

EX ORIENTE LUMINA
HISTORIAE VARIAE MULTIETHNICAE

**Festskrift tillägnad Juha Janhunen
på hans 61. födelsedag 12.2.2013**

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Edited by

**Tiina Hyytiäinen, Lotta Jalava,
Janne Saarikivi & Erika Sandman**



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TIBETAN NUNS: GENDER AS A FORCE IN A CULTURE UNDER “THREAT”

Mitra Härkönen

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the relationship between gender, religion, and nationalism. More precisely, it shows how Buddhist nuns take part in the Tibetan nationalist struggle as self-sacrificing freedom fighters and “protectors” of Tibetan traditional culture, and how these new roles challenge and transform their traditional monastic roles and social status.

The Tibetan monastic institution was integrated into the socio-political life of historical Tibet at an early stage. In the twentieth century, it became the centre of the Tibetan nationalist struggle, the aim of which is to resist Chinese rule in Tibet, as well as to conserve Tibetan culture, which is seen as being threatened by Sinicization. Despite their greater numbers and visibility compared to nuns, Tibetan monks have not been alone in their fight against China. Over the years, many nuns have also been both initiators of and active participants in freedom protests. In addition to their open resistance, nuns seem to also especially participate in a more subtle form of Tibetan nationalism, which can be seen in their acquired role as “protectors” of Tibetan traditional culture. However, the relationship between nationalism and gender is not simple or straightforward, and the presence of women as actors in nationalist processes can not only strengthen, but also challenge dominant gender relations.

In this paper, I will first look at the history of modern Tibetan nationalism and the significance of monastic institutions in it. After that review, I look at the role of Tibetan monastic women and gender in nationalist processes. In addition to literature on Tibet, religion, and nationalism, the paper is based on fieldwork conducted among Tibetans in an exile community in India in 2004 and 2008, and in Tibetan areas in China in 2007.

THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN TIBETAN NATIONALISM

Nationalism can mean many things – a movement, an ideology, and even a discourse of nationhood (see Delanty & Kumar 2006). It is also often described as a sense of

national consciousness, which exalts one nation, holding its culture and interests above all others. In anthropology, nationalism is perhaps most often used to refer to an ideology that asserts that the cultural boundaries of an ethnic group should correspond to political boundaries (Eriksen 2001: 275; also Smart 1985: 26–27).

Most scholars agree that modern nationalism as an ideological movement emerged in eighteenth-century Europe, but has adapted to or been reconstructed by cultures with different traditions from the West (Delanty & Kumar 2006: 1–2). In Tibet, nationalism is usually seen as a recent development. Robert Ekvall, a missionary-anthropologist working in Tibet in the first half of the twentieth century, noted that the Tibetan self-image did not include a concept of “nationhood”, as Tibetans distinguished themselves from non-Tibetans by means of religion, eating behavior, language, race, and geographic location (Butler 2003: 48). According to Åshild Kolås (1996), it was vis-à-vis Buddhism that Tibetans traditionally differentiated themselves from non-Tibetans.¹ “Tibet” referred to a certain territorial entity that was united by the Buddhist religion. Pan-Tibetan practices, such as long-distance trade and pilgrimage, have given relative coherence to a Tibetan cultural identity and have led to considerable cultural consistency (Kapstein 1998: 115–119, 140; also Yeh 2005). Emily Yeh (2005: 650), however, has traced the emergence of Tibetan nationalism to the escape of the 13th Dalai Lama to India and Mongolia after the British and Chinese invasions. In the early twentieth century, China had attempted to transform its previous “suzerainty” into direct sovereignty and the British displayed their imperial interest in Tibet. The ruling 13th Dalai Lama responded by establishing some of the institutions typical of a modern state, in particular the army. (Smith 1996: xi, 229, 262; Samuel 1993; Goldstein 1989)

Tibetan nationalism is seen to have grown only under the conditions of foreign conquest and rule, a phenomenon typical of colonialism. Thus, it has been suggested that Tibetan nationalism was only an outgrowth of encounters with the Chinese and that the idea of Tibetans having a nation-state did not emerge until the early twentieth century, especially until after the Chinese occupation and Tibetan exile.

In particular, the Chinese invasion of the Tibetan regions in the 1950s signified a change in Tibetan nationalism, which for most Tibetans had previously been an unfocused and localized ideology (Anand 2000; Butler 2003; Lopez 1998: 200; Yeh 2005).

1 It should be mentioned, however, that Tibetans also distinguished themselves from, for example, Mongols, Mongghul, Mangghuer, and Yugur, who practiced Tibetan Buddhism. Bon adherents – despite not being Buddhists – are also Tibetan.

Tibetan dissatisfaction with Chinese "democratic reforms" and socialist transformation culminated in a national uprising against the Chinese in central Tibet in 1959. This uprising and the escape of the 14th Dalai Lama to India brought an end to China's more moderate policies toward religion and religious institutions, leading finally to the total repression of religious life in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). (Goldstein 1998: 6–7; 1989; Powers 1995: 170–174; Kolås 1996: 54–55)

Contrary to Chinese expectations that the economic reforms and social liberalization of post-Maoist politics in the 1980s would remove the grounds for Tibetan discontent, the relaxation of social restrictions led to a revival of Tibetan civil, cultural and religious life (Gyamtso 2008), and to a resurgence of Tibetan nationalism. Central to this revitalization process has been the revival of monastic institutions, which have become inseparable from the idea of the prosperity of the Tibetan nation and culture in the early twentieth century.

SIGNIFICANCE OF MONASTICISM IN TIBETAN NATIONALISM

The principle of fusion of religious and secular authority was a powerful ideal in Tibetan society from early on. Buddhism is believed to have been introduced to Tibet in the seventh century by a mighty king, who started the first Tibetan dynasty (AD 600–842). It was more firmly established by a later king, who made Buddhism the official state religion and promoted the building of the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery. The actual rise of Tibet as a Tibetan Buddhist state, however, took place in subsequent centuries under the foreign domination of the Mongol and Manchu empires. The power vacuum left by the collapse of the first dynasty had led to rivalries between local lay rulers, who formed alliances with different Tibetan Buddhist schools and promoted the political rise of certain Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. By the thirteenth century, some monasteries had become both wealthy land owners and strong political institutions. (Powers 1995; Samuel 1993)

The largest monasteries were found in the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism, as Gelukpa religious leaders (i.e. the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas) gained considerable religio-political power in Central Tibet in the seventeenth century. The 5th Dalai Lama (enthroned in 1642) and the 13th Dalai Lama (enthroned in 1895) created especially favorable circumstances for monastic life, founding new monasteries and creating economic support systems for them. During the rule of the 13th Dalai Lama, the largest monasteries were expected to help the central government maintain its power in return for support and protection given by the government. (Samuel 1993; Goldstein 1989 & 1998; Powers 1995; Dreyfus 2003) Besides their

political, spiritual, and ritual responsibilities, the monasteries provided basic education and maintained the Buddhist scholastic tradition (Samuel 1993).

The changes brought by the Chinese drastically transformed the Tibetan societal structure, which was largely based on Buddhism and its monastic institutions. Monasteries were destroyed, while nuns and monks were forced to disrobe. Many were also imprisoned, tortured, and killed. (Goldstein 1998; Powers 1994; Young 2000: 230)

Given the traditional relationship between Tibetan religion and politics, the revival of Tibetan Buddhism has been seen to signify for Tibetans a communal experience with inevitable political significance. The revival of religion in the 1980s brought a revival of Tibetan nationalism. As a threat to China's territorial integrity and its political control in Tibet, it led to the re-establishment of political control over Tibetan religious life (Smith 1996; Kapstein 1998; Slobodnik 2004). One of the causes for dissatisfaction among Tibetans is the "patriotic education" promoted by the Chinese government. In the process of re-education, Tibetans are required to accept the region as an inalienable part of China, to denounce the Dalai Lama as a separatist, and to recognize the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama.

The resistance of Tibetans against political control as they experience it has found its expression in various demonstrations, often initiated by monastic people. The first documented outburst by monastics after the Cultural Revolution was a protest initiated by a group of monks in Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region in 1987. The demonstration began with a series of street protests and continued until 1989, when martial law was imposed by the Chinese government (Smith 1996: 602–603, 616; Samuel 1993: 574; Powers 1995: 182–184). There were minor demonstrations in the 1990s, but only large-scale demonstrations around the Olympics in 2008 managed to capture the world's attention again.

NATIONALISTIC MONASTIC WOMEN

There exists no recorded history of female monastics in Tibet, and the exact number of nuns and nunneries in traditional Tibet is not known. It is believed that before the 1950s, nuns comprised 2–4 percent of the female population and that there were 618 to 818 nunneries. (Havnevik 1994; Dreyfus 2003; Willis 1987) Despite differences of opinion about how many nuns there were in traditional Tibet, it is clear that monks far outnumbered nuns (Havnevik 1994; Tsomo 1987).²

² Estimations of the number of monks vary between 10 and 33 percent of the male population before the advent of the Chinese in the 1950s, but it is safe to say that the relative number of

When comparing the traditional position of monks and nuns in general, there appears to be differences, for example, between their levels of monastic ordination, religious practices and education, as well as their roles in society (Havnevik 1989; Grimshaw 1992; Gutschow 2000; 2004; Tsomo 1987; 1996; 2003; Willis 1987). While there are various reasons for the lower religious and social prestige of nuns and for the fewer opportunities that they are offered in terms of religious education, the inferior status of nuns in historical Tibet can at least partly be explained by the close connection between Tibetan political and religious life, in which nuns and nunneries did not have a notable position. This situation appeared to change with the rise of modern Tibetan nationalism in the twentieth century.

Despite the greater visibility of Tibetan monks in the nationalist struggle, Tibetan nuns have been highly active initiators of and participants in freedom protests. In fact, a larger percentage of nuns appear to be involved in political activities than monks (Young 2000: 231). Resistance expressed by Tibetan women against Chinese rule has existed from the beginning of the occupation, and even before that (Butler 2003; Pachen & Donnelley 2002). However, the women's nationalist struggle assumed visibility only through the series of street protests in 1987–1996, which were staged by nuns in Lhasa. During this period, more than 300 nuns from twenty-eight nunneries are known to have been arrested, almost all of them for staging brief, politicized circumambulations of the Barkhor area, a pilgrim circuit surrounding the Jokhang temple in the heart of the city (Barnett 2005: 323–328; Havnevik 1994).

One of the nuns who took part in a protest in 1988 is Ani Choedon. She now lives in India, where she shared her life story with me in 2008:

We were eleven nuns and two monks that went to protest in 1988. In those days, I was working in a temple in Lhasa. Before the protest I had gone to my home nunnery, which is a little further from Lhasa, and had told the other nuns that if they were interested in coming to protest they should gather together and come to Lhasa. So eleven nuns and two monks gathered in the temple I worked at. After that, we separated. We had made a plan earlier that we would go in pairs and just act as if we were walking along and giving alms to beggars. Our plan was to meet at the Tsuklagkhang [i.e. Jokhang temple]. We were all able to get there, but I never knew how when we reached the place the police were already there. The police told the shopkeepers and street vendors to close the shops. What we did next, we quickly made two lines and began to protest. We had written on banners slogans such as "Long Life to His Holiness", "Freedom in Tibet", "Chinese out of Tibet", and "Tibet belongs to Tibetans". So we had banners. Or not exactly banners, but the

monks in Tibet was much larger than anywhere in the Buddhist world.

slogans were written on pieces of paper, so we just threw them on the ground and at the same time protested. We shouted. So we had made two rounds around Lhakang [i.e. the temple] and there were many policemen and the army. We were all caught. I was caught by three Chinese soldiers. We were all put in a jeep or a kind of army truck and taken to a prison.

After her release from prison, Ani Choedon was expelled from the nunnery and forbidden from involvement in any political or religious activities. Because she did not want to return to lay life, she decided to escape to India, where Tibetans under the leadership of the Dalai Lama and his exile government had created a refugee community and where rebuilding monasteries and nunneries was taking place.

Nuns continue to protest today. As recently as 2 July 2011, for example, three Tibetan nuns from Kardze County in the Sichuan province of China were each sentenced to three years imprisonment for carrying out peaceful protests a month before (*Phayul* 2011).

In addition to open resistance shown by nuns such as Ani Choedon, more subtle opposition also exists. As suggested above, one of the reasons that the Tibetan monastic institution has gained significance in the Tibetan nationalist struggle is its role as a conservator of “Tibetan traditional culture”. This is highlighted in the following excerpts by Tibetans living in the Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo in the Qinghai province of China:

A 32-year-old layman from Amdo states:

Many religious practices have been destroyed and opportunities to study Tibetan are few. Tibetan traditional culture is in the monastery. It is the source of Tibetan culture and life. That’s why many monasteries were destroyed [...] The Tibetan monastery has thousands of years of history and knowledge. It is a resource for our culture.

A 62-year-old layman from Kham says:

The function of the monastery is to spread Buddhism to the world. If there was a monastery in one place only, it couldn’t promote Buddhism. The purpose of the monastery is to promote the Tibetan culture and to save the Tibetan culture.

The role of monasteries and monastics in the Tibetan nationalist cause is cited especially by the younger generation of Tibetans:

If there are many monks in the monasteries, they can study and practice Tibetan culture. So the monastery is the place to begin Tibetan education and preserve our culture. The main task of the monastery is to practice Buddhism

and Tibetan culture. Actually Buddhism is the root of Tibetan culture. (Male college student, 20, Amdo)

Tibetans are a very special nationality. There are a lot of monasteries in Tibet. This religion is very old in Tibet. So we have to keep the monastery. The monastery is important for Tibet because it preserves Tibetan culture and improves the life of Tibetans. (Male college student, 21, Amdo)

These and other interviews with Tibetans show that the monastic institution has become a focus of the Tibetan nationalist struggle, because it represents Tibetan ethnic identity and its “primordial” culture. As is typical with nationalism in general, Tibetan nationalism involves the glorification of ancient cultural traditions, overemphasis of the cultural continuity (in this case, an “imagined” Tibetan Buddhist nation), and lack of emphasis on internal differences and change. (Eriksen 2001: 276, 291–292; Anderson 1991)

While it is true that Tibetan women have enjoyed certain freedoms in work, family and community life, the main responsibility for women of all classes has always been the well-being of the family (Havnevik 1989: 50; Butler 2003: 16–17, 83; Thonsur 2003: 327). In fact, life as a nun was one of only a few opportunities for women to “escape” their conventional gendered roles as wives and mothers.

Apparently even today, monastic life means freedom from conventional expectations and the traditional female role. In addition, it seems to provide women with new, more meaningful roles in society. A 29-year-old nun from Kham, living in India in 2004, explained her motives in this way:

If laypeople have a lot of knowledge and they know about politics, they can help the government [in exile]. But ordinary laypeople, they can’t do anything for the government. A nun’s life is better than this kind of life. Even if we nuns can’t do anything to help the government, we can be good nuns. If we can’t help the government, at least we can read scriptures well and pray well. We can help by doing prayers.

It can be suggested that some young women make a “statement” merely by taking lifelong vows and joining the monastic life, due to a wish to conserve the Tibetan traditional religion and culture, which they believe is under threat of being eradicated (Havnevik 1994). Especially uneducated, rural women who belong to the lowest strata in society can acquire – if not higher social status – at least a more positive self-image as defenders and preservers of Tibetan traditional ways of life in the face of major changes. While there are many reasons behind the increasing numbers of nuns and nunneries in many Tibetan areas over the past few years, one of the explanations can be found in the role of monasticism in Tibetan nationalism.

GENDER AS A FORCE

Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989: 7, 9) have identified five major ways in which women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes. These are: 1) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities; 2) as producers of the boundaries of ethnic or national groups; 3) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture; 4) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences; and 5) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.

Aside from the first of these, Tibetan nuns can be seen as participating in all of the other processes of modern Tibetan nationalism. It was shown above how nuns participate in the ideological reproduction of the Tibetan collectivity and in transmitting its culture. Further, it was shown how they take part in national and political struggles. The nuns also act as producers of the boundaries between Tibetans and Chinese as ethnic and national groups and as signifiers of their ethnic and national differences. This is merely done by stressing the “high” position of Tibetan women, compared to Chinese women (Butler 2003). A Tibetan woman living in exile writes:

Fortunately Tibetan women have not been subjected to inequalities and do not spend their energy struggling for equality within their society [...] Until the national struggle is achieved, Tibetan women should and will continue to work for the national cause (Thonsur 2003: 334, 338–340).

In fact, according to Young (2000: 238), demonstrating nuns are seen as problematic by the government because, despite their rhetoric about gender equality, Chinese officials cannot accept women as autonomous agents. Interrogators generally want to know who (i.e. what male) is behind a demonstration. Charlene Makley has also pointed out about Tibetan laywomen living in Labrang that by dressing properly, behaving demurely, and respecting traditional gender limitations, they signal their independence from Chinese ideology and from Chinese rule. (Makley 1997; 2002; 2005; Young 2000: 238)

It has thus been suggested that the participation of Tibetan women in the nationalist struggle is not a women’s liberation struggle, but an aspect of the Tibetan nationalist movement (Butler 2003: 191). It is, however, too narrow a view that women and gender relations are simply tools to further a nationalist project. Women are not only passive symbols, but might have their own interests, which they promote in national processes (Walby 2006). Thus, while a nationalist ideology draws from “invented” or constructed ideas of the ancient traditions of an old culture, which is to be preserved and defended, it can mean-

while change the gender relations of the society and provide women with new, less traditional roles.

Furthermore, while the focus of the nuns' protest is on the national cause rather than on gender equality, the new roles that they acquire in Tibetan public and political life provide them with new opportunities in the monastic institution and are changing the way that they are viewed by Tibetans in general. Interestingly, Barnett (2005) has suggested that Tibetan women activists, and especially nuns, have been seen as embodying self-denial and purity of motives, based on dedication to the Tibetan culture and the national community. This may have paradoxically increased their standing as nuns. In particular, by protesting during periods when the danger of such actions is great, nuns seem to have acquired respect in their community as models of nationalistic courage and religious principles. (Barnett 2005: 314, 327–338)

Young (2000: 239) has suggested that one reason behind the increase of nuns (and the decrease of monks) in political demonstrations may be to allow monks to continue their advanced studies of Buddhism, studies in which nuns do not participate. Her argument is that a defeated people often look to the women in its community to uphold communal values, and that these values are often expressed more conservatively during crises. However, it can be seen that the most significant shifts in the status of nuns have been in the field of religious education. Nuns both in exile and in Tibetan areas of China have started to receive better religious educations. (Tsomo 2003)

It can thus be argued that, amongst other things, the Tibetan nationalist movement has opened up new opportunities for Tibetan nuns. Meanwhile, nuns have adopted the role of culture guardians or "preservers", which has been made possible by the Tibetan nationalist movement; they have changed their traditional status (Jayawardena 1986: 14). In other words, the nuns who are intensely concerned with the preservation of their religion, language, and culture are, at the same time, positioned to initiate changes in their status and traditional gender roles (Havnevik 1994: 362, 265).

CONCLUSION

Tibetan nationalism is mainly built on the idea of an ethnic identity that is distinctive from that of China (*vis-à-vis* Tibetan language and the history of the country, as well as its culture and religion). Non-violence has also been assumed as the primary value and strategy espoused by the Tibetan nationalist movement. For Tibetans, monasteries in particular represent Tibetan ethnic identity and culture, which are seen to differ considerably from those of the Chinese.

The aim of this paper has been to show how nuns are participating in the Tibetan nationalist struggle, the goal being resistance of Chinese rule in Tibet and preservation of “traditional” Tibetan Buddhist culture and Tibet as a Buddhist nation. However, the relationship between gender and nationalism is complex and ambivalent. Gender can be used to further a national cause. Women especially are employed, for example, as producers of the boundaries of an ethnic group and signifiers of ethnic differences, as well as agents in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and transmitters of its culture. As nationalist ideologies draw from constructed and glorified ideas of the ancient traditions and culture of a nation, which are to be preserved and cultivated, prevailing gender relations are usually essentialized and further strengthened in the use of the nationalist project.

Women are not, however, just passive victims or symbols in nationalist processes. They can be active actors and participants in national, political or religious struggles with interests of their own. The question of gender equality may or may not be included among these interests. Whatever the case, the presence of women in national processes seems to challenge and shape the dominant gender relations of a society.

Despite the fact that Tibetan nuns are not seen as fighting for higher status, participation by nuns in Tibetan nationalism appears to have provided them with new opportunities and roles within the monastic institution. Although previously inferior to monks in traditional Tibet (primarily because of their invisible position in Tibetan politics), nuns have started to gain new status during the course of the nationalist struggle. The new role of nuns as non-violent freedom fighters, their increasing numbers, and their mission as culture “preservers” seem to have changed their status and the ways in which they are viewed by society.

It can be concluded that Tibetan nationalism has had unpredictable consequences on gender relations in the Tibetan monastic institution. It is, however, too early to foresee the final outcome of the relationship between gender, religion and nationalism in Tibet, as gender relations are shaped by nationalist processes that are very much alive in Tibet today.

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