

## HOW BUDDHIST ARE BUDDHIST COMMUNITIES? THE CONSTRUCTION OF TRADITION IN TWO LAMAIST VILLAGES

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To tell us that every Species of Things is endow'd with an occult specifick Quality by which it acts and manifests Effects, is to tell us nothing.

Isaac Newton, *Optics* (1717)

### 1. *Introduction: Buddhism in Buddhist Society*

STRICTLY speaking, there is no anthropology of Buddhism, only the anthropological study of Buddhist societies. The distinction is more than a quibble and needs to be made for the purposes of the present article.

Buddhism is a system of beliefs and precepts which incorporates a world-view and specifies what sort of behaviour is most consistent with that world-view. For example, the fact that renunciation is one of its fundamental ideals has led purists within the religion, as well as certain scholarly commentators, to conclude that the only true Buddhists are monks. This is not to say that there is a single code of conduct which is universally accepted by Buddhists: on the contrary, there are at least as many versions of what constitutes 'consistent' behaviour as there are Buddhist sects. But if Buddhism is defined in terms of a set of sectarian precepts, then anyone who wishes to understand the doctrine and how it regulates the lives of its followers might as well stay at home and read the scriptures, since the behaviour of Buddhists will correspond precisely to these bookish standards. What does not so correspond is not Buddhism.

To express the situation in these terms is, of course, to parody a particular point of view, but the *reductio ad absurdum* does at least help us to establish the status of Buddhist literature in the anthropological study of Buddhist communities. The need for a sound grasp of the textual Buddhist heritage by the student of

Tibetan-speaking communities has been properly emphasized by several writers (most notably by Snellgrove 1966). The ethnographer without this background is liable to underestimate the homogeneous nature of religious belief across any region that has come under Tibetan influence. But the value of the literary aspect must not be exaggerated. Familiarity with Buddhist literature equips the researcher to understand Buddhism; by itself it cannot enable him to know how the religion is incorporated into the tradition of a particular community. Failure to appreciate this results in a reassuring if sterile discipline rather like train-spotting, which would try to find in real life a confirmation of textual specification. The rest of the tradition is accordingly treated as an adjunct to, or incidental to, or an aberration from, what happens according to the book. For the anthropologist, what is interesting about Buddhism is precisely this discrepancy between precept and practice, something that most often manifests itself as a compromise between the effort to live according to the rule and the exigencies of living in the world at all.

Some forms of Buddhism have features which, incidentally or by design, help them survive in a predominantly secular environment, and these features are predictably condemned by more austere sects as instances of compromise. In the case of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, the ritual content is one of the principal features that have rendered it more compatible with secular life than other, earlier forms of the religion.<sup>1</sup> Numerous writers have pointed out the adaptability of Lamaism in this respect and have described the various strategies whereby it is integrated into the village. The subject has usually been tackled from the point of view of the relationship between the representatives of the religion on the one hand—monks, lamas and so on—and the lay community on the other. This, again, implies a judgement of Buddhist societies according to a yardstick of conformity to the textual standard—from Buddhism downwards, so to speak.

In this article I propose to examine the matter from a different perspective, namely the way in which village communities form representations of the religion itself, and how Buddhist precepts and forms of behaviour are incorporated into local traditions. Paradoxically, as the conclusions will show, this approach may well be more consistent with a truly Buddhist view of society.

To approach Buddhist communities from this angle is more than a matter of merely locating them on a continuum of degeneracy from an ideal of orthodoxy. The establishment of a threshold that defines which societies are really Buddhist and which are not is a sectarian matter, one which has little relevance for

1. Not that the various Tibetan sects are agreed about what constitutes an acceptable level of compromise, or where to draw the line between Buddhist and non-Buddhist societies. For example, there is a continuing dispute about whether the country remained Buddhist during its 'dark age', between the end of the period of the kings (AD 842) and the 'second diffusion' of the religion in the eleventh century. On the one hand, there are those who contend that Buddhism did not survive this era because the basis of the religion is the Monastic Code (*vinaya*), and this vanished along with the dissolution of the kingdom. The opposite camp claims that Buddhism is based not on the Monastic Code but on ritual, and since this aspect survived, the religion cannot be said to have disappeared.

anthropology. What interests us is not the degree to which various communities diverge from some standard of perfection, but the different ways in which they do so.

The existence of these differences itself raises certain questions. For example, are the differences to be seen in a merely particularistic way as unique situations arising from the peculiar circumstances of each case, or do they exhibit certain common features which reveal something of the composition of tradition in villages to which they belong? Secondly, does a high degree of religious orthodoxy in a community mean that Buddhism forms the basis of its tradition as a whole? Thirdly, do Buddhist forms in a community necessarily represent Buddhist meanings, or might they acquire an entirely different significance in the new context?

The ethnographic material for this inquiry is drawn from two Lamaist communities in Nepal which display considerable differences in their approach to Buddhism. The villages in question are situated within a day's walk of each other in the upper Kali Gandaki region of Nepal's Mustang District, at an altitude of roughly 11,000 feet. The area is populated mainly by Tibetan-speaking people, following the Tibetanization of the region from about the eleventh century onwards. The present inhabitants are the descendants of Tibetan migrants from the north as well as of the indigenous people who have accepted the language and religion of the northerners to varying degrees. Some—particularly those whose ancestors lived in the main areas of Tibetan settlement—are now almost indistinguishable from the Tibetan population, whereas others retain their original Tibeto-Burman language and have been decidedly half-hearted about abandoning the cult of autochthonous gods in favour of Buddhism.

A comparison of the main features of the religious organization of the two communities will provide a basis for addressing the more general issue of the role of Buddhism in the formation of local traditions.

## 2. *Anatomy of a Monster*

Te is a prosperous village of forty-eight households whose inhabitants, the Tepas, speak a Tibeto-Burman dialect, locally called Seke, akin to that of the Thakalis who live a day's walk to the south.<sup>2</sup> The Tepas describe themselves, at least to outsiders, as Buddhists. The community is unique in the region in so far as it is strictly endogamous, a feature which is partly responsible for it being regarded with mistrust and suspicion by the surrounding villages. The Tepas do little to improve their public image but exacerbate it by a real xenophobia which is

2. The research from which the ethnographical material concerning Te is derived was financed by a generous grant from the Leverhulme Trust.

characterized by circumspection in their dealings with outsiders. Their attitude is exemplified by an annual oath which all villagers are required to swear. The oath contains five points, the most unequivocal of which is: 'It is a blessed thing to bring into the village information about the outside: if we carry information about the village to the exterior may we be utterly destroyed.'<sup>3</sup> Before the advent of Buddhism the religion of Te was a form of animism based on the worship of divinities associated with certain natural locations in the village. Its practice at the present time is confined to the offering of blood-sacrifices to the more important of these gods: apart from the sacrificer there are no mediumistic or other specialists associated with the cult, although the chief god takes possession of the villager of his choice for a few minutes each year and through him expresses his guarantee to protect crops and livestock in exchange for the requisite sacrifices.

Of far greater importance in terms of the corporate involvement of the village is the Buddhist heritage. Te bears all the hallmarks of a Lamaist community: there is an annual cycle of rituals which includes the main Buddhist calendrical ceremonies; there is an elaborate festival for the commemoration of the village's first lama; the second son in each family is assigned to the clergy, according to the Tibetan custom; and all the households extend patronage to a small community of Buddhist priests for the performance of domestic rituals. However, in spite of the wealth of Buddhist appearances Buddhist intent is almost entirely absent in Te. The religion was probably introduced to Te in three phases, but the result has not been the success of one sect over the others, nor the dissolution of differences to produce a sort of local ecumenism; instead, certain formal characteristics of each have been selected out and rearranged according to a logic different from the Buddhist ideas which originally produced them.

The first influential vector of the doctrine was a missionary lama called Bichua who, at some unspecified time,<sup>4</sup> established numerous Lamaist rituals in the village. He built a temple, instituted a community of monks and nuns, and put a stop to the sacrifice of animals. He is known to have written at least one book, which is likely to have been his autobiography combined with a collection of devotional poems. The religious changes he implemented survived him—for a

3. The remaining points are all, in one way or another, concerned with the proscription of socially divisive forms of behaviour (specifically theft, agricultural sabotage and adultery) among the villagers. The oath is discussed in detail in Ramble 1990, where it is argued that the principal unifying force in Te is actually derived from the unusual level of antagonism between its constituent households rather than from any notion of community solidarity.

4. The considerable uncertainty surrounding dates has been glossed over here since it does not affect the general argument. The Sakyapas, whom I identify as the second source of Buddhist influence in Te after Bichua Lama, were especially active in the area from at least the thirteenth century (Jackson 1978: 211), but this does not necessarily mean that they found a following in Te at this early stage. Unfortunately, I have found no textual references to Bichua Lama that might help in identifying the period of his activity. Tepas who were pressed to put a figure to what they understood by 'a very long time ago' suggested four or five hundred years, which would seem to be a reasonable estimate.

while. Some years after his death Te suffered a bad harvest, and villagers and cattle were simultaneously visited with sickness. Concluding that the author of these ills was the local pantheon, offended at the neglect it had suffered, the villagers resumed the sacrifice of animals and, to be on the safe side, immolated Bichua Lama's collected writings.

The ceremonies which the lama introduced were nevertheless continued. The most important of these is the major exorcism rite which marks the end of the old year throughout the Lamaist world. As it is practised at the present time, the ritual, known as *Satonse* in Te (*gTor-rgyab* in Tibetan), would be scarcely recognizable to Bichua Lama—or, for that matter, anyone else familiar with Lamaist ceremonial. The all-important liturgical content has been abandoned, the stately monastic dancing has been replaced by secular dance, and the casting out of the exorcistic effigy is followed by the sacrifice of a sheep.

If the Buddhist ideals promulgated by Bichua did not create a lasting impression on the Tepas, the charismatic figure of the lama himself evidently had a more profound impact. The ceremony is not a vehicle for Buddhist principles so much as a re-enactment of the events performed during the lama's lifetime. A villager is dressed up as a monk to resemble Bichua, and remains seated at a low table in the same attitude and location as the lama is said to have occupied while conducting the ceremony. On the low table are a sacred text—any text will do, since all the villagers are illiterate anyway—and the various ritual objects normally necessary for conducting such a ritual. During Bichua's lifetime, several centuries ago, the disposal of the exorcistic effigy, called a 'ransom', used to be the privileged responsibility of his three foremost patrons, one of whom was called Khangdo Palden, from the neighbouring village of Tshug. In modern times, when the ceremony reaches its climax at night, the Tepas carry the effigy down to the village boundary in procession and set it on the outskirts of Tshug. Those in front call out: 'Khangdo Palden, come and collect the ransom!' After a pause those behind ask, 'Have they come?' And those in front reply, 'They have come, they have come.'

An even more vivid instance of the lasting reverence accorded to Bichua Lama is a ceremony—unique to Te—called the Lama Guru, which is regarded as the most important celebration of the year. The occasion lasts five days and includes a wide range of performances and songs. The significance and origins of most of these can only be guessed at, and the villagers themselves exhibit no interest in these questions. The most solemn part of the festival is the section known as the 'Hidden Assembly', during which all the unmarried men and women aged between eighteen and twenty-five must remain isolated inside the temple overnight, under strict supervision, and sing a cycle of thirteen songs. These songs may not be sung at any time of the year but this; the words must be exactly correct, and in the event of a slip the supervisor orders the singers to recommence the cycle, however close to completion they may have been. The most striking feature about the songs is that, in spite of the strict attention paid to wording, they are in no recognizable language.

The songs are not in the vernacular Seke, nor in the local Tibetan dialect, and although they are somehow reminiscent of classical Tibetan they are not quite that either. However, with liberal use of the imagination the words can be adjusted to produce a series of religious verses in a literary style of Tibetan. The most likely explanation is that the songs are all that remain in the villagers' memory of the writings of Bichua Lama. The name of the ceremony, Lama Guru, supports this idea. This is probably a corruption of *lame gurlu* (Tib. *bla-ma'i mgur-glu*), 'the lama's songs'. The fact that the singers must all be unmarried perhaps recalls the community of monks and nuns which Bichua established and which would have been responsible for performing annually some more orthodox commemorative rite for their dead founder. The religious community declined for want of inspiration and the text was burned—the term for Buddhism is the same as the term for literature in the local dialect, and the autochthonous gods were inimical to Buddhism—but the lama himself remained sacred to the villagers. The ceremonies he created have been divested of Buddhist content and have become instead a framework within which his lifetime and gestures are annually regenerated. The meaning of the songs was lost with the decline of literary Tibetan, but they continued to be repeated as faithfully as possible on the grounds of their intimate connection with the lama, gradually accumulating errors as they were transmitted through generations of young men and women, like an ancient game of Chinese whispers.

The second phase of Buddhism in Te was implemented by the Sakyapas, who rose to be the dominant sect in the region. It became customary for the second son in each family to take holy orders, and many of these young monks received their higher religious education in the Sakyapa centres of Tibet. The religious impetus apparently declined around the early nineteenth century, perhaps—as in the case of the earlier Nyingmapa influence—because of the absence of charismatic religious figures, and the last ordained monk died a hundred years ago. All that now remains of Sakyapa influence is the continuing practice of the second son becoming a monk—with certain modifications. In accordance with tradition the monk does not marry, is exempted from domestic and village duties, and performs no agricultural labour. However, even though he makes no long-term quasi-marital alliance he need not be chaste, receives no religious initiation or training, does not dress differently from other villagers, and belongs to no monastic community. The result is a group of villagers who are ideally suited to spending all their time trading, and that is precisely what the monks of Te do. The fact that most households have at least one man who is duty-bound to be free of all domestic restrictions and instead passes his life in commerce on its behalf may go a long way toward explaining Te's prosperity relative to its neighbours.

The third major Buddhist influence on Te is represented by a family of Nyingmapa lineage priests who constitute a small neighbouring community called Tshognam. The priests have no involvement with Te at a corporate level (for example, they play no part in any of the calendrical rites, nor do they conduct ceremonies in the village temple) but instead maintain ritual relations with each of

the households individually. For the most part the Tepas depend upon them to perform domestic rituals, such as exorcisms and funerals. They are regarded somewhat as artisans of uncommonly high status who provide a necessary service, and cannot be said to have any significant ideological influence on the village: no lama whose parishioners perform regular blood-sacrifices can be said to have instilled even the most basic Buddhist precepts in his followers.

### 3. *Lubra: Tradition by the Book?*

Lubra is a small village of just nine extended households which has existed since the twelfth century as a community of hereditary Bon priests. To this day, in fact, the village follows the Bon religion, a syncretic system which includes early Persian and indigenous Tibetan beliefs but has been heavily influenced by Lamaist Buddhism. It must be stressed that for present purposes the differences between Bon and Buddhism are irrelevant, and where the former term is used it is for the sake of ethnographic accuracy, without any implication of ideological distinction.

The eldest son in each generation inherits the priestly status of his father and receives initiation and training from a senior lama. The Lubragpas (inhabitants of Lubra) do not, however, make their living by priestcraft—something which Tibetans generally hold in low regard—but, like other villages in the region, by agriculture supplemented by trade in grain and other commodities. The village priests—the heads of the households and their sons—form a body which conduct regular liturgical ceremonies in the village temple. Apart from the ubiquitous Tibetan agrarian rites, the annual cycle of rituals comprises twenty-one such ceremonies, which are all firmly based in the Bon scriptural tradition. The Lubragpas identify themselves as Bon priests and are locally recognized as such.

The inhabitants of the area which includes Lubra and Te are stratified according to a four-rank hierarchy following a common Tibetan pattern. At the head are the nobles, followed by priests, commoners and finally landless artisans. Nobles and artisans form endogamous groups but priests and commoners may intermarry. Lubra is one of two single-rank villages (that is, containing no households of any other rank) of priestly status. Te is ranked in a subsidiary category of commoners reserved for indigenous groups who preceded the arrival of the Tibetans.<sup>5</sup>

Historical records indicate that Lubra was accorded special privileges by the local ruler as a mark of value for the rites which its members performed for their royal patron. In principle, rank is transmitted patrilineally, but in practice place of birth and residence are the determining factors. The offspring of commoner men who marry Lubra women and reside uxorilocally (normal practice if there is

5. The system of social stratification in the region is discussed in Ramble 1987.

no male heir) are rated as priests, while those of a Lubra man who marries into a commoner household are accorded commoner status.

In short, what guarantees the Lubragpas their rank in the regional hierarchy is not the hereditary status of their several lineages but the status of the place itself. Unlike the nobles, their position is not protected by endogamy, and all that distinguishes Lubra from commoner settlements is its corporate priestly activity. It is important that the Lubragpas be seen to act as priests and that they should have justifiable grounds for doing so—that is, patrons for whom to perform ceremonies.

Support for the Bon religion in the area has declined over the generations. Ceremonies are expensive affairs, and if the Lubragpas' performance of them depended on the irregular sponsorship of devout patrons they would perform very few indeed in the course of a year and thereby throw their rank into jeopardy. Nor, for that matter, could they get around the problem by subsidizing the ceremonies themselves: client-priests must have, and must be seen to have, patrons.

Lubra has managed to fulfil these requirements by a system which maximizes all the possible benefits of patronage. The liturgical ceremonies held in the village temple are not one-off affairs that are repeated only when a pious villager decides to sponsor one: once a ceremony has been introduced into the calendar, it remains there in principle for eternity according to a contract between priests and patrons. The system may be described briefly.

Imagine that I am a noble or a commoner (or, less probably, an artisan) whose father has recently died. In order to help the latter through the difficult stages following death I perform some worthy act, the merit for which will accrue to him. I approach the Lubragpas and tell them that I wish to contribute towards the incorporation of a new ceremony into their calendar, give them, say, 500 rupees, and ask for the merit generated by my act to be dedicated to my father. The word will go around that a new ceremony is to be set up, and other people, like myself, who wish to generate some merit either for themselves or for ailing or dead relatives will make similar contributions. Let us say that a total of 8,000 rupees is collected in this way. The Lubragpas distribute the sum (not necessarily equally) among their nine households, who treat it exactly like a capital loan for trading, where the normal annual interest rate to the investor is ten per cent. The difference is that in this case the investors—including myself—do not expect the capital to be returned: we do, however, expect to receive our annual ten per cent interest—not in the form of cash, but in the equivalent quantity of merit. Each of Lubra's households uses the sum in trading and must contribute ten per cent of the portion of the investment it received to purchasing the requisites (oil, grain, butter and so forth) for an annual performance of the ceremony we have sponsored. The amount of profit made on the investment of course depends on the commercial prowess of the lamas, and anything beyond the ten per cent they keep for themselves.

Thus the ceremony I have helped to sponsor will be performed each year on a scale corresponding to 800 rupees, that is, ten per cent of the total investment,



and my late father will annually receive merit to the value of fifty rupees, or one tenth of my own contribution.

The advantage of this system to the investor is that he or his chosen beneficiary receives merit every year as long as the ceremony he sponsored continues to be performed. By the end of ten years he has recouped his original investment, and some of the ceremonies in Lubra's calendar may have been there for centuries. The advantage to the Lubragpas is even greater. In purely economic terms they probably do not gain much: however welcome the investors' capital may have been to the generation of priests who received it, it is their present descendants who have inherited the obligation of repaying the annual interest in the form of requisites for the ceremonies. The value of the system lies in the fact that their priestly role is independent of the caprices of local religious conviction at any given period. They are not made to look ridiculous if villagers no longer commission ceremonies from them. On the contrary, the priests are bound by contracts arranged between their forebears and the long-dead patrons whom they cultivated to perform twenty-one ceremonies each year.

#### 4. *Buddhism as a Component of Tradition*

From this outline of Lamaism in Te and Lubra, we can isolate the significant features of their treatment of the religion and assess their relevance to the study of Buddhism in local tradition.

Buddhism has been presented to Te in three packages, as it were, each consisting of an entire system of ideals and rituals, as well as precepts for the regulation of behaviour. In the absence of any lasting authority to point out how the components of each system are placed with respect to one another—and to stress the fact that the donor of the package is not an integral part of the system—Te has devised its own unique formula for their assembly. This has consisted of abandoning precepts altogether, of selecting aspects that, from a Buddhist point of view, are often irrelevant, and reconstituting them in a non-Buddhist way.

Let us take as an example the episode during the Satonse festival when a village monk is dressed up to represent Lama Bichua. From the original, Buddhist point of view the important features of the tableau would have included the following: the protagonist was an initiated lama who was performing a ceremony based on Buddhist precepts; the volume on the table in front of him was the particular text which was doctrinally appropriate to that ceremony; the ritual objects were there to be used in a specific way in order to enhance the efficacy of the performance. From the actual context, it is clear that the features that have been selected as significant by the Tepas are that the celebrant was Bichua Lama; that this ceremony was first performed during his lifetime; the particular location

in which he sat to perform the ceremony; that he was dressed in a specific way; and that there were certain objects, including a book, in front of him.

A similar comparison could be made between the Buddhist and Tewa representations of village monkhood. In spite of the many resemblances which Te's version of the institution bears to the orthodox model, the fact that certain aspects—principally chastity and religious activity—have been filtered out means that, from the Buddhist standpoint, the Tepas have missed the whole point of the exercise.

In short, the Tepas have not treated Buddhism as an entire system in which the formal properties, either alone or in special combinations, have certain given meanings. They have used it rather as raw material, divisible stuff which they have broken up and employed in the construction or elaboration of a local tradition. There is certainly a great wealth of these formal properties—objects, actions, forms of behaviour—represented in this tradition, but in no case have they retained their Buddhist meaning.

The immediate question raised by this situation is, why has Te selected these particular aspects of Buddhism and arranged them in this way rather than another? The treatment of the second and third phases—the institution of village monks and the relationship with the Tshognam lamas—invites an easy answer, namely that the institutions have a functional value for the village: the 'monastic' body is economically expedient, and the Tshognam priests meet essential emotional needs in performing life-cycle rituals. But this reasoning does not help us much with the legacy of Bichua Lama, for which there is no ready functional explanation.

The entire process can be reasonably described in terms of a more general statement: certain aspects of Buddhism have been regarded as significant and have been incorporated into the tradition because of their relevance to other aspects of that tradition.<sup>6</sup> This point will be taken up again below. In spite of the considerable differences between the two villages, this perspective on Te helps us understand the seemingly more straightforward case of Lubra. With respect to the piecemeal construction of its entire tradition Te is, as suggested earlier, a monster, a sort of regional anomaly. To push the anatomical metaphor a little further, the observation of dysfunctional traits in an organism often plays a key role in

6. Sperber (1985) has proposed an epidemiological analogy to address the question of why some cultural representations are more 'catching' than others and how they come to be distributed as they are. Some representations—beliefs, for example—are cultural because they have been internalized by a large number of individuals. (He distinguishes 'mysterious' beliefs from 'trivial' ones, and suggests that the 'winning mysteries' are those which are more evocative and memorable.) Other kinds of representations, such as institutions, cannot be internalized by individuals and may not have a homogeneous distribution: 'the distribution of some representations in certain ways causes other representations to be distributed in other ways' (*ibid.*: 86-7). This much is borne out by Lubra and Te; but since Sperber's treatment of what he would call 'heterogeneous distributions'—our main concern—is an afterthought expressed in terms of the individual psychological processes that are his main preoccupation, it does not take us much further than this assertion.

understanding the mechanisms of the norm; by the same token, the observations made in Te equip us to trace, in contexts where they are less apparent, processes similar to those which the village's anomalous nature throws into exaggerated relief.

Lubra's treatment of Bon is fundamentally different from Te's handling of Buddhism in so far as it has not effected any separation of forms and meanings. The religion has been incorporated into the village's tradition in its entirety in accordance with literary prescription, so that a visiting Bonpo from, say, Eastern Tibet would not find any aspect of Lubra's religious life shocking or unfamiliar. Faced with this high degree of orthodoxy and the fact that religion plays such a major part in the lives of the villagers, the observer is tempted to regard Bon as the basis of Lubra's tradition. Bon precepts are expressed in a corpus of regularly occurring rituals, and economic strategies are organized in such a way as to permit the continuity of this ritual cycle. The temple ceremonies correspond to orthodox beliefs in accordance with the specification of the great tradition, the priests perform these ceremonies, and the organization of the economic aspect is conducted through the households of the priests. The entire tradition seems to be constructed around a nucleus of textually prescribed belief.

To understand the role of Bon in Lubra's tradition it must first be remembered that, unlike Te, this village does not function in social isolation. The identity of the Lubragpas is indeed based on the fact that they are Bonpo priests. But being a priest has no meaning except in the context of a regional perspective which includes all the other ranks. It is precisely because of these other ranks that the Lubragpas perform ceremonies: if it were not for the nobles, commoners and artisans they could not be priests. The other ranks accept the status of the Lubragpas because the latter, as priests, hold the monopoly on the production of a locally valuable commodity—merit. If the demand for this commodity has diminished in recent times, the Lubragpas' priestly status has remained unaffected; they are known by all to be committed to the performance of the rituals according to the terms of a contract essentially no different from that between a trader and his creditors, and the solemnity of that is something the most irreligious Tibetan will appreciate.

To say that the Lubragpas are priests is a statement of the same order as calling Te and Lubra Buddhist societies. The designation is not definitive. It is descriptive and used metonymically. To be priests the Lubragpas must, among other things, be traders and cultivators, or else the complex system of patronage which maintains their regular cycle of rituals would not be possible. Bon represents a sizeable component of their tradition but it is not the centre of it: it does not exist in the village as an independent force, but stands in a dynamic relationship with other elements which include commerce, agriculture, marriage rules, and conformity to the hierarchical principles of the larger community.

### 5. Conclusion: A System of Mutual Dependence

The ethnographic examples given here leave no doubt that Buddhist precepts are not the organizing principle in the tradition of a community. Nor, in cases such as Te, where Buddhist ideals are very obviously absent, can we account for the selection and reorganization of Buddhist forms by invoking some other abstract quality. The way in which Buddhism has been incorporated into Te tradition and preserved has nothing to do with 'tradition-mindedness' or 'conservatism', but is explained within the context of all the social domains that make up the life of the community. The cohesiveness of traditions and our heuristic use of certain expressions—such as 'selection' and 'reorganization' in the last sentence—contribute to the fiction that there is a ghost in the machine.<sup>7</sup> In Lubra, the economic organization of the rituals and the social status of the villagers is not ultimately derived from a Bonpo world-view: rather the integrity of Bonpo ideas and forms must be understood as part of the pattern formed by all the components of the village's tradition.

The concept of a system of mutually dependent elements devoid of any separate controlling agency is hardly alien to Buddhist thought. One of the fundamental tenets of the religion is the doctrine of dependent origination, according to which the individual personality comes into existence as the fourth in a nexus of twelve interdependent causes. The series begins with ignorance and ends with ageing and death, but immediately recommences in accordance with the nature of cyclic existence. The personality consists of five aggregates, each a composite of lesser phenomena. These phenomena have no quality of permanence but 'manifest themselves momentarily something like the dots of which the images on a television screen are composed' (Snellgrove 1987: 22).<sup>8</sup> The most radical feature of this scheme is that there is no notion of any soul or self either underlying the constituent aggregates or forming part of their number. The self is nothing more than a *trompe-l'oeil* produced by the concatenation of transient phenomena.

Bearing in mind the limitations of any comparison between individual organisms and societies, we can find in the Buddhist world-view itself a fair analogy of the mechanisms involved in a tradition and the way religion is incorporated into them. The Buddhist concept of the individual is translatable to the social sphere not in terms of its details, but in terms of the principles whereby

7. A detailed discussion of the processes involved in the formation and continuity of tradition is to be found in a recent book by Pascal Boyer. The work attempts to establish a more precise understanding than the conveniently vague conception that 'traditional phenomena are linked to, and explained by a set of underlying ideas or representations' (1990: 4).

8. See Snellgrove's book also for a recent description of the concept of dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*) and related doctrines (1987: 14-28). (The book is reviewed below by David Gellner.) A more detailed treatment of the subject is to be found in Hopkins 1983 (see pages 183-196, 278, 271, 201ff.).

the elements which compound the unit are accorded their relative status. To this extent the comparison is not far-fetched and the areas of correspondence are easy to establish. The visible and audible acts that make up a tradition are analogous to the temporarily manifesting impulses that comprise the individual, while the identity of a community is an epiphenomenon arising from the aggregation of these acts. The perspective helps us to dispense with the misleading notion of a corporately held and independent entity existing in the minds of the people, generating and being represented in social phenomena. At best, this identity is no more than a succinct description of the way in which traditional phenomena interact.

Since our interest here is fairly narrowly focused on the mechanics of tradition in Buddhist societies, the correspondence borne out by the ethnography might be framed in more specific terms: Buddhist ideas do not constitute the core of the social tradition in Buddhist societies. The fact that religion happens to occupy a substantial part of a society's time and effort may create this impression, but Buddhism is in fact just one of all the traditional phenomena which interact on the periphery, as it were, to produce the illusion of a centre. Break the chain of interdependent causes, disunite the aggregates, and there is nothing at all.

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