The Monastery Rules: Buddhist Monastic Organization in Pre-modern TIbet

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4. ENTRANCE TO THE MONASTERY[325]

Introduction

Tibetan society before 1959 is often seen as highly stratified and hierarchical, offering limited opportunities to climb the socio-economic or socio-political ladder. In the 1920s, Charles Bell supposed that of the 175 *rtse drung* – the monastic government officials at the Ganden Phodrang – forty were from families that supplied the lay-officials (*drung 'khor*) whereas the rest were the sons of ordinary Tibetans who were chosen from the many monks of one of the Three Great Seats: Drepung, Sera, and Ganden. This, along with other similar examples, is often seen as evidence that social mobility in Tibet was possible, but that becoming a monk was a first requirement to move up in life for those from a 'working class' background. Bell furthermore noted that: 'Among the laity it is wellnigh impossible in this feudal land for a man of low birth to rise to a high position; but a monk, however humble his parentage, may attain to almost any eminence'.[326] If the above statement is correct – and there is no reason to believe that it is not – it raises the question whether the monkhood itself was open to all. And if it was not, what were the criteria for entering a monastery? In this chapter I intend to answer these questions and to demonstrate the limits of this vow-induced social mobility and shed some light on the opportunities and limitations of ordinary Tibetans in pre-modern times.

One of the few avenues of climbing up the social and political ladder was to join a powerful monastery. In modern-day Tibetan monasteries in exile, 'anyone who shows the slightest inclination' can become ordained and even the restrictions with regard to who can or cannot enter the monkhood contained within the Vinaya are 'routinely disregarded'.[327] The widespread assumption, perhaps based on this contemporary practice, is that this open-door policy is a historical continuation: that any male at any given time and place in Tibet could become a monk and make something of himself.[328] This idea is perhaps strengthened by the popular image of Buddhism as a religion that originally agitated against the caste system and strove towards a more egalitarian society. However, some *katikāvata*s, the monastic guidelines of Sri Lankan monasteries stemming from the 12th century, state that men of low birth were not allowed to become monks and elsewhere mention that it was the king who prohibited low castes from entering the order.[329] One *katikāvata* relates that the new monk should be examined according to *jāti* and *gotra* (caste) although it is unclear how this was done.[330] The question is thus whether the idealized images, both of Tibetan monasticism and that of Buddhism in general, correspond with historical realities. Some of the information on this issue is conflicting to say the least.

Who Could Enter the Monastery?

Sarat Chandra Das, who visited Tashi Lhunpo monastery towards the end of the 19th century, states that 'the order of the Lamas is open to all, from the highest noble to the

[325] This chapter is a slightly adapted version of Jansen, 2013b: 137-164.
[326] Bell, 1931: 169.
[327] Gyatso, 2003: 222.
[328] Goldstein's coining of the phrase 'the ideology of mass monasticism' has contributed to the notion that the monkhood in Tibet was open to all, see Goldstein, 1998 and Goldstein, 2009. For a critique of this position see Jansen, 2013a: 111-39.
[329] Ratnapala, 1971: 259.
[330] ibid.: 141.

Ragyabas, the lowest in the social constitution of Tibet'[331] while elsewhere he notes that to be admitted to Tashi Lhunpo one could not be one of the 'lower castes'.[332] The latter statement, along with the numerous restrictions that are contained in some of the bca' yig, suggests that entry to the monkhood and admission to the monastery were at times and at certain monasteries restricted. The custom of restricting different types of people from joining the Sangha or a monastery was not a Tibetan invention. To understand what drove the Tibetans to exclude certain groups of people from entering the monastery, we need to first look at the Indic materials. Despite the widely held view that Buddhism does not distinguish people according to their birth, caste or race, there are ample Buddhist sources that show that one's background often did matter. Guṇaprabha's *Vinayasūtra*, which is one of the main Vinaya-texts used by all Tibetan Buddhist traditions, states a number of restrictions in the chapter on ordination, the *Pravrajyāvastu* (*Rab tu byung ba'i gzhi*).

Although the classification is not made in the text itself, one can distinguish (at least) three different types of reasons for excluding someone from becoming a monk. One could be excluded on the basis of one's physical disposition, that is to say, people who were handicapped, ill, deformed, had one of the five sexual 'disabilities,' who were too young, or even too old, were not eligible. Then there were those who were excluded on the basis of their behaviour, which is to say those who had committed any of the five seriously negative acts (*mtshams med lnga*); monks who had broken any of the root vows;[333] known criminals, and people who generally were deemed to be too troublesome. Lastly, people could be excluded on the basis of their background or their social circumstances. Some of these were slaves (*bran*, S. *dāsa*), the king's soldiers, and people without permission from their parents.[334]

So far, excluding the people mentioned above appears quite commonsensical – from a socio-economic point of view, if nothing else – for allowing them to seek refuge in a monastic community may have meant getting on the wrong side of the authorities and society, depriving it of work-force and sons. However, the *Vinayasūtra* also mentions other groups of people: 'cobblers' (*lham mkhan*), and those of low caste (S. *caṇḍāla*, *gdol pa*) and 'outcastes' (S. *pukkasa*, *g.yung po*) may not be ordained.'[335] The Sanskrit version contains, but the Tibetan translation omits, the chariot-makers (S. *rathakāra*, *shing rta byed pa*) from this list. Guṇaprabha's auto-commentary, the *Vinayasūtravṛtti* does contain this group of excluded people.[336] The *Vinayasūtraṭīkā*, attributed to Dharmamitra, gives an explanation for each of the above terms given in the *Vinayasūtra*:

> A cobbler is someone who works with hides, a *gdol pa* is someone of an inferior caste, and a *g.yung po* is a barbarian (*kla klo*). These types of people

[331] Das, 1965 [1893]: 4.
[332] ibid.: 7.
[333] i.e. killing a human being, having sexual intercourse, lying (usually the false claim of spiritual accomplishments), and stealing (something of value).
[334] Bapat and Gokhale, 1982: 20, S.116-148. Gernet notes that in China slaves were not to be ordained and that this seems to be supported by the Vinaya (referring to Rhys Davids and Oldenberg, 1881-1885, Mahavagga vol. I: 47; 199), not because of their lowly state but because they were owned by someone else, see Gernet, 1995 [1956]: 129; 351, n. 171.
[335] *Vinayasūtra* (*'Dul ba'i mdo* D4117): 4b*: lham mkhan dang gdol ba dang g.yung po dang de lta bu rab tu dbyung bar mi bya'o*/. The relevant section in the Sanskrit text can be found in the above cited work: S.149-64.
[336] *Vinayasūtravṛttyabhidhānasvavyākhyāna* (*'Dul ba'i mdo'i 'grel pa mngon par brjod pa rang gi rnam par bshad pa* D4119): zhu 24b: *shing rta byed pa dang / lham mkhan dang / gdol pa dang / g.yung po dang / de lta bu rab tu dbyung bar mi bya'o zhes bya ba la* /

> may not be given food and [thus] there also is a prohibition on ordaining them. This should be understood to mean that there is a very strict prohibition against [them becoming] *śrāmaṇeras* (*dge tshul*) and the like.[337]

It is unclear to which categories of people *gdol pa* and *g.yung po* refer here exactly. In this context, the word *gdol pa* seems to denote someone who is of low birth, but who exists within the caste-system, whereas the word *g.yung po* appears to carry the connotation of an outsider, a foreigner, or simply an outcaste. The explanation seems to suggest that there was no commensality between the givers of the food and the prospective receivers of the food and that this was perhaps the main problem. Although these are important and interesting issues, for the current purpose, it is not of crucial importance to understand what Buddhists in early India ultimately meant by the above terms, but rather how Tibetans understood, interpreted and applied them.

There can be no doubt that the Tibetan society into which Buddhism was introduced was a stratified one, but the Indic notions of caste cannot have been easily adapted, or 'culturally translated' by the Tibetans. It is therefore of some interest to look at what these concepts were taken to mean by Tibetan Buddhists in different times and places, by which we can better understand the way the various strata in Tibetan societies were conceived of. While in some contexts *g.yung* seems to mean 'civil' or 'civilians' (as opposed to the military (*rgod*)), during the time of the Tibetan empire,[338] in some Dunhuang texts (Pt 1089 and Pt 1077) the word *g.yung* appears to denote 'people of the lowest order, virtually outside the pale of Tibetan society'.[339] According to the *Tshig mdzod chen mo* the word *g.yung po* refers to *caṇḍāla* or *bukkasaḥ*,[340] a low caste in early India, which is said to be the same as *gdol rigs*. However, the second meaning given is that of a pejorative word for a group of people who eat crabs, frogs, and tadpoles.[341] In the same dictionary, *gdol pa* is also taken to mean *caṇḍāla*, but the word is further explained to mean butcher (*gshan pa*) as well as 'a low caste in the society of early India.'[342] The phrase *gdol rigs* is said to denote 'people who are even lower than the *śūdra* (*dmangs rigs*), the lowest caste of the four *varṇa*s in early India, [and they consist of] blacksmiths, butchers, hunters, fishermen, weavers (*thags mkhan*) and bandits (*chom po*), etc.'[343] All these dictionary entries show that the words can denote both Indic and native notions of people at the bottom of society.

The monastic guidelines under examination here deal with these concepts in a similar way, usually displaying an awareness of them being Vinayic stipulations while translating them to the societal sensibilities of Tibetan Buddhists, in different times and different contexts. As alluded to above, these notions crop up in the monastic

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[337] *'Dul ba'i mdo'i rgya cher 'grel pa* (**Vinayasūtraṭīka*) (D4120): 'u 36b: *lham mkhan dang gdol pa dang g.yung po dang de lta bu rab tu dbyung bar mi bya'o zhes bya ba la/ lham mkhan zhes bya ba ni ko lpags mkhan no/ /gdol pa zhes bya ba ni rigs ngan no/ /g.yung po zhes bya ba ni kla klo'o/ /de lta bu zhes bya ba ni zan bza' bar mi bya ba ste/ de dag ni rab tu dbyung ba'i phyir yang bkag pa nyid yin pas dge tshul nyid la sogs pa dag gi phyir ches shin tu bkag pa yin par rig par bya'o*/ To my knowledge, a Sanskrit version of this text is not extant.

[338] Iwao, 2012: 66.

[339] Richardson, 1983: 137.

[340] This appears to be a misreading for *pukkasa*, which is understandable because graphically *bu*/*pu* may appear very similar.

[341] *Tshig mdzod chen mo*: 2624: 2) *sdig srin dang sbal pa lcong mo sogs za mkhan gyi mi rigs la dma' 'bebs byas pa'i ming*/

[342] ibid.: 1354: *<caṇḍala> bshan pa/ sngar rgya gar gyi spyi tshogs nang gi dman pa'i rigs shig*

[343] ibid.: *sngar rgya gar gyi rigs bzhi'i tha ma dmangs rigs las kyang dman pa'i mgar ba dang/ bshan pa/ rngon pa/ nya pa/ thags mkhan/ chom po sogs spyi'i ming*/

guidelines when the topics of admission to the monastery and entry to the monkhood are raised. The texts state limitations based not just on one's societal background, one's physical condition, or one's past conduct, but also on one's economic position, as well as one's place of origin. To a certain extent, however, these limitations are interlinked. In the monastic guidelines, the most common bases on which people are excluded from becoming a monk are 1) one's origins 2) one's economic position, and 3) one's societal background.

Exclusion on the Basis of One's Origins

As explained in Chapter 1, monasteries in the Tibetan Buddhist world had different functions: some were small local monasteries that mainly served their direct community with ritual, prayers and ceremonies, others were large and had a focus on education, some concerned themselves with retreat and practice, and yet others had a strong administrative function. These different monasteries required and attracted different types of monks. Small village monasteries were usually populated with monks from the direct surroundings, while certain large, prestigious and well-positioned monasteries had a more interregional and sometimes even international character.

Because Das accurately noted in 1893 the restrictions with regard to certain people entering the monastery of Tashi Lhunpo, which was both a large educational and administrative institution, he may have seen or known of its bca' yig written in 1876 (*me byi lo*).[344] This work gives a long list of people who were not allowed to enter the monastery as monks.[345] It stipulates that people from the direct surroundings of the monastery could not join Tashi Lhunpo.[346] Sandberg notes that this rule extended to all Gelug monasteries in the Tsang (gTsang) area in Central Tibet: one was not to enter a monastery less than forty miles away from home.[347] A similar restriction was in place at the Bon monastery of Menri; local men were discouraged from joining. Most monks living at Menri monastery before 1959 were said to be from the east of Tibet.[348] Cech's informants said that this rule was to guard against the danger of nepotism. We can perhaps then deduce from this that nepotism was something certain monastic institutions – particularly those that conducted 'business' with the lay-people in the immediate surroundings – tried to avoid.[349]

The reasons that some larger and more prestigious monasteries did not enroll monks from the neighbourhood would therefore seem to be largely pragmatic. Such monasteries were well known for their multi-ethnic make-up. Drepung monastery in the late 17th century had monks from almost all Tibet's neighbours. Its bca' yig, written by the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1682, notes the presence of Indian, Newari, Mongolian, Hor and Chinese monks.[350] Even though in Drepung the multi-ethnic monastic society was a *fait accompli*, the Fifth Dalai Lama viewed the presence of so many foreigners as a possible security threat, mentioning that this might result in the

[344] *bKra shis lhun po bca' yig*: 35-158.
[345] It should be noted here that people requesting admission to the monastery could either be laymen in search of ordination or monks from other monasteries.
[346] The villages that are named are Zhol, rNams sras and bDe legs. *bKra shis lhun po bca' yig*: 68.
[347] Sandberg, 1906: 122.
[348] Cech, 1988: 70.
[349] Restricting people from entering the monastery on the basis of their regional origins did not just happen in Tibetan Buddhist areas; in Korea, during the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392) not just slaves but the inhabitants of entire regions were prevented from ordination. See Vermeersch, 2008: 155.
[350] *'Bras spungs bca' yig*: 302.

Bar skor getting set on fire.[351] This mistrust of foreign monks may also be implicit in the admission-policy of Namgyel dratshang (rNam rgyal grwa tshang). Although the only extant set of monastic guidelines does not state any restrictions whatsoever,[352] Thub bstan yar 'phel, the current general secretary (*drung spyi*) of the monastery in Dharamsala, India, informed me that its admission-policy has historically been very strict. He mentioned that traditionally only 'pure' Tibetans (*bod pa gtsang ma*) could become monks there. This was because Namgyel dratshang was the Dalai Lama's monastery, which made it part of the establishment. It could prove harmful to the Dalai Lama's government if a foreign monk would step out of line. Thub bstan yar 'phel noted that since the Dalai Lama's resignation from politics in 2011, this policy, that effectively excludes non-Tibetan Tibetan Buddhist 'Himalayan peoples' (*hi ma la ya'i rigs brgyud*), has become less relevant. However, this rule of only admitting Tibetans is upheld to this day.[353]

In Sikkim, people were also prevented from entering the monastery on the basis of their origins. According to the 'History of Sikkim' (*'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*) only Tibetan stock was admitted in the Sikkimese 'Pemionchi' (*Pad ma yang rtse*) monastery,[354] thereby effectively excluding the Lepchas, many of whom did practice Tibetan Buddhism. In the *Gazetteer of Sikhim* it is mentioned that the 'novitiate' gets questioned by the disciplinarian and chant-master on his descent and if he has 'a good strain of Tibetan blood he is let off cheaply and vice versa'.[355] As the above citation suggests, the entrance fee was not equal for all. Carrasco notes that in Sikkim in the second half of the twentieth century, all new monks had to pay an admission fee, with the notable exception of those belonging to the nobility.[356] This admission fee was formalized at certain monasteries, but at most monasteries it was not a set fee but rather an offering by the parents.[357] Monasteries were (and are) fundamentally pragmatic: those which were short of monks would invite boys in, for little or no remuneration at all.[358] The likelihood remains, however, that certain, possibly more prestigious, monasteries did demand relatively high fees from monks-to-be and that this fee would be higher for certain groups of people. Theoretically, therefore, in some cases the poorest families would have been unable to afford to send their sons to the monastery, suggesting that another factor that limited access to the monastery was an individual's economic situation.

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[351] ibid.: *bar skor lta bur mi sna tshogs bsdad na me mi brgyag pa'i nges pa'ang mi 'dug*. Also see Jansen, 2013a: 109-39.

[352] This is the *bca' yig* written for Namgyel dratshang by the Seventh Dalai Lama, bsKal bzang rgya mtsho in 1727.

[353]Personal communication, Dharamsala, July 2012. One notable exception to this rule is of course Georges Dreyfus, who was admitted to this monastery at the behest of the Dalai Lama himself, but whose admittance met with some resentment from the other monks. See Dreyfus, 2003: 32.

[354] Carrasco, 1959: 188.

[355] Risley, 1894: 292.

[356] Carrasco, 1959: 188.

[357] For a description of a monk's admission into the monastery see Dreyfus, 2003: 59. It should be noted here that actually entering and living at a monastery and getting officially admitted to the monastery are separate occasions, and it is likely that certain 'monks' living at a monastery at particular times were never actually officially enrolled at the institution. On semi-monks and unofficial monks in Drepung see Jansen, 2013a:109-39.

[358] In some cases a chronic lack of new monks at a powerful monastery resulted in the levying of the 'monk-tax' (*grwa khral*). The topic of 'monk-tax' is in need of more academic attention. I plan to take this up as a research-topic in the near future.

Exclusion on the Basis of One's Economic Situation

It appears that in pre-modern Central Tibet, an ordinary family had to ask their 'landlord' for permission to send a son to the monastery. Surkhang notes that this permission had to come from the district officer (*rdzong dpon*) and that if permission was granted one would be presented with an official document called *'khrol tham*, a 'seal of release'.[359] Eva Dargyay, who bases her research on oral accounts, mentions that consent was always given due to social and religious pressure.[360] Even in the unlikely cases that this consent was everywhere and in all instances given, it still does not mean that ordination was always financially possible. A modern Tibetan-language book on Tshurphu (mTshur phu) monastery gives a rather detailed list of what one was expected to donate upon entrance. At least one communal tea to all the monks (*grwa dmangs*) had to be offered, for which seven round bricks of tea (*ja ril*) and ten *nyag lcags khal* of butter were required. This was called the 'enrolment tea' (*sgrig ja*). The book furthermore gives a long list of what quality scarves (*kha btags*) had to be given to whom by the new monk. This process of providing tea and scarves could then be repeated for the group of monks who shared a home monastery, but only in the case the monk came from another institution.[361] In Dwags po bshad grub gling during the first half of the 20th century, monks arriving from other monasteries to study were required to pay one silver *ṭam ka* upon entering and one such coin upon leaving.[362]

In Phiyang monastery (Phyi dbang bkra shis rdzong) in Ladakh the requirements for the enrolment tea were adjusted to the affluence of the family. I was told that all families could always afford to pay for it.[363] The originally oral version of the monastic guidelines for Sera je, which now has been written down, also mentions that the entry fee depended on what the individual could afford. For a layman to enter the monastery: 'he should offer the master at least a needle and some thread and [if he is well off] a horse or even an elephant.'[364] According to Snellgrove and Richardson however, 'would-be' monks at Drepung, after having made an application with the chief teacher of the house *(kham tshan*) of choice, had to provide a large amount of gifts and offerings just before the start of the Tibetan New Year.[365] The admission fee thus varied greatly over time and among monasteries.

Although it is by no means clear how affordable it was for average-income or poor families to provide such offerings, the above instances show that the monkhood was not as easily accessible as is sometimes imagined. In certain monasteries in Ladakh, a new monk had to have a monk-field (*grwa zhing*). This was a field that was owned and worked by the monk's relatives. The proceeds of the field would go towards the upkeep of the monk.[366] A son of a family that did not hold any land could

[359] Surkhang, 1986: 22.
[360] Dargyay, 1982: 21.
[361] *mTshur phu dgon gyi dkar chag*: 257, 8. The guidelines for *dGa' ldan mdo sngags chos 'phel 'chi med grub pa'i byang chub gling* from 1949 also enumerate the gifts a new monk was supposed to offer. See *'Chi med grub pa'i byang chub gling bca' yig*: 649.
[362] Nornang, 1990: 267, n. 16.
[363] Personal communication with dKon mchog chos nyid, Phiyang, August 2012.
[364] Cabezón, 1997: 350.
[365] Snellgrove and Richardson, 1986 [1968]: 238.
[366] Carrasco, 1959: 32, 3. A comparable system appears to have been in place at Dunhuang in the 9th and 10th centuries. Monks and nuns possessed fields and they hired labourers to farm their land, see Gernet, 1995 [1956]: 132.

therefore not become a monk.[367] A so-called monk-field was not always provided by the monk's family: dKon mchog chos nyid, an elderly monk at the Ladakhi Phiyang monastery, was assigned a field by the monastic authorities upon entering the monastery at eight years old in the 1930s. His relatives worked the field for him and he could live off the harvests.[368] This means that in certain monasteries in Ladakh the concept of 'monk-field' was flexible, and that actual ownership of the land was not a requirement, although it is obvious that one had to have relatives able and willing to work the field one was assigned.

A 13th century bca' yig for the monastery of Drigung thil states that an aspiring monk needed to have provisions that would last him at least a year: it is likely that poorer people would not have this kind of resources. This text, one of the earliest works actually (but probably posthumously) called a bca' yig, written by sPyan snga grags pa 'byung gnas (1175-1255), also requests monastic officials (*mkhan slob*) not to ordain people who had not gained permission from their superiors, or those who lacked superiors.[369] This indicates that there were indeed people, perhaps runaway servants, who sought refuge in the monastery, and that their presence was not welcomed. This is in many ways understandable: to allow landowners' servants to become monks would upset the social and economic balance, in particular in Central Tibet, where there tended to be a chronic shortage of labourers.[370] The materials available to me suggest, however, that concerns regarding the entrance to the monastery of 'lowly' individuals and fugitives were not purely of an economic nature.

Exclusion on the Basis of One's Social Position

Persons whose social position was low, persons whose position could not be verified, or those who were simply destitute, were not always welcomed by the monasteries in Tibet.[371] The author of the *'Bri gung mthil bca' yig*, mentioned earlier, clearly does not conceive of the monastery as a charitable institution: 'Ordaining all beggars and bad people without relatives will bring the Buddha's Teachings to ruin.'[372] It is clear from this text that the population at Drigung thil monastery was growing rapidly at the time of writing. There were too many people, possibly putting too much of a strain on the local population and its resources. Clearly, the author sPyan snga grags pa 'byung gnas wanted to put a stop to the unregulated population-growth at the monastery. He explains his wish for a more restrictive admission policy as follows:

> These people do all kind of things that are not in accordance with the Dharma here in greater Klungs in Central Tibet (*dbu ru klungs chen*). Because they

[367] To this day, Sri Lankan monasteries also only allow new recruits from the landholding caste, see Gombrich, 2006 [1988]: 166. Kemper makes a similar point, saying that except for a brief period of time only members of the Goyigama caste could become monks. See Kemper, 1984: 408. It is not clear, however, whether in contemporary Sinhalese society the decisive factor is one's birth in such a caste or the actual ownership of fields.

[368] Personal communication, Phiyang, August 2012. An interesting parallel to this is a Chinese decree issued in 955, which states those who cannot be supported by their parents may not enter the order. Gernet, 1995 [1956]: 45.

[369] *'Bri gung mthil bca' yig*: 248a.

[370] Goldstein, 1986: 96.

[371] Spencer Chapman furthermore notes that a high physical standard was also required for monks-to-be. Spencer Chapman, 1984 [1938]: 179.

[372] *'Bri gung mthil bca' yig*: 248a: *sprang po dang mi log bza' med thams cad rab tu phyung bas bstan par snub pa 'dug*

> cause annoyance and bring [us] disgrace, I request that from now on these types of people do not get ordained. If the likes of them do get ordained, then whatever established rules (*bca' khrims*) are made here, it will be as in [the saying] 'if the old cow does not die, there will be no end to the stream of wet [cow-] dung (*snyi slan*, sic: *rlan*).'[373] [Then] whether or not established rules are made, there will not be [any]. This is what it comes down to.[374]

It is possible that the author's main reason for not letting beggars and drifters become monks was that certain people had been abusing the system, becoming monks just so that they could acquire food or even enrich themselves. The problem with these types of people may have been that they lacked a support system, a family, which would ensure a level of social control. This does not mean that the author did not also entertain certain notions of class.

Kawaguchi mentions that people, such as blacksmiths, who would normally have difficulties in gaining access to the monastery, sometimes went to places far away and entered the monkhood having concealed their background.[375] Thus a prospective monk who arrived from further afield and who had no one to vouch for him would often be suspected of belonging to a lower social class. Although in Tibet caste as understood in the Indian context was never an issue of much import, this did not mean that class, in the broadest sense of the word, did not matter.[376] A late 17th century bca' yig for the monastery of Mindröl ling (sMin grol gling) states that people desiring to enter the monastery had to be *rigs gtsang*: this can be glossed as being of a pure 'type', 'class', 'background', 'lineage,' and even 'caste.' This phrase is thus very much open to interpretation. When I mentioned this term to a monk-official from Mindröl ling in India, he immediately suggested that it refers to people from blacksmith and butcher-families.[377] According to Cassinelli and Ekvall, butchers were not allowed to become monks at Sakya monastery. Men from blacksmith families were also not accepted into the monkhood, 'because they disturb the earth gods and make the implements of killing'.[378] Kolås cites a Chinese work, which, having a clear propagandist agenda, states that in pre-modern Tibet all lowly types (*rigs dman*) or impure people (*mi btsog pa*) were barred from entering the monastery. These low ranking people included butchers, blacksmiths, carpenters, leather-workers and corpse-cutters.[379] Spencer Chapman, a mountaineer who visited Lhasa in the early 20th century, despite being rather ignorant of Tibetan culture, writes that those whose line of work had to do with taking life were excluded from becoming a monk. He names tanners, butchers, gunsmiths, body-cutters and leather-workers.[380]

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[373] *'Bri gung mthil bca' yig* b reads *snyi rlan*. Due to its vivid imagery the gist of the proverb, despite it not being a very well known one, is quite clear.

[374] *'Bri gung mthil bca' yig*: 248a, b*: de 'dra ba rnams kyis dbu ru klungs chen 'dir chos dang mi mthun pa sna tshogs byed/ sun 'don/ zhabs 'dren rnams byed par 'dug pas/ de'i rigs rnams da phyin chad rab tu mi 'byin par zhu/ de 'dra ba rnams rab tu byung na 'dir bca' khrims ci byas kyang/ ba rgan ma shi na snyi slan rgyun mi chad kyi tshul du 'ong bar 'dug/ bca' khrims byas ma byas min 'dug/ rtsa ba 'dir thug nas 'dug*

[375] Kawaguchi, 1909: 435, 6.

[376] The concept of class as developed and defined by socialist thinkers did not exist in Tibet until modern times. In modern Tibetan *gral rim* is a neologism that denotes 'class.' See Kolås, 2003: 181-200, for an examination of notions of class in Tibetan society.

[377] Personal communication with Lama 'Tshul khrims', Dehradun, August 2012. This highly placed monk explicitly requested to remain anonymous; his name here is a pseudonym.

[378] Cassinelli and Ekvall, 1969: 269.

[379] Kolås, 2003: 188.

[380] Spencer Chapman, 1984 [1938]: 179.

The 19th century *bKra shis lhun po bca' yig*, in addition to excluding would-be monks on the basis of their place of origins, also gives further restrictions to do with social background:

> [Those not allowed are] outcastes (*gdol pa'i rigs*) who deal with killing, such as butchers, fishermen, hunters and those who are here in Tibet considered a bad 'class', namely blacksmiths and tanners, as well as villagers who are after sustenance and clothing, or those who have no land.[381]

The above demonstrates that the author of this bca' yig was well aware of the Vinaya rules, as he refers to outcastes, but he also gives the concept a local gloss by stating 'here in Tibet,' which shows his awareness that certain restrictions had to do with native sensibilities. One set of monastic guidelines, written by the Seventh Dalai Lama (1708-1757) for Sera je, stipulates that 'black people[382] such as blacksmiths, cobblers, beggars and the like may not be allowed to become estate-dwellers (*gzhis sdod*).'[383] Unfortunately, it is not clear whether this refers to monks who do not have 'resident' status or whether it pertains to all people living on grounds owned or managed by the monastery. However, earlier on, the text mentions that people from Kham and Mongolia who already belong to a subsidiary monastery (*gzhis dgon*) may not become residents (*gzhis pa*).[384] This suggests that the restriction in place against blacksmiths, cobblers and beggars becoming estate-dwellers might not necessarily have meant that their admission was refused outright but that, if they were admitted at all, they would maintain an outsider status.

Smiths – and blacksmiths in particular – were traditionally considered to be very low on the societal ladder and to be of a 'polluted' or unclean type (*rigs btsog pa/ rigs mi gtsang ma*). The reason for this pollution is interpreted by some to be because blacksmiths provide the implements of killing, thereby implying that the justification for their low status is a Buddhist one.[385] Other Tibetans answered the question why the smith is despised by saying that it simply had always been that way. However, when pressed to give reasons they commonly answered that it was because the work is dirty and dishonest, that they make weapons, the tools of killing, and because they work metal, the mining of which was prohibited because it was perceived to disturb the spirits, which in turn would bring ill fortune.[386]

The notion of pollution is not merely historical; in certain Tibetan and Himalayan communities it is still very much a feature of everyday life, and similarly the exclusion of people from entering the monkhood on the basis of their birth is something that was, until very recently, a commonly accepted occurrence among some communities of Tibetan Buddhists. In Spiti, boys from the lower classes were not allowed to become monks at the local level. Traditionally only sons of the land-owning and thus tax-paying *khang chen* class were allowed to become monks, while the blacksmiths (*bzo ba*) and Bedas (musicians) could not enter the monastery as

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[381] *bKra shis lhun po bca' yig*: 68: *bshan pa/ nya pa/ ling pa sogs srog gcod gi byed pa gdol pa'i rigs dang/ mgar ba/ ko pags mkhan sogs bod 'dir rigs ngan du byed pa rnams dang/ grong gseb pa 'tsho chas kyi phyir dang sa cha ma zin pa* [..]

[382] This phrase (*mi nag*) commonly refers to people who commit non-virtuous actions.

[383] *Se ra byes bca' yig*: 579: *mgar ba/ lham mkhan/ sprang po sogs mi nag gi gzhis sdod byed du mi 'jug*

[384] ibid.: 571: *snga sor khams sog gis gzhis pa byed srol med 'dug kyang/ bar skabs su sna tshogs shig byung yod 'dug pas/ da nas bzung khams sog dang/ gzhis dgon yod pa'i rigs kyis gzhis pa byas mi chog*

[385] Fjeld, 2008: 113.

[386] Rauber-Schweizer, 1976: 80, 1.

monks. In 2006, sixteen *bzo ba* boys from Spiti were admitted into Ganden Shartse (dGa' ldan shar rtse) monastery in South India. The rest of the community[387] summoned them to return to Spiti and punished the boys' families with a ban on access to water and fire (*me lam chu lam*), amounting to social ostracism.[388] This ban was only lifted in 2009 after letters of support by the head lama of the local monastery and the Dalai Lama were sent. The community still maintained that the boys of lower backgrounds should only ever become monks in monasteries outside of the Spiti area.[389] It is important to note here that the resistance to admitting people of 'blacksmith' background appears to have originated at the community level and not at the monastery one. This shows the level of influence a lay-community may have on monastic organization.

It can be surmised from the various examples given above that the exclusion of people on the basis of their societal status occurred throughout the ages, in monasteries of all different schools and in a variety of areas. While it is argued that in Tibet 'social inequality was based mainly on economic and political criteria'[390] and that the perception of pollution and the resulting 'outcaste' status is grounded in the present or original socio-economic status of these groups of people,[391] there may be more to it than that.

Reasons for Excluding Entry into the Monastery

It is rare for monastic guidelines to give explanations or justifications why a certain rule is made, aside from citing certain authoritative Buddhist texts. This in itself is telling of both the authors as well as the audiences of this genre of texts: it implies the assumption on the part of the author that his moral authority will not be questioned and that the justifications are already known by the audience. Thus the mere absence of explicit reasoning as to why certain individuals could not become monks does not mean that this policy always sprang forth from mere socio-economic concerns. It is imaginable that specific restrictions were imposed in certain areas so as to not upset the precarious equilibrium of labour and to avoid the monasteries becoming tax havens and shelters for runaway peasants. We also can see quite clearly that monasteries tended to act in accord with the ruling societal norms, as they must have been careful not to upset society in general. However, by making rules and regulations that reiterated these societal norms, the monasteries further solidified existing inequalities. This is much in line with the way in which the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya* positions the Sangha in society:

> The Buddhist rule that *dāsa*s ['slaves'], *āhṛtaka*s, etc., could not become Buddhist monks or nuns does not seem simply to accept the larger cultural and legal fact that such individuals had no independence or freedom of action (*svatantra*) and were a type of property; it seems to actively reinforce it. There is in any case no hint of protest or reform.[392]

[387] It is not clear whether this includes the inhabitants of the local monastery.
[388] The same practice occurs in Te, Mustang, where it is called *me bcad chu gcad* (to cut off the fire, to cut off the water). In addition to not being allowed access to water and fire, villagers may not share any food and drink with those boycotted, see Ramble, 2008: 178, 9.
[389] Tsering and Ishimura, 2012: 5-9.
[390] Thargyal and Huber, 2007: 67.
[391] Gombo, 1983: 50.
[392] Schopen, 2010b: 231.

From a purely pragmatic point of view, it made sense to exclude certain people: who in the traditional Tibetan society would have been willing to make donations, or to have prayers and rituals carried out by a monastery filled with beggars and outcasts?[393] It is tempting to look towards the doctrine of karma to explain why people of low birth, and who thus had accumulated less good karma, were not seen fit to become monks. This is, however, an argument that I have never come across reading pre-modern Tibetan texts.[394] I suspect that the aspect of pollution plays a larger role than previously acknowledged. This notion of impurity existed in- and outside of the monastery. The ideas of pollution continued into the monastic institutions not just because they had to accommodate the sensibilities of lay-people, who may have been unwilling to have monks from, for example, a blacksmith family perform the death-rites for their loved ones. In addition to these societal concerns, there are reasons to believe that these 'polluted' people were also excluded due to apprehension related to the presence of local deities, which were often transformed into protectors (*chos skyong*, *chos srung*, *srung ma*, *bstan srung*) where a religious institution was built.

One of the earliest works actually called a bca' yig gives an indication of the problem the presence of impure people could present for the gods living within the physical compound of the community. This short text by Rong zom chos kyi bzang po (1012-1088) was not written for a monastery but for a community of tantric practitioners, who were, in this case, preferably celibate but who were not (necessarily) ordained as monks. It names fives types of people who should not receive tantric vows (*dam tshig*, S. *samaya*,): butchers, hunters, thieves, robbers, and prostitutes. These people are classed as sinful (*sdig can*), but it is furthermore mentioned that one should not sleep alongside persons who are unclean (*gang zag mi gtsang ma*). The text names nine problems that may occur if these people 'and tantric vows are mixed' (*dam tshig bsres na*). One of them is that giving these people vows will upset the protectors and the clean *vajra-ḍākiṇi*s, and from that will arise [unfavourable] circumstances and obstacles.[395] The text then further explains how these unfavourable conditions would affect people's religious progress and how this in turn would debase the Teachings (*bstan pa dman par 'gyur ba*), and that the end result would be strife and disharmony in the community.

There is further evidence that suggests that the behaviour and 'cleanliness' of the religious practitioners and the benevolence of the protectors were seen to be intimately related. The set of monastic guidelines for Mindröl ling concludes by stating that those who go against the rules stipulated in the text will be punished by the protectors and their retinue,[396] and the author gTer bdag gling pa calls for the monks to behave well for that reason.[397] Another bca' yig in fact does not connect the mere keeping of the vows and behaving correctly to the munificence of the protectors,

[393] While I previously used the word 'outcaste' as a translation of *pukkasa*/ *g.yung po*, here the word 'outcast' is more apt, for in the Tibetan context the people who were turned away from the monastery were often those who had been banned or cast out of their village or tribe as a punishment for certain misdeeds.

[394] This is not to say that the model of karma is never used to justify the manner in which lower classes of people are treated in the Tibetan Buddhist world. An example of such reasoning, passed on orally and after 1959, can be found in Mumford, 1989: 47-9.

[395] *Rong zom bca' yig*: 399: *gsang sngags kyi srung ma rdo rje mkha' 'gro ma gstang ma rnams 'khangs te sngags pa rnams la rkyen dang bar chad 'byung ba* [..]

[396] *sMin sgrol gling bca' yig*: 313: *mthu stobs kyi dbang phyug dpal mgon lcam dral 'khor dang bcas pas*

[397] ibid.

but suggests that if one does not perform certain rituals or even the style of incantation of prayers according to one's own religious tradition one might invoke the wrath of the protectors. The text in question is a set of monastic guidelines for one part of Samye monastery, called lCog grwa, where the mediums of the oracles (*sku rten*) and the monks who were charged with performing the necessary rituals were based.

These guidelines, written by the Sakya master Kun dga' blo gros (1729-1783), suggest that even though Samye was at that time affiliated to the Sakya school, at some point monks started to carry out certain rituals, in particular those that had to do with the oracles entering the bodies of the mediums, that were derived from other religious traditions. This change, according to the work, upset the oracles, which caused upheaval among the people living in the immediate surroundings. This text, in fact, is primarily an admonition asking the monks to keep to the Sakya tradition. The author mentions that he asked the Dalai Lama (*rGyal dbang mchog gi sku mdun rin po che*)[398] for advice on the situation at Samye and that the latter replied that:

> It is not just at lCog but it has been stated that in any monastic situation adhering steadfastly to one's own original religious tradition – which ever that may be – [ensures that] no enmity damages the tantric vows [linking one] to one's deities and teachers, and that the wrath of the Dharma-protectors is not provoked.[399]

It thus appears that protector-deities were not well disposed to change. The monastery then also had to negotiate the local protectors, who were naturally conservative, on top of maintaining a balanced relationship with the local lay-people and the benefactors, both socially and economically.[400] The monastic guidelines are witness to this process of negotiating the changing times and socio-economic and political contexts, while the overall objective was to maintain the status quo. The adherence to the status quo by Tibetan monastics has often been commented upon by outside observers. I believe that this conservative attitude, in part, has to do with the main self-proclaimed objective of the Sangha as a whole (though not necessarily that of the individual monk), namely to maintain, preserve and continue the Buddhist Teachings. Another major factor in the Tibetan monastics' rejection of most types of change, as alluded to above, is not just grounded in the mere fear of change but also in the trepidation of the local deities' reaction. Their wrath would not necessarily be limited to the monastic compound but might also affect surrounding lay-communities and their harvests.

While the monastic communities saw the preservation of the Teachings as their primary *raison d'être*, the lay-population was probably – and understandably – more concerned with the effect that that preservation would have on the disposition of the local deities, which therefore may have been the perceived fundamental purpose of the presence of the monastery and its monks in the first place – at least, for the local lay-population. This demonstrates the rather fluid relationship between lay-

[398] This must have been the Eighth Dalai Lama 'Jam dpal rgya mtsho (1758-1804).

[399] *bSam yas lcog grwa bca' yig*: 405: *phyir phebs su/ lcog tsam du ma zad dgon gnas gang du 'ang rang rang gi chos lugs gang yin de ma 'gyur ba zhig byung na lha bla ma'i dam tshig la sel mi 'jug pa dang chos skyong gi mkhu ldog mi yong ba'i gnad yin 'dug gsungs shing/*

[400] Schopen makes a similar argument in the context of the Vinaya literature: 'The Vinayas are actually preoccupied, if not obsessed with avoiding any hint of social criticism and with maintaining the status quo at almost any cost. In terms of social norms, the monks who compiled the Vinayas were profoundly conservative men.' See Schopen, 1995a: 478.

people and monastics, which was, in contrast to what is commonly thought, not merely a benefactor-recipient or patron-priest alliance, nor simply a hegemonic relationship, but rather a balance in which both parties had an obligation to care for each other's livelihood and continuance. While social change and progress may have been something on the minds of some people at certain times, this adherence to the status quo was too firmly grounded in concerns regarding the continuity of Buddhism and the sensitivities of the deities for any significant societal change to take place.[401] When changes were implemented in traditional Tibetan society, they most commonly were initiated or authorized by people of high religious standing – exactly those people who were seen to have more control or power over the local deities.[402]

Concluding Remarks

I have argued above that while one of the few possibilities for social mobility in traditional Tibet was the entrance into the monkhood, specific groups of people at certain points in time and in certain areas did not have that option. This gives us a rough idea of the layers of Tibetan society for which social mobility seems to have been severely restricted.[403] Although the emphasis here has been on social mobility, it should be noted that in pre-modern Tibet education most commonly was only available in a monastic context and it is probable that those who were excluded from becoming monks were also usually excluded from formal education.[404] Later non-monastic educational institutions, such as the rTse slob grwa at the Potala, largely followed the organizational patterns of the monasteries, while admission was restricted to the children of aristocrats and government officials.[405]

It should be noted that most of the monasteries mentioned here that excluded certain types of people were in one way or another prestigious and important. This makes it likely that these monasteries, at the time their monastic guidelines were written, could in fact afford to turn away such types of people. It is furthermore noteworthy that, so far, no bca' yig written for monasteries in Amdo and Kham that I have come across contain restrictions on the basis of an individual's social background. This may then confirm the suggestion that historically the east of Tibet had a more egalitarian society[406] but this, for now, is a mere argument from silence.

Three types of grounds on the basis of which it was impossible for people to enter the monastery can be distinguished: 1) a person's birth place (for fear of nepotism) 2) a person's economic situation (for fear of profiteering) 3) a person's social background (for fear of pollution and social concerns). Some of these grounds can be traced to the Vinaya, although the categories found in Vinayic material often underwent a process of cultural translation in order to bring them in line with Tibetan

[401] The question as to whether these deities were merely 'invented' to justify certain political or economic policies is here irrelevant. Hubert and Mauss noted the existence of a *sphère imaginaire de la religion*: arguing that because religious ideas are believed, they exist and they thereby become social facts (cited in Collins, 1998: 73).

[402] One may argue that these people usually also had political power and that it was thus not necessarily their religious position that made change possible. I suspect, however, that in particular in the larger monasteries, the politically and economically significant posts were usually not given to the religiously influential monks, because holding such an office was seen as a potential threat to their religious standing.

[403] There appears to be a parallel between marriage and entering the monkhood. Even though people from various classes intermarried, the lowest strata were endogamous, and were thus excluded from marrying up. This presented these people with another limitation to social mobility.

[404] A similar point is made in the context of contemporary Spiti by Tsering and Ishimura, 2012: 6.

[405] Access to education is further discussed in Chapter 7.

[406] Thargyal and Huber, 2007: 205.

social norms. These social norms were not just based on concerns of a purely pragmatic nature but also on notions of pollution and purity. I put forward the hypothesis that these notions of pollution in turn were closely related to the perceived presence of local deities and protectors, at monasteries and elsewhere. This perceived presence might have – in part – contributed to the aversion to change, regularly commented upon by outside observers of pre-modern Tibetan society. A proverb from Sakya echoes this general attitude: 'no progress could be made unless the gods were offended'.[407] Although the local deities were clearly no advocates for change, they presented lay and monastic Buddhists with a common cause, namely to appease these supernatural yet worldly beings.

When viewing pre-modern Tibetan society from a social history point of view one should never neglect the influence of religious practices and sentiments. These cannot and should not be reduced to being solely politically or economically motivated. In this way one gains a more nuanced understanding of the manner in which the lay and monastic communities interacted with each other. Therefore, by looking at both societal and religious norms and practices and where they intersect one cannot but understand the pre-modern monastery as being part and parcel of Tibetan society, and not – as some still choose to think – outside of it.

[407] Cassinelli and Ekvall, 1969: 83.