and Samuel 1993). No other major themes seem to have emerged as central to ethnographic

writing on Tibetan societies in Nepal, despite the production of a number of substantial monographs (e.g. Jest 1976; Levine 1988; Ortner 1978, 1989).

The other area where there has been substantial recent fieldwork is Ladakh, and for reasons which are perhaps mostly historical rather than logical, the interaction between Ladakh-based anthropologists and those working with other Tibetan communities has until recently been very limited. The Zürich conference on the Anthropology of Tibet and the Himalayas, in 1990, brought together substantial numbers of anthropologists working in Nepal, Ladakh, Tibet, and among Tibetan refugees for the first time. It is to be hoped that this development will continue. At present, however, there has been little attempt to exploit the comparative potential between these various regions.⁴

The anthropology of Tibetan societies seems to me to be in at least as much need of a shift in perspective as Tibetan studies as a whole, if for somewhat different reasons. Let me move on then to the suggestion around which the remainder of my address is built—that, just for a change, we might try looking at Tibetan societies as part of Southeast Asia. To be more precise, I would also provisionally include in this geographical transfer the other Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan, peoples such as the Tamang, Gurung, Magar and Lepcha, and the non-Tibetan-speaking populations of Bhutan (Aris 1979; Imaeda and Pommaret 1990) as well as, of course, Ladakh.

My reasons for this particular strategy will become clearer in a little while. First, I will suggest some reasons why a Southeast Asian perspective on Tibet (and also on the highland societies of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan) has at least some *prima facie* claim on our attention, despite its unfamiliarity to most of us.

Tibetan and Himalayan Societies in a Southeast Asian Context

For a start, as the label 'Tibeto-Burman' reminds us, the speakers

of Burmese, the other major language of the Tibetan family, and of many of the lesser ones, are located in Southeast Asia. If we look at the distribution of Tibeto-Burman languages, it is heavily skewed towards Southeast Asia.

Now, language is not the same thing as culture, but it does suggest that there will be historical connections and cultural similarities. These connections and similarities do in fact exist. If we recall that much of what is now Eastern India (in particular, the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland and Mizoram) belongs culturally to Southeast Asia rather than South Asia, the rationale for seeing Tibeto-Burman societies primarily within the Southeast Asian context is strengthened.

In relation to the highland societies of Nepal, I am not denying the evident, and in some cases very extensive, influences from the Indian cultural sphere on many of these peoples, and for that matter on some Tibetan groups long settled in Nepal, such as the Sherpa. Viewing the Tamang or Gurung, for example, as primarily 'South Asian' peoples is, however, not self-evidently appropriate. That they have been treated in this way is, in considerable degree, the result of the arbitrary nature of regional traditions of intellectual inquiry (see Fardon 1990). These peoples have been studied by South Asianists, scholars working with them have developed their research within the intellectual context of other, specifically South Asian, research, and so forth. The extent to which these peoples share features with the highland populations of Southeast Asia remains to be determined.⁵

Other arguments could be adduced to strengthen my proposal, such as the complex and significant relationship between the Tibetans and peoples such as the Naxi, Lahu and Yi, who belong to the Southeast Asian highland complex. The most important thing about highland Southeast Asia for my present purpose, however, is that it provides a ready-made theoretical tradition that has a considerable degree of internal consistency and several central issues of real applicability to Tibet.

Here I refer to the intellectual lineage whose basic text is Edmund Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Leach 1954) and which continues through a series of critiques and extensions of Leach's basic themes, including the work of, for example, F. K. Lehman, Jonathan Friedman, and Thomas Kirsch, whose *Feasting and Social Oscillation* is of particular importance (1973).⁶

In order to keep my discussion within a reasonable length, I shall simply list some basic themes of this literature and comment very briefly on their relevance to Tibet, and then try to exemplify my argument through a short ethnographic exploration:

1. *The oscillation between egalitarian and hierarchical political forms.* This appears in Leach (1954), and is a major focus for several subsequent writers. I have argued at length elsewhere that the relationship between these forms is a major theme of Tibetan societies (Samuel 1993). It is also a necessary corrective to the twin problems of Lhasa-centrism and Sherpa-centrism. The related literature about the 'galactic polity' in Southeast Asia (Tambiah 1984, 1985; see also Reynolds 1987; Rudolph 1987) is also of clear relevance to Tibetan societies.
2. *The fluidity of ethnic identity.* This theme was again stated by Leach (1954), in relation to the Kachin and Shan, and developed by Lehman (1967) and Peter Hinton (1983) among others. Here we might consider the absorption of Naxi, Yi, etc., into Tibet, the little-studied region of rGyal-rong, and perhaps also the ambiguities in the position of parts of East Tibet in relation to adjacent Chinese provinces. Tibetanists tend to treat ethnic identity as a given. One of the virtues of the Southeast Asian Highland literature is that it has throughout been problematised.⁷ Leach already referred in *Political Systems* to the political and religious aspects of ethnic identity, and this has been a continuing theme in the literature on highland Southeast Asia.

3. *The role of shamanism and of soul-loss theories.* I have pointed elsewhere to the similarities between Tibetan *bla*, 'soul' (a key term in Tibetan folk-religion, with close cognates in Gurung, Tamang, etc.) and for example Thai or Lao *khwan* (Samuel 1993). There are similar terms and related ritual complexes in almost all the Highland Southeast Asian societies. In some of these highland societies, 'shamanism' (or 'animism,' etc.) still operated in recent times in the absence of Buddhism. Others provide case studies in the incorporation of Buddhism that may provide illuminating comparisons with Tibet (for example, Walker 1981).

A related point is the question of auspiciousness and good fortune (Tibetan *bkra shis*, *rten 'brel*, *rlung rta* etc.) and of divination (*mo*) as major but largely unstudied themes in Tibetan society. Here again there are extensive ethnographic parallels and some interesting analyses.

4. I have less to say about *kinship and social structure* (in part because these have been relatively neglected in Tibetan studies). The idea of the village as composed of a number of equal households, with ritual and other communal responsibilities rotating among them, is however typical both of Tibetan villages (where it may be combined with ranked groups of households, see Samuel 1993: 115-131, 152) and of many communities in Highland Southeast Asia. Kinship (and much else) in Highland Southeast Asian societies seems to be characterised by considerable local variation combined with enough of a common grammar to enable intermarriage and fluidity of identity between apparently quite different peoples (Kachin and Shan, Akha and Lisu). In Tibet, too, intermarriage and social mobility between apparently quite different populations (particularly pastoralists and agriculturalists with their at least superficially contrasting kinship systems and social structures) is common. It would be good to know more about how these situations were handled; the Highland Southeast Asian analogy may well prove illuminating.

5. *The question of the relative primacy of economics, power and ritual.* This has been a major theme in Southeast Asian Highland studies. Debate has moved from relatively simple assertions of the primacy of economics and social relations (in Leach 1954) to more sophisticated formulations in subsequent work (Kirsch 1973; Russell 1989; Durrenberger and Tannenbaum 1989). This question has scarcely been posed for Tibet.⁸ It obviously needs to be asked, as recent ethnography demonstrates (e.g. Dollfus 1989; Ramble 1992; Clarke 1980; Holmberg 1989). Tibetanist 'anthropologists still have to develop a theoretical language adequate to cope with these issues.

A related theme is *the connection between Buddhism and trade*. Richard O'Connor, for example, has developed an interesting analysis of Buddhism among Tai-speaking peoples (Thai, Lao, etc.), who are one of the other major linguistic groups in the highland region and include a range of societies from small, relatively stateless non-Buddhist communities to large states such as Thailand itself where Buddhism forms a state religion. He suggests that the adoption of Buddhism allowed the development of trade by enabling a move away from an inward-looking community associated with a household- and village-based ritual system to one operating on a much larger scale and extending beyond the immediate village community or local region. He regards the replacement of animal sacrifice by a Buddhist temple-based system as an integral part of this process (O'Connor 1989). A detailed comparison with Tibetan societies would seem a very promising line of research.

O'Connor's argument is typical of much of the Highland Southeast Asian literature in raising issues which have clear relevance to the Tibetan region but have so far received little or no attention in the Tibetan context. For all of the scholarly devotion that has been directed towards Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetanists have rarely stopped to ask why Buddhism was taken

up and what it meant to the people who adopted it. The process of 'Tibetanisation' remains mysterious and little studied (see Macdonald 1987; Samuel 1993). In the Highland Southeast Asian context, however, the kind of shifts of ethnic identity involved in 'Tibetanisation' have already received considerable attention. It seems likely that some of O'Connor's suggestions have relevance for Tibet, for all of the well-known differences between Vajrayāna Buddhism in Tibet and Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

Ethnic Identity, 'Tibetanisation' and Animal Sacrifice: A Brief Comparative Case-Study

In order to give a little ethnographic substance to these assertions, I will close this address with a brief examination of three case-studies from the southwestern edge of the Tibetan cultural region, where the 'Tibetanisation' process has evidently been at work in recent times. These are Gyasumdo and Humla in Nepal, and Karsha (Lahul) in India.

Gyasumdo, in northern Nepal, is a region of mixed Tibetan and Gurung populations that has recently become quite well known through Stan Mumford's Bakhtinian study, *Himalayan Dialogue* (1989). Mumford's framework consists of three stages adapted from Bakhtin: (1) the 'ancient matrix,' or the collectively-oriented shamanic world view, here identified with Gurung shamanism; (2) the introduction of an individualist perspective through Buddhism; (3) a 'dialogical' phase, here represented by the competition and controversy between Gurung shamans and Tibetan lamas for control of the ritual field. Gurung shamans and Tibetan lamas perform rituals for similar purposes, but Tibetan lamas regard certain aspects of Gurung practice, in particular animal sacrifice, as improper.

Mumford's frame is elegant but problematic. On the Tibetan side, he ignores that the 'dialogue' here probably goes back to the earliest days of Tibetan Buddhism (see, for example, Samuel 1993: 436-56 or Chappel 1991: 26). On the Gurung side, he appears to have misrepresented and oversimplified Gurung

ethnography (e.g. McHugh 1991). Mumford nevertheless presents a fascinating picture of how Tibetan Buddhism and the local traditions of 'animism' or 'shamanism' are competing in a specific time and space.

The local tradition here is of reciprocal exchange. In fact, as Mumford himself points out, the Tibetan lamas incorporate elements of reciprocity in their rituals as well, while the collective responsibility and embeddedness in mutual relationships pointed out by McHugh (1989), for example, for the Gurungs, are characteristic of Tibetan communities too.⁹ Still, there is a shift between Gurung and Tibetan perspectives, since for the Tibetan lamas the idea of the individual responsibility is also strongly present through the concept of *karma*. Is this shift in part, as O'Connor might argue, a choice of universalistic over local discourses that is also associated with a link away from the inward-looking village community to a wider network of trade and social interaction?

An important indicator of the shift, as in O'Connor's argument, is the question of the performance of animal sacrifices. Tibetan lamas in the area have been active in attempting to ban such sacrifices. The Tibetan emphasis on this point is not only, or even primarily, because of the Buddhist prohibition on taking life. The banning of animal sacrifices was historically in Tibet the sign of Tibetan Buddhist dominance over local pre-Buddhist deity cults. Animals as offerings are replaced by dough images, and the lama approaches the local deities through the universalistic procedures of Tantric ritual (Samuel 1993: 244-69). This change, however, can only weaken ties to the local community and its locally-based ritual practices. In Gyasumdo in the 1960s it was the visit to the area of a high-status refugee lama that set off a new phase in Mumford's 'dialogue,' at a time when the local population was becoming increasingly involved in the political and economic structures of the Nepali state. It is tempting in the light of O'Connor's argument to suspect that this dialogue was at least as much about the nature of community and about the

transformation of economic relations and social values as it was about the issue of correct ritual procedure.

For a second case study, I turn to the work of Nancy Levine in the ethnically Tibetan community of 'Ladog' in **Humla**, also in Nepal but much farther to the west (Levine 1989). Unlike the Gurung in Gyasumdo, the Bura, the 'tribal' population to the south of Ladog, now speak Nepali, though with varying degrees of ethnic identification with Tibetans or with the high-caste Hindu population also present in the region. Levine focusses, in the article I am considering, on spirit-possession and ethnic identity. Spirit-mediums or *dhami* are used mainly by poor and low-caste people, on both sides of the Tibetan-Hindu divide, who cannot afford or do not have access to lamas or Brahmins. The gods who speak through the *dhami* are seen as 'foreign' by both sides, and they demand animal sacrifice, which is again a major point of contention for the lamas. Animal sacrifice and the *dhami* have a marginal and residual status in the region as a whole, resorted to by those with no better option; those who have neither successfully 'Sanskritised' nor 'Tibetanised'. The villagers of Ladog, however, maintain the *dhami* cults despite the lamas' opposition. Levine suggests that they "provide an interface with the surrounding Nepali society" (1989: 20) as well as access to divine power and assistance for those marginalised by the major traditions.

For a third case-study, I move further west again to **Karsha** in Lahul (in Himachal Pradesh, India). For the Karshapa people, I rely on the work of my former student, Elizabeth Stutchbury (1991). The Karshapa speak a Tibeto-Burman language some way distant from Tibetan, but they are Tibetan Buddhist and have been wholly incorporated into the Tibetan Buddhist system. The local gods are dealt with according to standard Tibetan ritual procedures. Animal sacrifices have been outlawed, but there are strong traditions of their existence in the recent past, and a masked dance with non-Buddhist overtones relating to the local gods still exists.

The local monasteries in Karsha have strong connections to major monastic centres in Ladakh, southern Tibet and

(nowadays) India. A feature of Karsha in comparison with the other regions is its position on a relatively important trade route and its degree of incorporation into the two major traditions. The region was part of the Hindu state of Kulu before British rule was established, and the local ruling elite, the Thakurs, had dual Hindu and Buddhist identities, as did the deity at the major local pilgrimage centre of Triloknath. The people of Karsha, for all of their ability to adopt Hindu identities when it suits, and their awareness of the continuing differences between themselves and the Tibetans, have basically been absorbed into the universalistic sphere of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture.

It would clearly be unwise to try to construct a historical sequence in which Gyasumdo, Humla and Karsha represent successive stages on a Mumford-like typology. The picture is more complex than such typologies allow. We do not know if the Gurung, Bura or Karshapa had a stronger sense of ethnic identity or greater cultural autonomy in the past than they have today, or how long the Tibetan populations of Gyasumdo or Ladog have themselves been Tibetan. The presence of caste Hindu society and the Hindu state of Nepal provides additional complicating factors. The three case studies nevertheless seem to represent different degrees of 'Tibetanisation,' of incorporation of 'tribal' populations (to use the Indian and Nepalese terminology) into the major cultural patterns of Tibetan, and to some degree also Hindu, society. The issue of animal sacrifice is one of the diacritic features that indicate stages in this incorporation. Local and universal values, closeness and distance from major trade routes and political centres, and economic issues, are all relevant dimensions of the field of analysis. One could easily add a series of further case studies of the same type, for example from southeast Tibet (Naxi and Yi people) or northeast (Tu people).

The point of the exercise is simply to exemplify the relevance of Highland Southeast Asian categories and questions to Tibetan material. These categories and questions tend to cut

across the distinctions that are familiar within Tibetanist discourse, and help to break them down (in this case, for example, those between Buddhist Tibetans and non-Buddhist or partly-Buddhist tribals). Perhaps this kind of cross-fertilisation can bring some welcome new approaches into a field that, as I suggested earlier in this chapter, badly needs them. Ultimately, of course, it is not a question of whether Tibetans or highland Nepal peoples are 'really' Southeast Asians. To ask this would be to confuse analytic categories with reality. What I hope to have suggested in this chapter, however, is that the frameworks to which Tibetanists have become attached for historical reasons are not necessarily the most appropriate, and that the kind of shift in perspective which I have described may be a valuable supplement and corrective to our established practices. Making such shifts in perspective may, I hope, both help to expand Tibetan studies beyond the parochial concerns to which it has so often been restricted, and lead us into real dialogue with the wider community of Asian scholars.

Notes

1. This statement is, I should add, not meant as an endorsement of Goldstein's actual position, which strikes me as itself relatively naive (see Samuel 1993: 56-8, 586n2, 592n3).
2. The well-recognised role of Buddhist India in the development of Tibetan Buddhism makes little difference to this picture, since Indian 'influences' on Tibet are treated, for the most part, as coming to an end with the Muslim invasions of Bihar and Bengal in the thirteenth century.
3. Among exceptions, one might mention Rolf Stein and some of his students in France, Luciano Petech in Italy, and Elliot Sperling and Chris Beckwith in the USA.
4. Pascale Dollfus's recent study (1989) is a welcome exception.
5. Two relevant areas for investigation might be the shamanism complex among e.g. the Kham Magar (Oppitz 1981, 1986; de Sales 1991) or the Gurung (Mumford 1989), as contrasted with the spirit-mediumship and spirit-possession more characteristic of Hindu societies, and the emphasis in ritual and everyday life on collective auspiciousness, good fortune and interdependence among many of these peoples (cf. McHugh 1989 on the Gurung).

6. A recent collection edited by Susan Russell (1989) provides a good survey of the current state of research.
7. Some recent work on Nepal points in the same direction, e.g. Macdonald 1989; de Sales 1992.
8. An exception is Fürer-Haimendorf's early argument about the relationship between the introduction of the potato and the growth of Sherpa monasticism (1964).
9. See, for example, Aziz 1981; Levine 1981; Lichter and Epstein 1983. This aspect of Tibetan communities has, however, received little emphasis in the literature.

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