

**RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN THE
TRADITIONAL TIBETAN STATE(1)
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Introduction

Ruled by an incarnation, the Dalai Lama, and supporting a monastic segment comprising between ten and twenty percent of the eligible males, Tibet was a state in which religious interests and priorities predominated. 'Religion' (and the religious segment), however, was not the homogeneous entity it is typically implied to be, even within the Gelugpa Sect, and the great Gelugpa monasteries were often at odds with the Dalai Lama's government. In this paper I shall examine aspects of this discord and then present several illustrations of such conflict from twentieth century Tibetan history.

Monasticism is fundamental to both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism and is found wherever Buddhism exists. However, the Tibetan form of monasticism differed from other forms in terms of a variety of fundamental factors such as: 1) its mass philosophy and accompanying size; 2) its theory of recruitment; and 3) its internal organization and normative structure.

The Tibetan monastic system supported a staggering number of monks. Surveys show that there were 97,528 monks in Central Tibet and Khams in 1694, and 319,270 monks in 1733 (Dung-dkar 1981: 109). Assuming that the population of these areas was about 2.5 million in 1733, monks thus constituted about thirteen percent of the total population and about twenty-six percent of the males. The magnitude of this can be appreciated by comparing it to Thailand, another prominent Buddhist society, where monks comprised only one to two percent of the total number of males (Tambiah 1976: 266-267). A critical factor underlying this size was the Tibetan belief that the state should foster the spiritual (religious) development of the country by making monkhood available to the largest number of persons. The scope of monasticism (and the cycle of religious rituals and ceremonies the monks performed) was seen in turn as the measure of the Tibetan state's success. Monasticism in Tibet, therefore, was not the otherworldly domain of a minute elite; rather it was a mass phenomenon.

The Tibetan monastic system was also striking in that, first, the overwhelming majority of monks were placed in monasteries by their parents when they were between the ages of seven and ten, without particular regard to their predispositions or wishes; and second, becoming a monk was not a temporary undertaking but rather a lifelong commitment.

There were many reasons why parents made their son a monk. For some, it was their deep religious belief that being a monk was a great privilege and honor. For others, it was a culturally valued way to reduce the number of mouths to feed, while also ensuring that their son would never have to experience the hardships of village life. Again, sometimes parents made a son a monk to fulfill a solemn promise made to a deity when the son was very ill. Yet, in other cases, recruitment was simply the result of a corvee tax obligation to a monastery which was their lord.

Parents sometimes broached the subject with their sons, but usually they simply told the child of their decision. The monastery officially asked the young boys whether they wanted to be monks. But this was really pro forma, and if, for example, a newly made child monk ran away from the monastery, this would not result in his dismissal on the grounds that he did not want to be a monk. A number of monks recalled that they had fled to their homes after a few months' initial stay in the monastery only to receive a beating from their fathers who immediately took them back. The monks relating these incidents did not see this as abusive. Rather, they laughed at how stupid they were at the time to want to give up the opportunity of being a monk. Tibetans, lay and monk alike, generally feel that young boys cannot comprehend the wonder and importance of being a monk, and that it is up to their elders to see to it that they have the right opportunities. Thus, the decision to make a child a monk was predominantly the prerogative of the parental generation rather than derived from either the wishes of the child or some perception of a deep-seated predilection in the child for the monk's life.

Once accepted, it was hoped that the novice would remain a monk for his entire life, adhering, minimally, to a vow of celibacy. However, monks clearly had the right to leave the monastic community whenever they wanted. Given the almost random selection of novice monks, powerful mechanisms were needed to retain young monks who had to face a life of celibacy. The monastic system, in fact, possessed effective mechanisms for facilitating this⁷ including economic security, comradeship, and a very liberal (or lax) view of monastic activities and discipline. For example, the Tibetan monastic system did not attempt to weed out novices who seemed unsuited for a rigorous life of prayer, study and meditation, and monks were expelled only for the most serious crimes of murder and heterosexual intercourse. Similarly, there were no exams which novices or monks had to pass in order to remain in the monastery (although there were exams for higher statuses within the monks' ranks). Monks who had no interest in studying or meditating were as welcome as the virtuoso scholar monks.

On the other hand, monks leaving the monastery faced significant economic problems. Because they lost whatever rights they might otherwise have had in their family farm (patrimony) when they entered the monastery, departing monks had to face the task of finding a source of income. Complicating this was the fact that they reverted to their original serf status when they departed, and were thus liable for service to their lord. These and other factors made it both easy and advantageous for monks to remain in the monastery.

The elevated status of monks and monasteries was manifest also in their treatment as semi-autonomous units within the Tibetan state⁷, with the exclusive right to judge and discipline their own monks in all cases except murder and treason.

This relative autonomy, however, did not mean that the monastic system was disinterested in the political affairs of the country. It was actually very

concerned. The reason for this derives from the fundamental ideology of the Tibetan state and its economic and political ramifications. Tibetans considered their country unique by virtue of its support and patronage of religion as its primary goal. This was nicely phrased in a letter the Tibetan Foreign Bureau sent Chiang Kai-shek in 1946:

There are many great nations on this earth who have achieved unprecedented wealth and might, but there is only one nation which is dedicated to the well-being of humanity in the world and that is the religious land of Tibet which cherishes a joint spiritual and temporal system...(2)

However, this 'joint spiritual and temporal system' ideology did not preclude serious conflict between the monasteries and the government with regard to specific actions and options, for there was no unanimity on who was best able to determine what was in the best interests of religion and thus Tibet. The monks believed that the political and economic system existed to further their ends, and that they, not the government, were the best judge of what was in the short and long term interests of religion. They could not accept that decisions detrimental to their monasteries could benefit Tibet's unique religious system, and they believed it was the monasteries' religious duty and right to intervene whenever they felt the government was acting against the interests of religion, which they generally saw as their own college or monastery. This, of course, brought them into the mainstream of political affairs and into potential conflict with the Dalai Lama and the government who also felt they were acting in the best interest of Tibet and religion. Although the great monasteries did not involve themselves in the day-to-day operation of government administration, they played an important role in larger issues. For example, in the 1920s, a bitter dispute emerged over the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's plan to enlarge the army. The Dalai Lama saw this as necessary to preserve Tibet's integrity vis-a-vis China, while the monks saw it as a threat to their superiority with regard to both coercive force and the institutionalization of alien British values.

One major theme of modern Tibetan history, then, was the conflict between the desire of the government to control the monastic segment, particularly the three great Gelugpa monasteries in and around Lhasa: Sera, Drepung and Ganden.

The Three Monastic Seats

Sera, Drepung and Ganden were collectively known as the "Three Seats" (*gdan-sa gsum*) of the Gelugpa Sect, because they acted as the main monasteries for hundreds of smaller branch monasteries. These three monasteries were enormous, resembling bustling towns as much as sanctuaries for the pursuit of other-worldly studies. Their monks were basically divided into two groups: those who were pursuing higher studies, the "readers," and those who were not. The former became the scholars while the latter typically could only read and chant their prayer books.(3) In the Mey College of Sera Monastery, for example, only about 800 of the 2800 (twenty-nine percent) were "readers."(4) Of these 800, a large proportion never went beyond the lower levels of learning. The nonreaders worked for the monastery (or themselves), or simply lived off the daily distributions and teas provided by the monastery during the collective prayer sessions. However, although so many of the monks were engaged in non-scholarly and non-meditative pursuits, all were (heterosexually) celibate.

Drepung, the largest of the three monasteries, officially held 7700 monks, but actually contained about 10,000 in 1951. Sera officially held 5500 and Ganden 3300, but they actually housed about 7000 and 5000 monks respectively. By contrast, the army normally present in Lhasa numbered only 1000--1500 troops. Moreover, as many as ten to fifteen percent of the monks housed in the Three Seats were *dobdos* (*ldab-ldob*) or "fighting monks." These monks had a distinctive appearance (e.g., hair style and the manner of tying their robes), and they belonged to clubs which held regular athletic competitions. They also typically engaged in ritualized armed combat according to a code of chivalry, and often acted as bodyguards for the monastery.(5) The presence of 20,000 monks in and around Lhasa, thousands of whom were "this-worldly," aggressive, fighting monks traditionally afforded the Three Seats tremendous coercive leverage vis-a-vis the government, whose army they dwarfed before 1920.

The Three Seats somewhat resembled the classic British universities such as Oxford in that the overall entity, the monastery, was in reality a combination of semi-autonomous sub-units, known in Tibetan as *tratsang* (*grwa-tshang*). By analogy with British universities, these are commonly called "colleges" in English. Monks belonged to a monastery only through their membership in a college, and although there was a standing committee that functioned with regard to monastery-wide issues, there was no abbot for the whole monastery, only for individual colleges.

Each *tratsang* had its own administration and resources, and in turn was comprised of important residential sub-units known as *khamsen* (*khams-tshan*) which contained the actual domiciles (apartments or cells) of their monks. Like the college, they had their own administration and, to a degree, their own resources.

A potential monk could enter any of the Three Seats but within the monastery had to enroll in a specific *khamsen* depending on the region he was from. Membership in a *khamsen*, therefore, was automatic and mutually exclusive. For example, a monk from Kham (Eastern Tibet), or more likely, from one of a number of regions in Kham, had to enter one and only one *khamsen*.(6) Thus, *khamsen* exhibited considerable internal linguistic and cultural homogeneity. Since different *khamsen* were affiliated with different colleges, the college level also often had a regional flavor. Colleges and their *khamsen* units occupied a specific spatial area within the monastery, and were the center of ritual, educational, social and political activities for their members.

Each of these units - the monastery, the various colleges and the *khamsen* - were corporate entities. They had an identity and a name which continued across generations, owned property and wealth in the name of the entity, and had internal organization. While the monks came and went, the entity and its property continued. Moreover, it is essential to note that a monk's loyalties were primarily rooted at the *khamsen* and college levels, and there was often little feeling of brotherhood between monks of different colleges despite their being from the same monastery.

Thus, there were competing units within the Three Seats. The monastic colleges were often at odds with each other, and even the incarnate lamas were allied with specific monastic colleges and khamsen. An essential flaw in the Tibetan politico-religious system was, therefore, that while religious priority was universally accepted, defining what benefited religion or religious entities was often contested.

Religion, though in one sense a homogeneous force in Tibetan politics, was also a fragmenting and conflicting force. Competition between the various religious entities to increase their influence and prestige and the lack of consensus regarding which policies were in the interests of religion plagued modern Tibetan history during the twentieth century. An interesting example of such intra-religious conflict took place in 1921 between the Tibetan government and the Loseling College of Drepung Monastery.

The Tshaja Incident

The relations between the Dalai Lama and the Loseling College of Drepung Monastery had been strained for years. The Tengyelung (Demo) Conspiracy and, more importantly, the support Loseling gave to the Chinese during 1911-1912 when the Dalai Lama's volunteer army was trying to drive the Chinese out of Lhasa, had infuriated the Dalai Lama. Led by Loseling College's three chantso (*phyag-mdzod*; business managers), the Tshaja, Phuja and Gongja, (7) Drepung Monastery had adhered to a pro-Chinese and anti-Dalai Lama policy. (8) When the Dalai Lama's officials ordered them to send monks to help fight against the Chinese, they refused, saying that they were monks, not soldiers. They agreed to fight only if the Chinese tried to force their way into Drepung itself, not otherwise. Many of the Loseling officials such as the Tshaja were from Chinese-administered parts of Kham and tended to have pro-Chinese leanings. This orientation was well known to the Manchu Amban who fled to Drepung when he feared for his life and was sheltered by the monastic officials in a mountaintop retreat until the fighting was over (Surkhang, interview).

Loseling's behavior warranted punishment, but during the period 1913-1919, the Dalai Lama was too preoccupied with the Simla talks and the warfare in Kham to confront Loseling and teach it the lesson he felt it needed. But by late 1920, there were no such restraints, and when a dispute arose in Loseling College, he took the opportunity to attack its leaders.

The incident began in late 1920, when the Loseling chantso led by the Tshaja told a former monastic official named Adala that his khamsen (Tsha Khamsen) wanted him to give back an estate he was using. (9) Adala had been holding this estate on "permanent lease" (*kha-'dzin*), paying Loseling a lease-fee every year, and managing the estate as if it were his own. Feeling he had permanent rights to this estate so long as he paid the annual fee, he refused to return it. When the Loseling managers decided to take it by force, Adala complained to an acquaintance, the powerful Dronyerchenmo. He immediately saw this as an opportunity to get bark at the Loseling managers, and he told Adala to petition the government. (10)

With this petition in hand, the Dronyerchenmo summoned the three Loseling managers to a meeting and arrested them. The very next day they were sentenced and punished. Although judicial orders normally specified the nature of the crime or misdeed, in this case the order simply said that, "your faults are known to you so there is no need to list them." The Tshaja and Phuja were whipped, their private property confiscated and finally they were exiled (Surkhang, interview; Shan-kha-ba n.d.).

When the monks in Drepung found about these acts, Loseling held a meeting to discuss what to do. Led by two monks named Anjanali and Ngogar, the monks decided to go en masse to the Norbulingka Palace to present their case to the Dalai Lama, i.e., to demand the release of the two managers.

The monks of nearby Nechung Monastery tried to persuade the Loseling monks not to go to Lhasa when they saw them pouring out of Drepung, but several thousand Loseling monks went on to Norbulingka, forcing their monastery officials to accompany them. The guards at the Norbulingka Palace gate also could not stop them and they pushed their way into the palace grounds right to the "Yellow Wall" which surrounds the living area of the Dalai Lama. There the senior monastic officials prostrated and shouted that they wanted to see the Dalai Lama, who was in retreat at the time. They yelled that their managers had done no wrong and so should be released and their property returned. The monks also taunted the troops on guard by the Yellow Wall, daring them to shoot. When they did not, the mob of monks forcibly took away the troops' arms and broke them. While the senior monks shouted and prostrated, the younger monks urinated and defecated all over the Dalai Lama's gardens, pulled up and trampled the flowers, broke statues and sang especially loudly in order to disturb the Dalai Lama. (11)

The Lonchen Sholkhang came out to try to calm them. He made the traditional thumbs-up pleading gesture and said, "Please don't do this. Whatever you have to say, tell me." But the monks treated him rudely and with disdain, saying, 'Old man, you don't know anything. We want to see the Dalai Lama' (Urgyenla, interview; Surkhang, interview; Bell 1946).

Tsarong, the army's commander-in-chief, was immediately summoned to Norbulingka Palace, but many advisors feared that calling out the military and opening fire on the monks could push the other colleges and monasteries to support Loseling and possibly precipitate an all-out civil war. The government's military position in Lhasa at this time consisted of only about 700 troops, not an adequate force to control a joint reaction by the Three Seats, so it was ultimately decided that the most prudent course was that no action be taken to eject the monks forcibly. The Dalai Lama pretended he knew nothing of what had happened, and by the afternoon the monks tired of the protest and left Norbulingka. In the meantime, the Dalai Lama and Tsarong issued orders to recall several thousand troops and Militia to Lhasa preparation for a possible confrontation with Loseling. Live ammunition was also issued to the troops in Lhasa at this time. (12)

That night soldiers were stationed in front of Drepung where they set up camps, and the Dalai Lama, through Tsarong, ordered Loseling to turn over the ringleaders of the protest. The monks, as expected, refused. Loseling College appealed to the monks of Sera and Ganden, as well as to the monks of Drepung's other major college (Gomang) to support them, and then they posted pickets above their monastery. (13) Various lamas, such as Kundeling and Ditru, tried to mediate the confrontation, but the monks would not

agree to turn over their ringleaders. Sera, however, quickly refused to join Loseling; later Ganden also refused, as did Drepung's own Gomang College. Loseling was on its own. But since it contained 4000-5000 monks, it was still a formidable opponent. The monks threatened to attack Norbulingka and Lhasa, and said that they would seize the Dronyerchenmo, whom they saw as their main enemy in this fight (Bell 1946: 327).

By the second week in August, the Tibetan government had massed several thousand troops in Lhasa and felt confident that they could handle the monks. Loseling College was to be taught a lesson, though without bloodshed if possible. With the reinforced government troops deployed in a semicircle in front of the monastery (with strict orders from the Dalai Lama not to fire upon it), new demands were made to the monks to turn over the leaders of the demonstration (Bell 1946: loc. cit.). Loseling now found itself in an untenable situation. It was without support from other monasteries; it had been unable to get the Eastern Tibetan (Khamba) community in Lhasa to lend military support; and it was blocked by a large army force led by Tsarong, an official who was likely to have no qualms in taking on the monks militarily. Loseling, therefore, backed down. By mid-September, it had surrendered eleven ringleaders of the protest, (14) and others who had run away, such as Anjanali, were captured in caves on the mountains behind Drepung after an all-out search, during which the government ordered all district officials to seize and hold any Loseling monks who passed their way (Urgyenla, interview). The government even interrupted a teaching of Taktra Rinpoche in his hermitage north of Lhasa to see if Anjanali might be there (Khri-byang 1978: 94-95).

All told, about sixty monks were arrested, paraded around the city, lightly flogged, shackled and had cangues placed on their necks. They were then put into the custody of various aristocratic families. The Dalai Lama dismissed the Drepung abbots, and passed a rule giving himself the right, for the first time, to appoint the managers of Drepung's khamsen. He also imposed a new rule whereby these managers were chosen only from monks who hailed from nearby, i.e., Central Tibetan, places. This was done to decrease the power of the Khamba monks whom the Dalai Lama saw as more pro-Chinese and less amenable to control by the central government (Urgyenla, interview).

For the first time in modern Tibetan history, the government's army had confronted the monks directly and forced them to concede, although not a single shot was fired. The Loseling incident of 1921 served notice that the monks of the Three Seats could no longer intimidate the Dalai Lama with impunity. The Dalai Lama later told Bell that, "it was necessary for me to make a show of force or else the large monasteries would continually give me trouble"; but he went on to say that he intended to show them leniency. (15) And in a sense he did. While the ringleaders were severely punished, the monastery and the monks were not. No estates were confiscated, as had been the case with Tengyelung. (16)

The Flight of the Panchen Lama

The need to build a strong military and maintain a large army equipped with modern British rifles on the Kham border had dramatically increased the expenses of the Tibetan Government and resulted in the imposition of a special tax on the great monasteries, including Tashilhunpo, the seat of the Panchen Lama. Outside of the central government, the Panchen Lama was the largest estate-holder, possessing not only numerous manorial estates, but also ten whole districts.

There was considerable ill feeling between the officials of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama due to the Panchen Lama's behavior following the Dalai Lama's flights to exile in 1904 and 1910. When the question of financial support for the large contingent of troops on active duty arose, some remembered that during a previous war with Nepal in 1791 (when the Gurkha troops attacked Tashilhunpo), the Panchen Lama had paid one-quarter of all the military costs. The Dalai Lama used this as a precedent, and, after returning to Tibet in 1912, he informed the Panchen Lama that he had to pay one-fourth of the total military costs of the 1912-1913 Chinese war, as well as one-fourth of the costs of the Tibeto-British wars of 1888 and 1904. This amounted to 27,000 ke (*khal*) of grain. Tashilhunpo vigorously disagreed with this interpretation and did not pay the entire amount (Don-khang 1984: 2).

The relations between the Dalai and Panchen Lamas deteriorated further in 1917, when the Dalai Lama instituted a new rule called the Fire-Snake-Year Order (*me-sbrul bka'-rtsa*) which made the serfs of Tashilhunpo in Gyantse District pay one-seventh of the horse and carrying-animal corvee tax on levies of over one hundred horses and three hundred carrying animals. Since Tashilhunpo had written statements from past Dalai Lamas exempting its serfs from providing such corvee services for anyone but Tashilhunpo, the Panchen Lama viewed this as an illegal abrogation of his prerogatives. Similarly, in 1923, the Water-Pig-Year Order (*chu-phag bka'-rtsa*) extended this to all Tashilhunpo serfs in Tsang (Don-khang 1984: 35). In 1922, the new government "Revenue Investigation Office" had also levied an additional annual tax of about 30,000 ke of grain and 10,000 silver coins on Tashilhunpo (*ibid.*: 57).

The Panchen Lama and his officials attacked the validity of the new taxes, arguing that the precedent on which they were based was invalid. They argued that they had only paid one-fourth of the Tibetan government's military expenses in 1791 because their own city and monastery were under attack. They also argued that they could not afford to make such payments and still fulfill their religious obligations to their monks, and they presented documents which granted them tax exemptions. Meanwhile, each year they protested the decision, the unpaid taxes piled up. Lungshar, a Tshipon, played a major role in this controversy, insisting that the Panchen Lama could pay the new tax. His examination of the Panchen Lama's government records documented that they could easily pay the new levy and do the corvee taxes. He convinced the Dalai Lama that the real motive behind the Panchen Lama's refusal was his ambivalence over the supreme authority of the Dalai Lama. Thus, increasing revenue to support the army produced a major dispute between the Panchen Lama and the central government.

Additional details of this dispute come from the Panchen Lama's approach to the British in India (through MacDonald, the Gyantse Trade Agent) asking for their help. MacDonald reported in a letter to his superiors in the

Indian Government:

I have the honour to report that His Serenity the Tashi [Panchen] Lama sent a messenger to me yesterday with a private letter (which he requested me to return to him) stating as follows:

... That the Lhasa Government has demanded that the Tashi Lhunpo Government should contribute one fourth of the total expenditure for the upkeep of the Tibetan Army, which consists of the following:

- (a) Rs. 650,000/- approximately,
- (b) 10,000 mounds of grain valued at Rs. 80,000/-,
- (c) 2,000 boxes of Chinese brick-tea, valued at Rs. 85,000/-.
- (d) In addition to the above, they have asked for other liberal concessions (not mentioned in the above letter).

... In default of complying with the above demands, I have been informed that the officials of the Tashi Lhunpo Government who are undergoing imprisonment at the Potala Palace will not be released and others will also be imprisoned.

... His Serenity the Tashi Lama states that he is unable to meet the demands made upon him and he proposes to submit a representation to His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the subject. If his request is granted, things will then of course be all right; but if not, His Serenity wishes to know whether the Government of India will mediate between himself and His Holiness the Dalai Lama as he states that his only hope is the assistance of the Government of India.1r

The Panchen Lama, after several unsuccessful protests by his officials and one abortive attempt to escape when he went to the hot springs of Lhatse District (Phun-rab 1984: 130), secretly fled to Mongolia and China on December 26, 1923, leaving the following set of instructions for his followers in Tashilhunpo:

Be it known to all the Abbots and Assistants of the four colleges and also to the Acting Prime Minister and the Monk and Lay officials of the Tashi Lhunpo Government:-

With regard to the troubles of the Tashi-Lhunpo Government and their subjects, I have submitted representations to His Holiness the Dalai Lama on several occasions, but my requests have not been granted. At the same time His Holiness has always shown me kindness. The investigating officers listened to the advice of evil-minded persons and made it very difficult for His Holiness to grant my requests. In consequence, orders were issued to all Jongpoens of the Tsang Province that they must supply free transport, etc., to the officials of the Lhasa Government, against the prevailing custom. Moreover, I have been asked to make contributions for the upkeep of the Tibetan Army, but the nobles and subjects were unable to take the responsibility of meeting these demands. For these reasons, the subjects of the Tashi-Lhunpo Government were disappointed and became dissatisfied. You are all aware of these facts and these things have made it quite impossible for us to live in peace. I should have made further representation, but it would have created a difficult position for His Holiness. I am therefore leaving Tashi-Lhunpo for a short period to make it easier for His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I am going to see whether I can secure anyone to mediate between us, with the assistance of the dispensers of gifts in Kham and Mongolia whither I have despatched messengers. It is quite impossible for me to make the annual contributions to meet the Military expenses and I am compelled to proceed to an unknown destination to try to raise funds from the Buddhists who may be inclined to help me voluntarily. I may state here once and for all that I have no desire to do anything against the wishes of His Holiness the Dalai Lama or that will be injurious to our prestige. The letter which I have addressed to His Holiness should be at once forwarded, so as to make matters clear to him. After due consideration I have appointed the Acting Prime Minister [of Tashilhunpo] and the Abbots of the four Colleges [of Tashilhunpo] to carry on the administration during my absence. First of all, you should see that the customary ceremonies are performed in the Tashi-Lhunpo and other monasteries as usual. You should also see that the Lamas of the different monasteries receive their rations; and that the monks study all the religious books and preach the religion, and that they do not neglect the subject of disputation; and above all, you should see that all the monastic rules are duly observed. Finally, you should discharge your duties faithfully and treat the poor subjects and monks with all consideration and help them in every way possible. You should keep careful accounts of all receipts and expenditure from land revenue, etc., and apply the balance for the observance of religious ceremonies. You should carry on your duties appertaining to the spiritual and temporal powers after due consultation; but if you cannot decide any big question, you should refer the matter to me for orders. You should discharge the duties of your responsible position without fail and leave nothing undone. I hereby command all the monks and laymen, who are subjects of the Tashi-Lhunpo Government, to obey the orders of the Acting Prime Minister and Council and discharge their duties faithfully. Let all noblemen and peasants bear these instructions in mind and act accordingly. I will issue necessary orders in the future according to circumstances. Let all the animate beings bear this in mind. I have issued these orders on the auspicious date - the 18th day of the 11th month of the Water-Pig Year (26th December, 1923).(18)

The Tibetan government sent troops to seize the Panchen Lama, but they were too late and he escaped together with a large entourage. The Dalai Lama responded by appointing his own officials to take over the administration of Tashilhunpo. The Panchen Lama, despite subsequent attempts at rapprochement, lived out the rest of his life in exile in China, dying in Jyekundo in 1937.

The Toba Abbot Incident

A third well known incident occurred when Reting, the Regent, attempted to force the retirement of the abbot of Toba College of his own Sera Monastery so that he could appoint one of his own supporters.

Reting's staunch supporter during his period of power consolidation in the late 1930s was the abbot of Toba College in Sera. Although this college carried the title of "abbot," it was in reality one of the anachronistic colleges that no longer had any monks or property. The abbacy of this college, however, was usually seen as a stepping stone in the monastic hierarchy, as it was common for the Toba abbot to be made the abbot of one of the real colleges when an opening occurred. Reting, however, wanted to award his ally, the Toba Abbot, immediately, so he decided to force the current abbot of Sera Mey College to resign and then appoint the Toba Abbot in his place.

The incumbent abbot of Mey College was a learned and pious elderly monk, admired and respected by all the monks. He was also a Khamba, and very close to the Pandatsang family, both of whom came from Markham. Pandatsang, in turn, was a close supporter of Reting. Consequently, Reting asked Pandatsang to convey to the abbot that he wanted him to resign from his position at once. Reting tried to sweeten the blow by offering the old abbot the title and rights of an ex-abbot (thereby making him eligible to attend the government and monastic assemblies) and giving him the yield from the estate assigned as salary to the Mey Abbot for one more year.⁽¹⁹⁾ The old abbot did not wish to disobey the Regent and immediately agreed to resign. However, he knew that the monks of Sera Mey were not particularly fond of Reting, who was from their rival college (Sera Che), and he suspected that they would insist on his remaining abbot if he announced his intentions to resign. He requested, therefore, to be allowed to resign without informing the monks. Reting agreed to this and the abbot submitted his written resignation.

The Sera Mey monks were first surprised and then incensed, as they gradually discovered what had transpired. Consequently, when the order came from the government to submit a list of candidates for the abbacy, the monks guessed (or were secretly told) that the reason behind the resignation was to allow Reting to appoint the Toba Abbot. They decided first to follow traditional rules and submitted to the government (Regent) a list of five unusually outstanding candidates, but they did not include the Toba Abbot among them. They also agreed internally to stage a mass walk-out if the Toba Abbot were appointed. Usually only a ranked list of names was submitted, but the Mey College monks were so angered that they added a written note:

The elimination of our good abbot has made us very sad, but this is finished. We are not going to make any trouble about it. However, regarding the appointment of a new abbot, we have submitted the names of five first-rate candidates so please pick the new abbot from among these five. If this is not agreeable, we will send up other names to you. But there is one person whose name we will not send up: the Toba Abbot. He has a great wish to be abbot but he is not knowledgeable or scholarly and will not be a good abbot. He is good in politics, but is not good in religion. If you appoint him as abbot, then we will put away the rug on which the monks sit in the Prayer Hall and leave. To this all the monks have taken an oath.

(Surkhang, interview)

This defiance placed the Regent in an extraordinarily difficult and potentially humiliating position. If he appointed the Toba Abbot, as was his right, the monks had already sworn that they would not accept him; and given the volatility of monks, they might even try to kill him. If Reting then took action against these monks, there was no telling what kind of support they would get from Drepung and Ganden Monasteries.

Reting turned for assistance to the most famous lama of Sera Mey, Phabongka. He was in the midst of giving religious teachings at Tashilhunpo, but the Regent sent a special messenger who travelled night and day to ask him to return at once. In Lhasa, the Regent explained the situation and asked Phabongka to persuade the monks to accept the Toba Abbot. Because most of them had taken teachings from him, and were thus in a student-teacher relationship to him, Phabongka was confident they would listen to him.

Phabongka invited the more influential monks in Sera Mey to come and see him, enjoining them to obey the Regent. The monks replied. "You are our 'root' lama and whatever you say we will do. If you say die, we will die. However, agreeing to accept the Toba Abbot we will never do."

Phabongka scolded them, "If you do not listen to what your 'root' lama says, you are very bad indeed." The Mey College monks, however, would not yield. They offered Phabongka a gift of money that symbolized their belief in him, but Phabongka, angry and frustrated, threw the gift money back at them (Surkhang, interview). The monks, however, refused to acquiesce, reiterating that even if they, the higher monks, agreed to accept the Toba Abbot, the common monks would never agree.

Phabongka had to convey the monks' resolve to Reting, who then tried to intimidate them. He ordered blacksmiths in Lhasa to make publicly many arm and leg shackles and leaked the rumor that these were for the Sera Mey monks who were to be arrested by the government. After this public display, Reting ordered the Mey College leaders to come to his office in Shol, fully expecting that they, fearing arrest, would not come. If this ploy worked, he would have a more defensible issue to use against them if he chose to use force. But again he failed. The monk leaders first asked the common monks what they would do if the Regent arrested or killed them. When they swore to sacrifice their lives if necessary in support of their leaders, the Sera Mey officials went as ordered to Shol.

As though giving them a last chance, the Regent asked the Mey College officials what they were going to do, implying force might be used against them. The monks stood firm again, saying, "We have nothing to think about at all. If you want, you can put us all in prison but we cannot yield. Even if we wanted to change now, the lower monks will not let it be" (Surkhang, interview). Reting, though furious, now backed down rather than risk a violent confrontation with Sera Mey, and appointed one of the five candidates originally submitted for the abbacy.

However, Reting was not content to leave the matter as it stood. He decided to punish the monks of Sera Mey by venting his anger on the old Abbot. He expelled him from the monastery (on the grounds of fomenting discord), causing him to lose not only all his rights and income, but also his very home in the monastery. This in turn again embittered the monks who further humiliated the Regent by spreading the word that the life of the Toba Abbot was not safe if he returned to the monastery. Unwilling to risk this, the Toba Abbot now also had to resign (Surkhang, interview).

Conclusion

From the alleged attempt on the life of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama by Demo Hutoktu at the turn of the century to the disastrous attempt by Reting to assassinate the Regent Taktra in 1947, Tibet experienced a series of significant clashes between the Three Seats and the government, and between key elements in the Geltigpa religious segment. This discord, however, was typified not by conflict over the ideology that religion must dominate in Tibet, but rather over the monks' belief that this meant that the interests of the monasteries should reign supreme. The Three Seats thus had no qualms about challenging the government when they felt their interests were at stake, for in their view they were more important than Ganden Photrang, the government headed by the Dalai Lunas. During the first half of the twentieth century, this perspective dominated the policies of the Three Seats and severely constrained the options available to the government. This, in turn, clearly played a major role in the ultimate demise of Ganden Pliotrang in Tibet in 1951-1959.

NOTES

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2 Translation from a copy of the original document provided me by Lobsang Lhalungpa.

3 Although the past tense is used here, the Three Seat monasteries are again functioning both in Tibet and in India, albeit in attenuated form.

4 Interview with Dung-dkar Rinpoche.

5 See Goldstein 1964 for a discussion of these dabdo monks.

6 Khanitsen sometimes contained sub-dorntitory units known as mitsen (mi-tshan) which were even more specific with regard to the geographic origin of the monks, e.g., a single region within Kham.

7 These three were the managers of Tsha Khamsen, Gonggo (Kong-po) Khamsen and Phugang Khamsen, Loseling's three largest khamsen.

8 Interview with the late Zur-khang Sa-dbang-chen-mo (hereafter Surkhang).

9 It is not clear whether they just wanted to give the estate to someone else as some have suggested, or whether they intended to retake administrative control over all such estates.

10 Shan-kha-ba n.d. The third manager, the Gongja, was released without punishment, most likely because he had not been in office 1910-1913.

11 Urgyenla, interview; Surkhang, interview; Bell 1946. The Tibetan term *grwa-pa blug* expresses this rushing out of the monks to protest and to intimidate the government. The verb *blug* normally denotes a substance bursting out of confinement, e.g., water from a hole in a dam.

12 IOR, L/PS/10/883, telegram from Bell (in Lhasa) to the Government of India (Defhi), dated 3rd August, 1921. Tsarong Dzasa (personal communication) contends that there were more than 700 troops in Lhasa at this time. He says the Bodyguard Regiment had 500, and that there were two to three other regiments in Lhasa. This may well be correct, but Bell was referring to actual troops on hand, for often a sizable portion of a regiment was on leave. In any case, even 1200 troops was still hardly an overwhelming force if a major confrontation developed.

13 IOR, L/PS/10/883, telegram from Bell (Lhasa) to Government of India, dated 3rd September, 1921, cited in telegram from Government of India to His Majesty's Government, dated 11th September, 1921.

14 IOR, L/PS/10/883, telegram of Bcll (Lhasa) to Government of Iii(lia), dated 16th September, 1921, cited in telegram from Government of India to His Majesty's Government, dated 23rd September, 1921.

15 IOR, L/PS/10/883, telegram from Bell (Lha-sa) to Government of India, dated 16th September, 1921, cited in telegram from Government of India to His Majesty's Government, dated 23rd September, 1921.

16 In Tengyefing's case the entire monastery had been razed to the ground in 1913 so that not even a single stone remained.

17 IOR, L/PS/12/4174, letter from British 'l@rade Agent (Gyantse) to Political Officer Sikkim, dated 18th November, 1922. The British refused to intervene.

18 IOR9 L/PS/12/4174 (Pz 1769/24), British Trade Agent (Gyantse) to the Political Officer in Sikkim, circa. March, 1924.

19 In other words, the Toba Abbot would not get the yield from the estate for his first year.