

# CENTRAL ASIATIC JOURNAL

INTERNATIONAL PERIODICAL  
FOR THE LANGUAGES, LITERATURE,  
HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF  
CENTRAL ASIA

VOLUME XV

No. 3

1971

OTTO HARRASSOWITZ - WIESBADEN

# THE BALANCE BETWEEN CENTRALIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION IN THE TRADITIONAL TIBETAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

An Essay on the Nature of Tibetan Political Macro-Structure

by

MELVYN C. GOLDSTEIN

Ohio

Although a variety of authors such as Carrasco,<sup>1</sup> Bell,<sup>2</sup> Richardson,<sup>3</sup> and Rahul<sup>4</sup> have written about the Tibetan polity there still remain areas of serious confusion and misconception. The recent publication of Cassinelli and Ekvall's *A Tibetan Principality: The Political System of Sa sKya*, Cornell University Press, 1969 raises and illustrates one of the most fundamental of these, namely, the relationship between the center and the sub-units. Cassinelli and Ekvall see "western" Tibet (normally referred to as the province of *gtsang*)<sup>5</sup> as comprised of the three governments of Lhasa (otherwise known as the overall or central Tibetan government), Shigatse (an erroneous name for the religious corporation of Tashilhunpo) and *Sa sKya* (hereafter rendered phonetically as Sakya). They take the position that the latter is virtually independent, viewing—as the following quotes indicate—the authority of the central government (their "Lhasa" government) as merely token in nature.

The Sa sKya government was recognized as an independent, although secondary political entity, with jurisdiction over several noncontiguous areas in central and western Tibet (28) . . .

We have spoken throughout of Sa sKya's political independence from the larger, more powerful, and better known governments at Lhasa and Shigatse . . . Sa sKya was a part of a political system that included Lhasa and Shigatse, but this system was largely formal and had virtually nothing to do with the day-to-day business of governing the area of Sa sKya

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<sup>1</sup> *Land and Polity in Tibet*. University of Washington Press, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> *Tibet Past and Present*. Oxford University Press, 1968 (orig. 1924); *The People of Tibet*. Clarendon Press, London, 1928.

<sup>3</sup> *A Short History of Tibet*. E. P. Dutton, N. Y., 1962.

<sup>4</sup> *The Government and Politics of Tibet*. Vikas Publications, 1969.

<sup>5</sup> The Tibetan orthography is transcribed following the system of T. V. Wylie, "A standard system of Tibetan transcription," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 22: 261-267, 1959.

proper. In performing the essential governmental functions of collecting and allocating revenue, maintaining judicial processes, and selecting official personnel, the government of Sa sKya was answerable to no one... It was not linked with Lhasa as part of a federation or confederation, for there was no policy that applied to both Lhasa and Sa sKya; it was not part of an empire ruled by Lhasa, for the minor demands effectively made by Lhasa were too weak and infrequent to constitute an imperial relationship (43-44). Our respondents liked to contrast the orderly political life of western Tibet—represented by the governments of Lhasa, Sa sKya and Shigatse—with the chaotic conditions in eastern Tibet. Perhaps the people of Lhasa and Shigatse had similar feelings. (43, note)

I contend that this position is incorrect. On the one hand it significantly underemphasizes the superordinate authority and rule of the central government, while on the other, it erroneously treats Sakya and Shigatse (Tashilhunpo) as being fundamentally different in nature from the hundreds of other aristocratic and religious political subunits. The Cassinelli-Ekqvall analysis of Sakya distorts the very nature of the Tibetan political system, the essence of which, in fact, was the delicate balance between centralized and decentralized (feudallike) political authority. In the following pages the authority parameters of the center and the sub-units will be explored and the relationship between them examined.

Since I believe the underlying source of misinterpretation in the Sakya study is simply incorrect information, let me briefly indicate the sources of my own data. The overwhelming mass of materials derive from information collected during the course of a twenty month field study of Tibetans who have been resettled in south India. One of the main parts of this research involved a reconstruction of the overall socio-political system in traditional Tibet and consequently I collected considerable information not only on the central government but also on the various sub-units, Sakya being among them. This information was supplemented by interviews and discussions with a number of Tibetans in other parts of India and in Seattle, including the two major informants of the Cassinelli-Ekqvall study.<sup>6</sup>

Since the reforms of 1751, Tibet was ruled by a (office of) Dalai Lama who administered the polity through a theo-aristocratic bureaucracy. The authority of this government (hereafter called the central government) was not only accepted as legitimate in name, but

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the methodological approach used in that study, see M. Goldstein, "Stratification, polyandry and family structure in Tibet", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Spring, 1971.

was overtly exercised in a number of ways discussed below.<sup>7</sup> However, the political supremacy exercised by the central government did not preclude its delegation of broad and fundamental rights to political sub-units. As we have indicated, this was one of the most salient features of the overall political system in Tibet. Let us first, then, examine the sub-units.

Tibet contained hundreds of politico-economic sub-units we will call estates. These estate sub-units were formally delimited territories with hereditarily attached serfs (*mi ser*). These units were held by two general types of lords: 1) religious corporations, and 2) aristocratic familial corporations. The former type of lord included monasteries, part of monasteries such as "colleges (*grwa tshang*)" and the corporations (*bla brang*) associated with a line of religious incarnations. The size of these units varied tremendously, the smallest ones consisting of only one estate and the larger ones possessing numerous noncontiguous estates scattered across the polity. Sakya and Tashilhunpo, as well as other units such as Drepung, Sera, Ganden, Reting would be classified among the largest of the religious sub-units.

Aristocratic lords were named corporate (aristocratic) families. Each of these hereditarily held one or more estates and in turn had to provide the government with at least one adult male from the family for service as a governmental official.<sup>8</sup> Although this was clearly an obligation deriving from their hereditary possession of estates, it was nonetheless perceived by the aristocrats as their right to monopolize the lay governmental positions. Like the religious lords, the number and size of estates any given family held varied considerably with many having control over two or more noncontiguous areas.

It is estimated that these religious and aristocratic lords controlled over fifty per-cent of the total arable land in Tibet and the better land at that.<sup>9</sup> Since almost all estates included hereditarily

<sup>7</sup> This paper deals with the traditional political system that existed during the period from 1913 (when the 13th Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa to rule an independent polity) to 1951 when the 17 point treaty was signed between Tibet and the People's Republic of China.

<sup>8</sup> There was one major exception to this. The Lhagyri family in the E region of south central Tibet hereditarily held vast estates without being obligated to serve the government. This derives from their being descended from the Tibetan Kings.

<sup>9</sup> This estimate was made by the former Tibetan Council Minister (*bka' blon*), W. G. Surkhang.

tied serfs, lords therefore also controlled a sizable segment of the total population, and one important dimension of the political system concerns just what this "control" of lords over their serfs was.

The linkage of serfs to their lord was transmitted through ascription at birth via parallel descent lines (i. e., sons became serfs of their father and daughters of their mother). Serfs could not legally and permanently leave their estate without their lord's permission. They were bound to estate and lord. This aspect of the lord/serf relationship has produced a great deal of confusion in the literature. Being "bound" to lord and estate did not mean that a particular serf could not unilaterally leave the territory for visits, pilgrimages, trade and so forth. Serfs were free to do what they liked so long as their obligations (taxes in kind and corvee labor) were fulfilled. But the lord/serf relationship was certainly not merely one of economic contract. The serf had obligations to fulfill for his lord by virtue of his holding land of the lord, but—and this is the critical fact—the serf did not have the option of unilaterally returning the land to his lord and severing his linkage with the lord. He was hereditarily bound to the land and to the obligation, and it is this fact, which is usually ignored, which produced the serfal characteristics of Tibetan social organization.<sup>10</sup> Serfs could and did "illegally" flee their estate and lord and surreptitiously place themselves under another lord or simply remain lordless, but until this century lords held a temporally openended right to pursue, apprehend and punish their runaway serfs (see p. 13 for the revised twentieth century policy).

This linkage of serf to lord extended over into the realm of marriage as serfs had to obtain their lord's permission to marry<sup>11</sup> although this was significant only when the groom and bride were serfs of different lords. Since the normal mode of residence after marriage was patrilocal, the bride's lord stood to lose the labor potential of the girl if she married another lord's serf. Lords theoretically could refuse to permit such "mixed" marriages—precisely on the basis of the bound aspect of the lord/serf relationship—but normally they opted for alternative mechanisms, the reasons for which are too complex to discuss here. The most typical and common of these

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the different categories of serfs in Tibet see M. Goldstein, "Serfdom and mobility: an examination of the institution of "human lease" in traditional Tibetan society," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXX. No. 3, May, 1971, 521-534.

<sup>11</sup> This was also true for entering the monastery.

alternatives consisted of the lord issuing the bride "human lease" status. This amounted to severing the physical bond of the girl to the estate but maintained the jural bond. The human lease holding bride (serf) was free to leave the estate permanently but in lieu of that had to pay a yearly sum of money which was stipulated at the time of issuance by the lord (and could be increased), and this tie to her lord was transmitted to her daughters who also had to pay a stipulated fee to the lord.

Each sub-unit clearly exercised primary governmental rule over their estate(s) and serfs. Lords administered their territory through a variety of organizational types based largely on the size of their holdings. Some large units like Sakya and Tashilhunpo had a formalized governmental structure, others maintained special "steward" serf families but all maintained some form of differentiated administration. While the lords (or their staffs) theoretically could,—but very rarely actually did—initiate and implement new policies for their territory, the main thrust of their administration was oriented rather toward: 1) the collection of taxes in kind and corvee labor, 2) the organization and overseeing of the economic-subsistence operation of the estates, 3) the maintenance of a matrix of peace in their territories.

The first two foci were clearly the most important for the lords and the third can be seen as a prerequisite for their continued existence of them. Power, esteem, and in indirect ways, authority, derived primarily from wealth. Wealth in turn derived primarily from the hereditary possession of land.<sup>12</sup> The control of land segments necessitated a capable and regular work force to till this land and produce the yields which were convertible into power and so forth. It was the serfs, obviously, who fulfilled that function and it is in this dimension that the serfs were of prime importance to the lords. Lords were interested not in exercising close control over the daily lives of their serfs but rather in maintaining an efficient and regular labor force to work the lands. Cassinelli and Ekvall's comment on page one asserting that the central government did not interfere in the day-to-day affairs of the Sakya sub-unit, holds true, as we shall see, not only for all the other hundreds of sub-units large and small, but also for the serfs and serf-units (villages) of any given lord. The orienta-

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<sup>12</sup> In this paper the role of nomadic wealth will be ignored. It will suffice to say that lords also held rights over pasture land and that there were also nomadic serfs.

tion of governmental rule in Tibet (on all levels) was to regularize a steady flow of wealth from their territories. So long as this was realized, they had little interest in interfering in the lower level units.

The third focus mentioned above was the maintenance of peace. Lords held primary adjudicatory rights over their serfs, but *did not* maintain any force in their territory whose primary, or even secondary, function was to seek and apprehend violators of criminal and civil norms.<sup>13</sup> In other words, they maintained no police force. The adjudicatory rights of lords were, thus, *passive*. While lords had the right to issue decisions and impose even corporal punishment and imprisonment, they acted only on cases brought before them. Civil disputes were initially handled through mediation and it was only when this failed that cases were brought to the lord for adjudication. In criminal cases, the initial responsibility for the apprehension of the criminal suspect fell on the victim, and the case only reached the lord if the victim was successful in catching the suspect. As we shall see below, this primary judicial right was also diminished by the right of any serf to appeal (*khra log*) the decision of his lord to the central government for final adjudication.

Thus, as Cassinelli and Ekvall indicate for Sakya, it is a fundamental feature of the Tibetan political system that the religious and aristocratic lords held broad primary governmental rights over their land and people. The central government did not generally interfere in the internal administration of these sub-units and within the parameters of existing written documents and tradition, the lords had the authority and power to exercise rule. This authority, however, was tempered considerably by the fact that the orientation of the lords was not toward regulation but rather toward the extraction of wealth from their territories.

Like the sub-units, the central government also did not operate any polity-wide police network and its primary governmental focus was virtually identical with that of the sub-unit lords, namely, the collection of taxes, and the maintenance of peace. Still, there is no question but that the central government regularly implemented its authority over the sub-units and unilaterally initiated and implemented new policies which held not only for the serfs and

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<sup>13</sup> I use the word norm here since there was actually no set of written laws against which behavior was compared.

territories it controlled directly, but also for all the sub-units, including Sakya. The fact that the central government did not exercise day-to-day control over the whole population did not mean that it did not exercise superordinate political authority and rule, for it clearly did. ~~It simply means that the nature of the Tibetan system cannot be neatly pigeon-holed into a euro-american political framework.~~ Let us now ~~turn~~ and examine some of the important dimensions of this overall superordinate position of the center.

1. The Tibetan central government not only controlled but completely monopolized the military in Tibet. Only it could maintain troops and only it did. These troops were recruited as a corvee tax not only from the serfs directly under the central government but also from the serfs who were part of the various religious and aristocratic political subunits. Moreover, the soldiers of any particular lord were not maintained as separate units under the leadership of an appointee of their lord but rather were integrated with conscripts from other lords. The heads of the army—the Commanders-in-chief and the Generals of the battalions—were appointed by the central government from among their government officials. These soldiers ~~were a standing force on duty~~ all year. Their primary function was to protect Tibet's borders, but they were used internally in several instances of attempted rebellion. They were ~~not~~, however, used as a local police force. The Tibetan central government was not only the sole possessor of troops in Tibet, it also had the authority to unilaterally increase or decrease the number of troops. Even the largest of the sub-units had no say in the matter at all.

2. Another important indicator of the overall rule of the central government concerns its control over the critical communications-transportation network (the *sa tshigs* system). This network involved all the sub-units and consisted of a web of post-stations located between ten to twenty miles apart. It was the obligation of the serfs of any given area to supply (as a corvee tax) people, animals and quarters to legitimate holders of requisition permits (*lam yig*) from the central government. There was no question of reciprocity in the operation of this system. While the lords could impose corvee transport duties on *their own* serfs and plan trips and so forth so as to make the best use of *their own* various estates, it was only the central

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this transportation-communications system see, M. Goldstein, "Taxation and the structure of a Tibetan village," *Central Asiatic Journal*, Vol. XV, No. 1, 1971, 1-27.



government who could command the service of the national *sa tshigs* system. Furthermore, during the reign of the 13th Dalai Lama (1895–1933) the central government unilaterally initiated a new policy whereby the serfs performing the corvee services were paid a set fee for each animal used.

3. A third aspect is the fact that only the Central Government coined money and postage stamps and only it could enter into binding agreements with foreign nations. The government, moreover, regulated the export-import flow of certain goods such as salt and tea, and even imposed customs duties on key items such as wool, tea, hides, and salt.

4. A fourth and very important dimension of the political supremacy of the central government was its role as a court-of-last-appeals. Although lords held primary adjudicatory rights over their serfs, in cases where serfs of different lords were involved, or even in cases where the serfs of a single lord were not satisfied with their lord's decision, the case could be brought to the central government for *adjudication*. All Tibetans living within the Tibetan polity had the right to appeal decisions rendered by their lords or by lower government officials such as district commissioners. There have been numerous examples of serfs bringing cases against their lords and of the central government adjudicating in favor of the serfs. If the central government reversed an earlier decision of a lord, the lord had no recourse but to accept it and perhaps reappeal in the future. We are clearly not talking about mediation here.

In 1950 a dispute arose concerning the succession to the throne of Sakya. Although the circumstances are somewhat clouded, on the death of the ruler (the *khri chen*) the eldest of the potential successors was the son of the late ruler. Since he was the older he claimed to be the rightful ruler. The other religious lineage of Sakya, however, claimed that even though its candidate was younger the position of ruler should alternate between the two lines regardless of age and thereby should go to it. After about a year of internal machinations during which the elder acted as a temporary ruler, the dispute was taken to the central government for adjudication. Although Cassinelli and Ekvall would claim that this was simply mediation, the end result was that the central government decided that the rightful ruler was the younger claimant and he became the ruler (*khri chen*). The term by which Tibetan government officials discuss this is not *bar bzhus* (mediation) but *bka' bcad gnang* (adjudication).

The elder candidate, who was the main informant in the Cassinelli and Ekvall study, never accepted this decision and in fact later moved to Lhasa where for a long time he unsuccessfully tried to appeal the decision and obtain its reversal. His appeal was still pending in 1959 when the revolt broke out. I fail to see how this even resembles mediation. I could cite numerous other examples but feel that this suffices to illustrate the role of the central government as a final court for all Tibetans

However, this adjudicatory role of the centre was a passive one in the sense that the central government would adjudicate cases brought before them but did not initiate them themselves except in cases of treason.

Before moving on, one more point should be mentioned regarding the centre's retainment of ultimate control over the taking of human life.

Murder cases, whenever they occurred, were required to be reported to the representatives of the central government. Usually this was the local district commissioner, but it could also mean the Council of Ministers in Lhasa if the participants were important persons, or if the sub-unit involved was one of the larger ones such as Sakya or Tashilhunpo. The district commissioner generally sent one or more of his subordinate officials (e.g., a district clerk) to investigate, and if there were suspects, bring them back to the district headquarters. In the end, the district officials would send a report to Lhasa stating the evidence and their recommended punishment. Lhasa would then either approve this or amend the punishment. For the larger units mentioned above, especially for Tashilhunpo, the collection of evidence and the interrogation was often done by the officials of the units themselves, but the government had to be informed and the punishment approved.

5. While the sub-units obviously could not make rules that were binding for the other areas, the central government could and did. We have already seen how the central government did just that in relation to conscripting corvee soldiers and initiating payment for the communication-transportation system's corvee services and these were not unique situations. In the early 1920's, under the leadership of a favorite of the Dalai Lama, the Finance Minister *Lung-shar*, a new revenue tax was instituted. Due mainly to the creation of a standing army (previously the soldiers came only for a few months twice a year), the expenses of running the government

had greatly increased after the return of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama from self imposed exile in India in 1913. In order to counteract this a tax was made which fell on the previously little taxed larger aristocratic lords. This new tax was to be in proportion to the size of their estates, and was to fall on the demesne lands. The lords could not pass it along to their serfs. Although favoritism and other particularistic relationships greatly affected the application of this tax, it was nonetheless generally implemented.

Tashilhunpo was the largest and most powerful political sub-unit and for this reason the events surrounding the implementation of a similar new tax on Tashilhunpo (called *ma-bo shi-sur (dmag phog bzhi zur)* or '25 per cent of the soldiers' salary') is very important. Briefly, when the central government tried to make Tashilhunpo pay 25 per cent of the military salaries and expenses they demurred, saying there was no precedent for such a tax and that they were exempt from such taxes on the basis of their old documents. The government insisted, nevertheless, and in 1923 the incarnate ruler of that unit, the Panchen Lama fled for refuge to China with a number of his officials. A delegation of government officials and troops was sent from Lhasa to intercept and bring him back but they were unsuccessful and the Panchen Lama safely escaped to China. The Central Government then sent officials to Tashilhunpo to assume the activities normally held by the Lama. Since they did this tactfully, assuring the Tashilhunpo officials that no drastic changes in structure would be made, they were actually able to take over that sub-unit without violence. In the end, then, the tax was paid.

6. Another aspect relevant to this discussion concerns the regulation of runaway serfs by the center. In the first decade of the 20th century the Agriculture Office of the Central Government instituted a new rule which gave all serfs who ran away from their lords and had not been caught for three years the right to place themselves under the government as serfs of that office. Previously, a lord could forcibly return and punish his runaway serfs whenever he found them.

The domination of the central government over the various sub-units is clearly indicated by the above examples, which could, of course, be multiplied considerably. But just as it is erroneous to talk of independent principalities, it is also erroneous to talk of Tibet as a centralized hydrolic or historical bureaucratic state. The structure

of the Tibetan political system hinges on the balance between these two conflicting dimensions, and this brings us back to our earlier comments on the *laissez-faire* attitude of the central government for this is at the heart of the problem. The relationship between the central government and the population in the areas in which it exercised direct control is particularly illustrative.

Not surprisingly, we find that villages of government serfs (*gzhung rgyugs pa*) were relatively autonomous in much the same manner as the aristocratic and religious estate sub-units. To be sure, they had heavy taxes in-kind and corvee labor but their day to day activities were not interfered with. In a manner relatively analogous to the way the central government did not take an active role in the day to day administration of sub-units such as Sakya, they also did not for villages of government serfs directly under their control. Their interest was primarily extractive. So long as the specified taxes were fulfilled and disputes settled or mediated on the village level, the villagers had little contact with the officials of the district. I am not trying to imply that these villages were of equivalent status with the religious and political estate sub-units, for this they were not. But they do illustrate the basic passivity of the central government with regards to the direct, local level exertion of its authority on a regular basis. So long as taxes and various services were performed the government made little or no effort to undermine the delegated authority of the lords and even villages of its own serfs.

Again, this is not surprising since when we examine who in fact was the central government we find that it was controlled by the subordinate lords themselves. The obligation of the aristocratic corporate families to provide government officials was, as mentioned above, actually perceived by them as a monopoly right, and they therefore monopolized the all-important lay official segment of the government. Moreover, through the option of providing monk officials, the aristocratic segment also infiltrated the monk segment of the bureaucracy and controlled important positions disproportionate with their numbers. More importantly, the position of ruler itself came to be intimately connected with the possession of estates.

The Dalai Lama, the ruler of Tibet, was selected as a child under a theory of incarnation. The child selected was considered to be the incarnation of the deceased Dalai Lama. This mode of succession, however, necessitated long periods when the ruler would be a minor.

Structurally, then, there was no way to insure continuity between successive Dalai Lamas.

In the interim periods, which were usually for 18 years, a Regent ruled in the name of the Dalai Lama. These Regents were also selected from incarnate religious figures and thus were also succeeded through the incarnation principle. If a Regent died during this period he could not be succeeded by his new incarnation. Another incarnate adult Lama would have to be selected. Moreover, the authority of the Regent was significantly less than that of the Dalai Lama. Unlike the latter, who ruled by sacred right, the Regents were selected by the government and the three great monasteries around Lhasa. Whereas there was no legitimate way to dethrone a Dalai Lama, the Regents could be and were deposed.

When we join this to the fact that with the exception of the Seventh (1751–57) and 13th (1895–1933) Dalai Lamas no Dalai Lama either survived to majority age or actually exercised political authority, we see that Tibet was characterized by a care-taker type of government.<sup>15</sup>

Regents ruled for almost the whole of the Gelugpa (yellow hat) rule in Tibet. The orientation of the Regents was clearly toward increasing the wealth (in-kind and estates) of their religious (incarnationlineage) coporations. During the reign of a Regent his corporation became an extremely large and powerful unit. Each came to hold numerous estates scattered over the country. In other words, the actual rulers for almost all of Tibetan history were primarily oriented to improving their position within the feudal-like estate/serf system rather than attempting to alter it. Certainly this was also the attitude of the aristocracy who monopolized the lay sector of the central government's bureaucracy.

Consequently, it is not surprising that no conflict developed between the principles of feudal-like decentralization and centralization. Since the feudal elements had co-opted control of the government they were perfectly satisfied to leave the sub-units (i.e., themselves) great internal latitude of rule. It was only during the reign of the great 13th Dalai Lama (1895–1933) that the scope of the centre expanded rapidly.

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<sup>15</sup> H. E. Richardson has kindly pointed out that the 8th D. L. also ruled for a few years, and that later some Dalai Lamas technically ruled for a few months. These however do not alter the overall caretaker dimension of the Tibetan government.

The Tibetan political system was thus a centralized theo-aristocratic polity characterized by a basic overlap of personnel between the central government and the religious and aristocratic sub-units. Although the system can be seen to have been gradually moving in the direction of greater centralization, the pace was so slow that sharp conflict never developed over this. The basic premises regarding the rights of the sub-unit lords was never challenged and competition in the Tibetan government centered on the incumbents in offices rather than on the structure of the office system itself. Consequently, as this essay has tried to show, it is only within the framework of this overall political system that the nature and role of political sub-units such as Sakya can be meaningfully understood. Centralization existed side by side with hereditary decentralization and the uniqueness of the Tibetan form of government lies in the delicate balance between these.