

SEGMENTATION WITHIN THE STATE: THE RECONFIGURATION OF TIBETAN TRIBES IN CHINA'S REFORM PERIOD

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Abstract

Despite the upheavals of collectivisation and reform, the nomadic pastoralists of Amdo, in the north eastern part of the Tibetan plateau, maintain that they substantially retain historic forms of tribal organisation. The governmental structures of the modern Chinese state have replaced the hereditary rulers, kings and monastic leaders, who formerly exercised leadership over the nomads' tribes. However, ideologies of revenge and practices of feuding still characterise relations between tribal groups. Moreover, the nomads continue to turn to senior Buddhist lamas as mediators, despite the criminal sanctions imposed by the police. It is suggested that these elements represent a continuity in tribal forms within the framework of control now exercised by the modern state. An uneasy relationship between tribes and state has long characterised this region and continues to do so in the modern world.

Keywords: Tibet, China, tribes, nomads, Buddhism, government

Introduction

The relationship between nomads and states has been much discussed in the academic literature, not least on the pages of *Nomadic Peoples* (Bradburd 1987, Salih 1990, Klute 1996, Lenhart and Casimir 2001). This article considers the relations between Tibetan nomads and the socialist and post-socialist Chinese state.¹ These nomads have for centuries herded yaks, sheep and horses on the grasslands of the easternmost part of the Tibetan plateau and before the Chinese take-over formed tribal groups ruled by hereditary leaders and Buddhist monasteries. Relations between these groups were often characterised by warfare, feuding and elaborate processes of mediation conducted by Buddhist lamas. When the Maoist army took control of the area in 1958 the local leaders were stripped of their power and authority, the monasteries were closed and the nomads were reorganised into communes for collectivised herding. The early 1980s brought a period of reform, however, and the introduction of the 'Household Responsibility System' under which livestock were returned to the private ownership of the nomads' tents. The government administration still exercises strict control over many aspects of the nomads' lives. Nevertheless, the nomads talk as if their group structures remain substantially the same as they did before 1958. They say that

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they form the same named tribes, divided into the same encampments and that the dynamics of feuding and mediation continue according to historic patterns and principles.²

The full history of recent political and economic development in the region is complex, but the intention here is to highlight certain patterns within the nomads' tribal organisation which make some sense of this narrative. Many scholars, both Chinese and Western, have considered the state of the pastoral economy in the area in terms of the issues of poverty and ecological degradation, and many critique the state's control of resources.³ Less attention, however, has been paid in the literature to the issue of tribal organisation. The new urban classes in the area still tend to refer to themselves as nomads and to some extent their narratives of continuity represent an attitude of defiance towards the Beijing-controlled administration: us against them, Tibetans against Chinese. The government, as a whole, is often referred to as 'the Chinese', despite the local Tibetan representatives in its offices. However, I suggest that this attitude also represents a classic opposition between tribe and state, between two different forms of social organisation.

As Klute (1996) points out, nomadic tribes and states have long enjoyed dynamic although often unstable relations and there have been considerable debates in the literature about the respective definitions of tribe and state, particularly in the Middle East (Khoury and Kostiner 1990, Tapper 1997).⁴ In Amdo, pastoral groups range from encampments of a dozen or so tents to confederacies of large groups, each containing several hundred tents, and I would suggest, following Khoury and Kostiner (1990), that the strict definition of either is not useful. I use the terms 'encampment' and 'tribe' to match the indigenous terms for the smaller and larger groups, repkor (ru skor) and dewa (sde ba), respectively. Rather, as Tapper suggests (1997: 9, 315), 'tribe' is best thought of as a state of mind, a construction of reality and a model for action. It is also a mode of social organisation which, he says, is essentially opposed to that of the centralised state.⁵ In Amdo, as described in this article, certain ideas about social organisation run through nomad society: group loyalty, the norms of the feud and an attitude to leadership that combines recalcitrance with selective submission to authority. It is the presence and interplay of such ideas and norms that, I suggest, characterise the tribal dynamics of these nomads' groups, and continue to do so within the context of the modern Chinese state.

The Study Area of Amdo

The area generally referred to as Amdo is the north-eastern part of the Tibetan plateau, roughly the size of France. It is separated from central Tibet by a large area of desert and was never incorporated into the political regime of the Dalai Lamas, despite the fact that most people and many monasteries regarded Lhasa as the ultimate source of religious authority. The Amdowa (people of the region) are

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distinguished from the Khampas to the south largely by language, but they share religious allegiances and regard themselves as having a far greater affinity with the other peoples of what is generally known as 'ethnographic Tibet' (Richardson 1984) than with their Han Chinese and Hui Muslim neighbours to the east. The majority of the area is grassland, occupied by nomadic pastoralists who have historically traded their animals with the farmers of the valleys along the northern and eastern edges of the plateau. I conducted nine months of fieldwork in 2003 to 2004, concentrated in the counties of Machu and Darlag.

Although economic developments have allowed many Amdowa to obtain education and jobs within the new towns that have been established on the grasslands, most of the Tibetan population of these areas depends on livestock for both subsistence and a source of income. As others have pointed out (Goldstein and Beall 1990, Goldstein et al. 1990, Miller 2000), the high-altitude pastoral practices of the Tibetan plateau effectively exploit a short growing season and ecological conditions in which harsh winter conditions, rather than water scarcity, are the main challenge to survival. In the (seasonally) lush grasslands of Machu, pastoral movements only occur three times a year, generally taking less than two days to complete. Moreover, an entire group of thirty-five tents can camp together, although in the less favourable ecological conditions of Darlag tents tend to be more widely spaced. Attempts to introduce agriculture in the grasslands during the collective period have now been abandoned.

History of Political Authority

Along with most of the Tibetan plateau, Amdo was dominated by powerful Mongol forces from the mid-thirteenth century until the early eighteenth century.⁶ Their leaders, having been converted to Buddhism by Tibetan lamas, supported the rise of the Gelukpa sect under the Dalai Lamas in central Tibet and patronised new monasteries in Amdo. These included Labrang, founded in 1709 by Jamyang Zhepa, who had been recognised as a senior reincarnation by the Fifth Dalai Lama. Labrang immediately became a powerful political player and, like a number of other monasteries, came to dominate a large surrounding area. When the Manchu Qing dynasty rose to power in the early eighteenth century it established Xining, a town to the north of Amdo, as the administrative base for the area. The rule of their administrator, the Amban, was light, however, and allowed relative autonomy to be retained by the monasteries and other local rulers. The power of the Qing waned in the early twentieth century and its control over Amdo was replaced by that of the Hui Muslims. However, their administrative influence was also largely confined to the agricultural areas in the north and east of the region.

By this stage a number of powerful local rulers had emerged in Amdo. Monasteries such as Labrang, Repkong and Taktsang Lhamo appointed headmen, gowa (go ba), to the tribes within their areas, these tribes being groups consisting

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of several thousand nomads (Ekvall 1939, Rock 1956). Labrang's dominion extended to two of the tribes in the Machu region, where I carried out fieldwork. My informants told me that the monastery sent monks to be their gowa for periods of three years. The main tasks of these officials were to approve the headmen of the smaller groups, the repkor, and to arrange for monks to carry out religious rituals in the area, but principally to 'sort out the problems' among the nomads, by which they meant resolving cases of theft, fighting and killings. It does not appear that any substantial taxes were levied, although the nomads offered substantial tributes of butter, wool and meat.

In other areas, such as Sokwo, Ngawa and Chöni, secular leaders achieved the status of kings, similarly presiding over a group of tribes (Ekvall 1939, Carrasco 1959), while certain tribes had their own hereditary gowa (Hermanns 1949). The latter included the tribes beyond Labrang's influence in Machu. My informants described the activities and functions of these gowa as being the settlement of all the problems within their groups, in much the same terms as they described the role of the headmen sent by Labrang. In Golok, a large area to the southwest, furthest away from Xining, several such tribes formed a powerful confederacy under ruling families who claimed descent from the mythical King Gesar. These nomads were notoriously independent of centralised control and numerous accounts tell of their pride, their war-like qualities and the threats they posed to travellers and neighbouring tribes alike (Rockhill 1891, d'Ollone 1912, Teichmann 1922, Rock 1956, Namkhai 1997). Robert Ekvall, who lived in Amdo throughout the 1930s and 1940s, describes the overall pattern as one of alliances, warfare, feuding and overlapping spheres of political, military and religious influence (1939, 1964, 1968, 1981).

These historical accounts indicate considerable instability in the area, with stronger groups preying on weaker and patterns of raids and thefts (Levine 1995: 70). My own informants in Darlag, a county in Golok, described the fluid nature of the groups and changing allegiances in that area, while in Machu several families had fled Golok, either because of fighting or to seek better pastures. Nevertheless, Ekvall also describes well established practices for the mediation of conflict between tribal groups (1964, 1968). Once a death had been inflicted, in response to a raid, for example, retaliatory killing could only be avoided by the payment of appropriate compensation or blood money. Large feuds were mediated by high-status individuals, whose power was based on their positions as chiefs, their skills of oratory or, in the ultimate case, their charismatic authority as reincarnate lamas (1968: 78–79). As well as ordering families to pay blood money, the lamas could order families to move to new areas. Indeed, the two Machu tribes under Labrang's control were said to have been formed out of families displaced by previous incarnations of Jamyang Zhepa in this way, although they were proud of their history as lharde (lha sde), patrons and military protectors of the monastery. Nevertheless, as Ekvall (1964) emphasises, even the lamas' power was persuasive rather than coercive and these processes were by no means invariably successful.

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Effects of the Chinese Occupation

My informants were almost universally reluctant to talk about their experiences at the time the Chinese 'came' to the region and during the Cultural Revolution, which has been the experience of other researchers in Amdo (Makley 2005). When questioned, they generally referred to a period of fighting and a large battle in Machu during which many perished. The closure of the monasteries and ban on religious activities was always central to their accounts. Many monks were forced to take jobs and wives or else were imprisoned or executed. These included Khongtang Rinpoche, one of the highest lamas at Labrang, who was only released from prison in the early 1980s. Jamyang Zhepa's reincarnation was a young boy who developed friendly relations with the authorities, later taking a Chinese wife. Nevertheless, he remains the most senior religious figure for the majority of Tibetans in Amdo. Many nomads were persecuted for religious practices during the Cultural Revolution, often simply disappearing in police custody. Their families continued to herd yaks, sheep and horses on the grasslands but within the structure of new communes, only being allowed limited food rations. Many talked of the hunger they endured. Other researchers describe the 'struggle sessions', during which the Tibetans were forced to 'speak bitterness' against each other (Makley 2005) and the persecution of former leaders as 'class enemies' (Goldstein 1994: 95–96).

The reforms that swept China after Mao's death under Deng Xiaoping reached Amdo, along with central Tibet, in the early 1980s (Goldstein 1994: 96–100). The major reform was the introduction of the Household Responsibility System, under which livestock was redistributed amongst the nomads' tents, according to family size. Once initial restrictions on the sale of animals were lifted, the nomads became almost fully autonomous again in their pastoral practices. At the same time, the government created new administrative units, *xiang*, out of the old communes. These communes had largely been mapped onto the territories of the tribes (*dewa*) (Clarke 1987 and 1989, Levine 1999). Machu county now consists of nine *xiang*, of which five represent and are named after former tribes. Two tribes have been combined into one *xiang*, one large tribe has been divided into two and one new *xiang* has been created on the land of a defunct horse-breeding station, now occupied by resettled families who have reverted to pastoralism. The authorities recognise certain leaders from each *xiang* as representatives, responsible for providing information to them and implementing their directions. These men have to become members of the Communist Party, but they are essentially the nomads' own choice and are referred to by them as *gowa* (headman). To a large extent, therefore, the new administrative units have been mapped onto the former tribal divisions.

The reform period has also been accompanied by a series of initiatives designed to stimulate economic development in the region, which the commune period had singularly failed to achieve (Goldstein 1994, Horlemann 2002, Manderscheid

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2002, Nori 2004). For the nomads, the most significant developments have been the establishment of a network of roads which bring markets and consumer goods within easy reach. Formerly the journey from Machu to the market centre at Labrang required a one-month round trip, where the nomads sold their animals and bought essentials such as grains, tea, cloth, household goods and religious items. Better communications have also allowed them to engage in more extensive trading activities (Levine 1999). At the same time, education opportunities have allowed a few to find jobs in the local police force or governmental administration, as teachers and health workers. As Manderscheid (2002: 287) notes, some young people are keen to get jobs and move to the towns. In Machu, however, this is limited to the very small number who have managed to progress with their education.

The biggest changes have occurred in the urban areas and for the new educated classes, who now find themselves competing for jobs and educational opportunities with their Han and Hui neighbours (Fischer 2004). In the grasslands, on the other hand, the material changes are, for the most part, seen as having been beneficial, introducing affordable trucks and motorbikes, new clothing in place of cumbersome sheepskins and convenient household goods such as milk separators. Most families have also been able to build houses for the winter, which are substantially warmer than tents when temperatures fall to -30°C , or below. On the other hand, they resent what they see as the authorities' interference with their autonomy, particularly the policy of restricting family size to three children (which is now being implemented in Machu), requirements to administer medicines to their livestock and, above all, the policy of fencing the pastureland.⁷

This fencing represents a policy introduced during the reform period of dividing the pastureland among individual families on fifty-year leases. The official aim is to promote ecological sustainability and resolve the perceived problems of overstocking and pasture degradation (Goldstein 1996: 12, Miller 2000 and 2001, Horlemann 2002: 250–51, Liu Yimin 2002, Banks et al. 2003, Nori 2004). The same practice was implemented, with a similar objective, in Inner Mongolia (Sneath 2000: 130–31). Certain studies of the ecological conditions of the grasslands (in particular Miller 2001 and Nori 2004) have expressed concern over rising human and livestock populations, grassland degradation, poverty and economic security. Others, however, have argued for the long-term sustainability of the nomads' pastoral practices (Goldstein and Beale 1991, Levine 1999), in what Goldstein (1996: 4) calls a 'stable non-equilibrium system'. Among the many who have criticised the fencing policy on ecological grounds (Levine 1995 and 1999, Miller 2000, Banks 2001, Banks et al. 2003), Goldstein (1996: 26) argues that: 'the glaring absence of a method for transgenerational reallocation of privatised pastureland appears a serious flaw in the programme that is likely to undermine its long-term effectiveness'.

It is not the purpose of this article to enter into the ecological debates, but informants in Machu were for the most part entirely sanguine about their long-

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term economic security. This is maybe not surprising, given the material benefits that have been introduced recently, but it also represents their historical experience of periodic natural disasters (Nori 2004: 12–14), against which livestock increase provides some insurance (Goldstein et al. 1990, Goldstein 1996: 4). A few people told me that recent increases in population and livestock numbers are putting some strain on pastures, but they do not consider this to be of major concern. It is the fencing policy which is most resented by the nomads for interfering with the flexibility of their pastoral movements and creating divisions within encampments.⁸

Contemporary Social Organisation

The nomads in Machu describe themselves as being organised into dewa of several hundred and sometimes over a thousand tents. Ngulra, in which I spent most time, is one of the largest (now divided between two administrative districts or xiang) and consists of about 40 repkor, encampments of around thirty-five tents. Dewa is a fairly general Tibetan term meaning ‘group’ or ‘section’ within society. The nomads also talk about tsowa (tsho ba) or shokwa (phyogs ba) (as does Ekvall 1968: 28–29), terms that carry more of a sense of lineage or clan. This is especially so in Golok (Lobsang 1988), where an ideology of descent characterises the former ruling families. However, the contemporary political groups are not defined on the basis of descent or even fictional kinship ties.⁹ Members of one repkor are in fact often related, as brothers who establish new tents tend to stay within the same repkor, but this is regarded as an inevitable product of family division rather than as a qualification for membership of the group.

Since the redistribution of livestock there has been relative parity in wealth between tents, although formerly there were significant differences between rich and poor and inequalities are reemerging. Each repkor holds meetings which are attended by most of the adult men and these select one or two headmen (gowa), whose task it is to liaise with the authorities, to ‘sort out the problems’ of fighting, stealing and other conflicts within the group. They also liaise with the headmen of other repkor in the event of disputes between two groups and attend the councils of gowa from all the repkor in the dewa. This collective body now undertakes responsibility for the control of conflict in the dewa and takes charge of its relations with other groups and visiting lamas. It has thus taken over the role formerly exercised by the gowa sent by Labrang.

Informants in Machu were quite clear that these dewa were substantially the same groups that had existed before the Chinese occupation, although many have changed in size, and territory has been readjusted. On occasion such adjustments have been made by the government authorities, to create a new xiang, for example, but in other cases the nomads have simply moved around and conflicts have led to new boundary delineations. It was quite clear from the numerous accounts of

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historical conflict between dewa and repkor, which all the older people were able and willing to give, that nomads have always come into conflict over pasture. In the past decade in northern Machu alone, one dewa had had a major dispute with a neighbouring tribe in Sokwo, which was settled by senior monks and gowa from other dewa, while another feud was still being waged between Ngulra and another Sokwo tribe. This had its roots in a pre-1950s migration of certain Sokwo families onto Ngulra land (according to my informants) and it is the cause of periodic hostilities, most recently in the late 1990s when at least eighteen nomads were killed (Shinjilt, forthcoming).

Certain researchers have argued that there has been an increase in such violence as a result of the government's policies of fencing the pastureland (TIN 1999, Horlemann 2002, Yeh 2003) and my own informants agreed that the fences have established new boundaries, creating the potential for new disputes, while other fences have exacerbated existing conflicts. In the Ngulra–Sokwo dispute, for example, the new provincial boundary places the disputed territory entirely into Qinghai, Sokwo's province, which has made it impossible to determine what the Ngulra nomads consider to be a just division of the land. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Pirie 2005), the nomads regard the new fences as providing new sources of conflict, but not as radically altering the nature or frequency of the resulting feuds or the means available to settle them.

Feuding and Mediation

The nomads talk frequently and readily about both actual and potential violence and most men prominently carry knives. They talk as if their neighbours are always just about to attack or steal from them and everyone could tell stories of fighting and killings that had occurred within their families or encampments within the last few years. They explained that they 'have' to take revenge in the event of a theft of livestock and if a member of their family has been killed they must retaliate against a member of the murderer's family or repkor. One fight, for example, had recently occurred between two men, one from Ngulra and one from the neighbouring dewa of Chocomama. The Chocomama man had died and men from his dewa came immediately to take revenge, killing two men of the murderer's repkor. On the other hand, violence is not readily apparent on a daily basis within the encampment. The nomads strongly disapprove of serious fights among encampment members and said that a murder would lead to the permanent expulsion of the killer's family. While I was in Ngulra, for example, some young men were caught stealing yaks from other tents within the encampment, which caused considerable outrage. They were caught and severely beaten by their elder male relatives and the gowa, who also called a meeting to make new rules. It was agreed that similar thefts would always merit beatings and that if the theft was from a neighbouring repkor, the families would have to pay back the livestock twice over. They needed to maintain good relations with their neighbours, they explained.

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When such a conflict occurs within one dewa or between neighbouring repkors who normally maintain good relations, the resolution procedures are relatively informal and there is considerable social pressure on the disputants to agree to a settlement. When thirty sheep were stolen from the tent in which I stayed, for example, the elder son went with some friends to identify the thief. When they found him, in another dewa, the son declared his intention to fight immediately, but his friends restrained him and on their return to the tent, members of his family persuaded him to let the gowa intervene to arrange compensation payments. The whole matter was settled in this way over the course of a few weeks. This echoes Ekvall's (1968: 76–79) accounts from the earlier period, of a 'community consensus' in favour of agreement and the informal way in which two or three respected neighbours could 'get together with little fuss and go about the business of mediating'.

Social pressure is thus applied to restrain violence, but once retaliatory killings have begun, a feud can only be resolved through procedures of mediation. Injuries and death must always be compensated for by the payment of the value of the life, mnyö rtong (mi stong), and thefts resolved by the return of the animals or compensation. Acceptance of compensation indicates an agreement by the victim not to fight any further. This is despite the fact that the police almost inevitably track down and imprison those responsible for murders. The state's criminal punishments are regarded by the nomads as wholly inadequate to resolve their feuds (Pirie 2005). Some years ago, for example, some animals had strayed from the repkor I stayed in onto the pastures of the neighbouring group and when one of the boys went to fetch them he was badly beaten by the neighbours. The result was a fight between men of the two repkor, during which one man died. Revenge killings would almost certainly have been carried out had the gowa of the dewa not intervened to secure a truce. They decided that the killer's family should pay mnyö rtong and should also be expelled from the area for three years, to remove them from contact with their neighbours. The killer was also imprisoned for eight years by the police. The mnyö rtong amounted to more than that family's entire wealth, but the whole repkor combined to raise the money. Once it was paid, good relations were restored between the groups and the family has now returned from exile. Group loyalty, revenge and principles of compensation are all, thus, enacted during such proceedings.

In the event of conflict between persons or groups from different dewa, violence is difficult to resolve, however. Outsiders such as monks initially intervene to establish a temporary truce and then gowa from neighbouring dewa or senior monks from a local monastery are called in to act as mediators, zowa (gzu ba). A meeting is set up in a neutral place, now often the local town, with different groups in different rooms and the mediators acting as go-betweens. Their task they told me (and this is confirmed by Ekvall 1964) is to determine the appropriate level and nature of compensation. Mnyö rtong is calculated after the deaths of each side have been reckoned and set off against each other, depending on the identity

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of the victims and the nature of the killings. They may also suggest apologies and offerings of religious books. In the case of the Ngulra–Chocomama fight, for example, Ngulra would not accept the normal *mnyö rton* because men had been killed within their own encampment, but the case was settled by the intervention of a senior lama who ordered a small, but symbolic, extra payment by way of apology. The mediators may also establish where boundaries should run, as they did in the Machu–Sokwo dispute. Crucially, they have to convince the parties of the justice, *jömdri* (*rgyu bras*), of the solution. My informants often referred to the *gowa* with ‘good speech’, as those who could easily resolve such problems

In Golok certain *xhombo* (*dbon po*), men from the ruling families of local tribes, are particularly noted for their skills in oratory and diplomacy and took great pride in describing their achievements as *zowa* (mediators) to me. In other areas, however, today as previously, regular appeal is made to the lamas. Jamyang Zhepa and Khongtang Rinpoche (until his death in 2000), in particular, were seen as able to resolve conflict that is beyond the capabilities of local mediators. The nomads said they would always tell the truth in front of such figures and the lamas suggest just solutions (*jömdri*), taking into account the history of the case. In the Jigdril area of Golok, for example, a feud between two neighbouring tribes, having its origins before the 1950s, re-emerged in the 1980s and raged for many years before finally being settled by the intervention of Khongtang Rinpoche. These senior Buddhist lamas fulfil the function of peacekeepers, welcomed for their ability to persuade the angry nomads to resolve their feuds by accepting compensation. Their status as reincarnations of monks who previously achieved great eminence and spiritual powers makes them particularly suited to perform such a role. It is notable that they are never said to refer to Buddhist principles or morality during such processes, however. They settle the nomads’ disputes on the basis of retaliation and compensation (Pirie 2005).

The power exercised by these mediators is, moreover, primarily persuasive. Ekvall describes the ‘argument, cajoling and implied threats the mediators bring to bear’ (1968: 78). Mediators ‘had to stand high in the social and power scale according to the importance of the case’, but not ‘with such direct authority with respect to those between whom they were to mediate that they would be suspected of attempting coercion’ (Ekvall 1964: 1140–41). My own informants also stressed the precariousness and difficulty of the processes of mediation. In the case of the Ngulra–Sokwo dispute, for example, informants said that certain of the Sokwo *gowa* had rejected the mediation of both Jamyang Zhepa and Khongtang Rinpoche and actually threatened to shoot the lamas if they came onto their territory. Ekvall gives a graphic description of the contemptuous way in which an individual could reject the process of mediation: at one meeting an obstinate man simply poured out the remains of his tea on the ground and ‘with contemptuous slowness’ walked away from the gathering, signalling the end of the process and the likely resumption of hostilities (1964: 1147). Dresch (1984: 45–46), similarly, describes the Yemeni Shayks, who acted as mediators of tribal conflicts, as

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powerful figures who were needed to impose a measure of order, but whose power could also be found irksome. The ideal was someone who could 'take responsibility for the safety of others without presuming on those others' prerogatives'.

As I have argued elsewhere (Pirie 2005), there is a mosaic of power relations and sources of authority within these dynamics. The gowa exercise a certain amount of coercive power over the members of their groups, to restrain them from fighting and stealing and to induce them to accept compensation for injuries. This power is generally supported by pressure from within the family and community. External mediators, called in to tackle the larger disputes, exercise a more persuasive authority which can and will, it is expected, be resisted by recalcitrant individuals bent upon revenge. The presence of the Chinese state has had an effect on such relations by removing the political, and thus coercive, power of the former gowa from hereditary families and monastic appointees, but the contemporary, locally appointed gowa and Buddhist lamas are still playing the crucial role of mediators.

Individualism

The nomads' ambivalent attitudes to authority and conciliation are closely linked to the expectations of individual behaviour and the nature of social capital amongst them (Pirie 2005). Both Ekvall (1964: 1124–25; 1968: 76–77) and Hermanns (1949: 231–32; 1959: 302) repeatedly emphasise the autonomy and individuality of the Amdo nomads and the individual and immediate nature of their responses to violence. In my own conversations I found that the norms of retaliation were always expressed as individual ones: 'I am going to go and fight him', 'I want to fight the police because they injured my cousin'. It is not 'we should all go and fight'. Group opposition and loyalty are expressed in personal terms and the expression of the intention to fight is always made without apparent care for the consequences to others who will inevitably be drawn into the escalating violence. There is also a sense that the potential for violence is only barely controlled and that an individual's anger can be provoked by the slightest transgression.

This valorisation of male anger and aggression is reflected in the habitus within the tent, where there is an emphasis on individual wishes and inclinations. Men are frequently found ostentatiously lying around on carpets, playing cards and demanding food and drink while the women cater to their needs. The appearance of industry and responsibility is minimised as they ride around on their horses or motorbikes, never looking busy or hurried, and there is carelessness with the effects or burdens they place on their friends and relatives, especially women. The public face of the male nomad is self-centred, careless and indolent. It is the women who are, rather, the guardians of domestic order, taking responsibility for the vast bulk of the work. Even the herding will be delegated to them if a man feels like making a trip into town. Only religious activities, from which women are excluded because of pollution concerns, are the men's sole prerogative.¹⁰ Ekvall

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(1964: 1135) also describes a taboo on women carrying weapons and I never saw or heard of any instance of women fighting. Anger and aggression is very much male behaviour. An ethic of individuality and irresponsibility therefore characterises the behaviour of the male nomads, while it is the women who take responsibility for the order and economic productivity of the domestic sphere.¹¹

Along with such norms of personal behaviour go a carelessness and lack of responsibility towards the social order of the larger group. It is, rather, the gowa who concern themselves with the collective interests and fortunes of their group. Leadership is granted to the experienced, mature and industrious, those who are prepared to take on the onerous responsibility for enforcing a measure of restraint on aggressive individuals, rather than to the brave and fierce. 'I worry every day about the possibility of fighting over that boundary' one gowa said, while other men would normally distance themselves from such responsibility: 'the gowa are going to meet with the local officials to sort out the problem', 'the village meeting is going to have to consider this'.

Such attitudes find parallels in the reluctance with which individuals are reported to submit to the mediation of even the highest lamas. Considerable skills of oratory are said to be needed on the part of the mediators to overcome the expected resistance to conciliation on the part of those bent on revenge. The clash between the norms of individual (male) behaviour and the norms of order is neatly expressed by Ekvall in his description of the nomad who disdainfully rejected conciliation by walking away, 'as my Tibetan companion expressed it with a snort of mingled disgust and admiration, "like an old yak – stubborn and unwilling"' (1964: 1147). An ambivalent relationship, therefore, exists between the individual nomads, their leaders and mediators. There is a large degree of (ostentatious) independence but most individuals accept that they are likely to be cajoled into submitting to mediation and agreeing to conciliation.

Similar attitudes towards authority can be seen in the contemporary relations between the nomads and the state. The nomads are largely resentful of government interference in their pastoral practices and they are disdainful of the idea that the police could mediate their disputes: 'They cannot do justice, they do not care about the history', it is said. However, the nomads do turn to these new authorities when they represent a useful source of enforcement and the potential to prevent violence, by settling boundaries, for example. Where it is the new fences that have created new problems, the nomads' attitude (or that of their gowa) is that the authorities should take responsibility for helping to resolve them. This amounts to the selective submission to new forms of authority and the adaptation to a new set of power structures (Pirie 2005). In fact, adaptation is also occurring on the part of the officials, who have come to recognise the authority of the mediators to settle serious conflict. They often invite them to intervene and in Golok they even set up the meetings at which the xhombos (the mediators from former ruling families) can carry out these functions. In one remarkable incident, the local police in Darlag shot a monk during the course of a protest concerning the police treatment

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of a group of monks in detention. A subsequent stand-off between the police and a large crowd was only resolved by the intervention of senior lamas who persuaded the police to pay compensation to the family of the monk, according their principles of mediation (TIN 2004).

Tribal Organisation

Tapper (1997: 18, 343) has suggested that in analysing the relations between tribe and state, a distinction must be made between two levels of tribal organisation. Drawing on Barth's analysis of the Basseri in Iran (1961), he suggests that smaller groups, the basic pastoral communities, are largely shaped by demographic, ecological and socio-economic factors. The larger groups, on the other hand, those that could be called tribal confederacies, are characterised by strong leadership, often developing administrative organisation, and are generally shaped by political, economic and cultural relations with neighbouring groups and states.

In Amdo a similar distinction can be drawn between the organisation of the repkor (encampment) and that of the former tribal confederacies. Within the repkors, tents are united on the basis of kinship, territory and pastoral movements. There is also a sense of loyalty in the event of disputes with other groups and the payment of compensation. Leadership is exercised by an internally selected gowa, who is prepared to take responsibility for enforcing order within the group, but he exercises a fairly coercive form of authority over its members in order to restrain damaging conflict. There is every reason to think that this type of organisation also characterised the repkor in the former period. The dewa (or tribe), on the other hand, are much larger groups united on the basis of territory, including the veneration and protection of a territorial divinity and a sense of loyalty in the event of conflict. Leadership was formerly much more powerful, originating in the Buddhist monastery, the king's palace or the tent of a hereditary ruling family. Strong rulers were often able to unite several tribes into confederacies, which engaged in warfare or alliances with external forces. As Tapper suggests, sociopolitical factors dominated this level of organisation.

These levels of tribal structure clearly intersected and the concepts of social organisation I have identified ran through both. What the distinction does help to explain is the otherwise surprising fact that the removal of the upper layer of tribal leadership by the Chinese state has not resulted in the disintegration of the dewa. Even in the absence of their former leaders, the nomads regard themselves as members of the same dewa that existed previously. To a large extent the reconstitution (or continuation) of dewa identity has been assisted by the government's practice of mapping xiang boundaries onto those of the former dewa. What has also happened is that the headmen of the local groups have combined to form a governing council in the place of the gowa formerly appointed by the monastery or king. The principles of organisation found in the smaller

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groups have been extended to the larger. Chinese rule has thus resulted in a certain (unintended) democratisation of pastoral politics, but has also allowed the continuation of essential elements of tribal organisation.

Comparisons with Mongolian Nomadic Political Structures

Tapper's (1997) and Barth's (1961) analyses are largely based on Middle Eastern examples. The tribal formations of nomadic groups in Mongolia provide a geographically closer comparison but, surprisingly, a greater contrast. The Mongolian nomads historically formed large, powerful and war-like confederacies, with hereditary ruling lineages and extensive relations of patronage (Barfield 1993, Humphrey and Sneath 1999: Ch. 8, Sneath 2000). Sneath (2000: Ch. 7) describes the way in which a lineage ideology was prevalent in Mongol tribal society, where it legitimated the superiority of the ruling classes, although, as in Amdo, lineage did not form the basis of solidarity among smaller groups.

What separates the Mongolian and Amdo examples more sharply is the existence of what Sneath calls 'patriarchalism', a form of social relationship that, he says, formed the ideological precondition of an extensive pastoral hierarchy. Relations of patronage operated throughout the social strata of the Inner Mongolian tribal groups. As well as in relations between commoners and the nobility, such relations were found in the domestic sphere, in the organisation of space and relations within extended families. His study, conducted in the 1990s, reveals that many elements of the former tribal organisation, notably the status of the nobility, had been swept away by Chinese rule. Nevertheless, patriarchalism was again being expressed within the domestic sphere, as part of the habitus of the nomads' tents.

In Amdo it is, by contrast, the patterns of feuding and mediation and the alternation between insubordination and respect for authority in relations between individuals and leaders, which are the comparable ideological conditions of the nomads' tribal organisation. Like Mongolian patriarchalism, such ideas and cultural forms have persisted into the post-reform period and are again shaping the social dynamics of tribal organisation.

It is clear, from Sneath's accounts, that historically there was extensive conflict and rivalry amongst the larger-scale tribal groups in Mongolia. However, it is not apparent that principles of revenge and retaliation historically characterised relations between smaller units, families and pastoral encampments, nor that they do so today. These are the principles which, by contrast, underlie the relations between even the smallest groups in Amdo and which continue to do so within the framework of the modern state. It is their persistence that, I suggest, largely accounts for the narratives of continuity expressed by my informants. As in Mongolia, therefore, certain features of the former tribal organisation, both structural and ideological, have disappeared: the status of the former ruling

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families, the position of the monasteries as political leaders, and former distinctions between rich and poor families. What have been retained in Amdo, on the other hand, are fundamental ideologies concerning group loyalty, revenge, mediation and the ambivalent relationship between individuals and their leaders.

Conclusion: Relations Between Tribe and State

The ideologies of loyalty and revenge that characterise contemporary relations between groups of Amdo nomads are underpinned by certain expectations of individual behaviour and the nature of social capital in the nomads' encampments. These expectations involve careless attitudes towards social norms and the interests of order, and stubborn and defiant attitudes towards authority. They are counteracted by the assumption of responsibility on the part of the gowa, the zowa and the women. Together, these dynamics create models for behaviour and patterns in social organisation and relations between groups. If, as Tapper suggests, 'tribe' is a state of mind, a construction of reality, these dynamics form the essence of tribal organisation among the Amdo nomads. 'Tribe' is also a mode of social organisation that is fundamentally opposed to that of the state, with its centralising tendencies, policies of command and authoritarian attempts to control 'criminal' behaviour.

There is, therefore, a basic antipathy between governmental agents and nomads on the Amdo grasslands. The authorities dislike the elusiveness and mobility of the nomads, the fluidity of their social structures, their rebelliousness and tendency towards violence. The nomads, for their part, resent governmental control; the restrictions on their movements and control of their fertility. Yet, throughout the world, tribes and states have long coexisted in uneasy, but generally workable, alliances. The governmental authorities in Amdo maintain their own structures of control, but have come to recognise that the nomads' feuds cannot be resolved by the imposition of criminal punishments and now call upon the senior Buddhist lamas and the nomads' own mediators to intervene. For their part, the nomads recognise that boundary reorganisation has created new conflicts which can only be resolved by clear demarcations on the part of the authorities, so their gowa, seeking to control nomad conflict, look to those same authorities to make the decisions that will pre-empt violence.

Recent debates amongst anthropologists of China have concerned the issue of ethnic identity among the nation's extensive population (Harrell 2001: 152–56). In Amdo, ethnic relations, particularly between Tibetans and Hui Muslims, have become an acute issue in the urban areas associated with economic development and opportunities (Fischer 2004). As discussed in this article, however, in the pastoral areas the offices of the police and governmental administration are largely staffed by local Amdowa. The issue is, rather, one of the relations between the structural and organisational ideas of tribal groups and those that underlie the controlling hand of

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the state. The Tibet Information Network (2004), reporting on the Darlag shooting, characterised the incident as representing tensions between Tibetan monks and nomads, on the one hand, and Chinese (Han) and sinicised Tibetans on the other. The issue, I would suggest, is not so much of the 'sinicised' identity of the police, as of the functions they must perform as agents of the state. It is a matter of the form of social organisation more than the identity of its constituents.

The advent of the Chinese communist state, collectivisation, reform and economic development have swept away old forms of tribal leadership in Amdo and brought about significant changes to the pastoral economy. Nevertheless, the nomads' narratives of continuity reflect the persistence of an essential model of tribal organisation. A set of ideas centred on group loyalty and revenge lies at the heart of the uncomfortable, contemporary relationship between nomadic tribes and the Chinese state, having already played a part in a long and dynamic history of relations between tribes, kings and states in eastern Tibet.

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Notes

1. I use the term 'nomad' because that is the word used by the few English-speakers among them. The Tibetan equivalent *drokwa* ('brog pa) means 'people of the pastures'. Tibetan terms are transliterated here according to the local pronunciation, with the Wylie (1959) spelling in brackets.
2. A return to former ways of life is also mentioned by Lobsang Gelek (1998), Liu Yimin (2002) and Manderscheid (2002: 278–80).
3. See Clarke 1989, Banks 2001, Levine 1995 and 1999, Goldstein 1996, Miller 2000 and 2001, Liu Yimin 2002, Manderscheid 2002, Horlemann 2002 and Banks et al. 2003. Exceptions are Clarke 1989, Goldstein 1996, Lobsang Gelek 1998, Yeh 2003 and Levine n.d.
4. The essence, or not, of a lineage ideology, a pastoral mode of production, ethnic and linguistic unity and political autonomy for tribal forms have all been debated (Tapper 1983, Khoury and Kostiner 1990, Kraus 1998, Schlee 2002), as has the applicability of the term 'tribe' to state-like tribal confederacies (Bradburd 1987, Tapper 1997).
5. Dresch (1990: 277) likewise suggests that state is an idea just as much as an institution.
6. The historical details in this paragraph are largely drawn from Fairbank, vols 6, 8, 9 and 10. The historical background is described at greater length in Pirie (2005).
7. Levine (1999) also notes a resistance, in Golok, to official directives to reduce herd sizes, although these were not evident in Machu.

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8. Banks et al. (2003) refer to a projected revision of the Grassland Laws of 1995, to allow for forms of group tenure, but I found no evidence of the implementation of such a law in Amdo. In fact, the government is now pushing ahead with ambitious plans to settle the nomads in the towns, as part of the massive 'Develop the West' campaign introduced by Jiang Zemin in 1999. Extensive house-building programmes are underway in Machu at the time of writing, but so far only a handful of nomads has agreed to settle.
9. Nomads refer to their bone names rü (rus), as indicating their ultimate origins and theoretically allying them with families from all over the region (as Europeans might do with their surnames), but such alliances have no practical significance. I regard Clarke (1989) and Levine (1995, n.d.) as overstating the importance of lineage ideas within tribal groups. As discussed elsewhere (Pirie 2005), a distinction must be drawn between a lineage ideology that legitimates the authority of ruling families, as in Golok, and an ideology that purports to integrate the members of a group (Tapper 1997: 344), which is not found in Amdo. This has some significance in the light of the extensive debates on the centrality of lineage ideals in tribal structures (Kraus 1998, Schlee 2002).
10. In a telling comment on the eventual 'war-weariness' that overcomes the men following extended conflict, Ekvall (1964: 1135) refers to their longing for time to pursue pleasure, trading and religious activities. Basic economic subsistence was clearly being taken care of meanwhile by the women.
11. As in other gendered societies (eg. Simic 1983, Peters 1990) in-marrying wives have little influence on matters beyond the tent, but mothers do exercise considerable authority over their sons, including persuading them to exercise restraint and desist from pursuing violent revenge.

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