

Communications to the Editor

On Tibet as a Stateless Society

Geoffrey Samuel's article, "Tibet as a Stateless Society and Some Islamic Parallels" (*JAS* [1982] 41, 2: 215–29) has great significance for all involved in Tibetan studies. He presents a valuable corrective to the prevalent view that the traditional Tibetan political system must have been either a "feudal society" or an "Asiatic (autocratic) state." As Samuel notes, this attempt to categorize Tibet has distorted "our perception of the true nature of the Tibetan system . . ." (p. 226).

Equally praiseworthy is the point that the economic (and the sociopolitical) structure of Tibet can not be understood without an appreciation for the significance of its long- and short-distance trading networks (p. 219). Too many other European and American scholars subliminally retain the idea that, prior to 1950, Tibet had been "out of this world," isolated from the crosscurrents that swept over the rest of Asia. They do acknowledge that China's control of the Tibetan plateau over the past thirty years has had consequences for Pakistan, India, Nepal, Afghanistan, and the Soviet Union's Tajik, Kirghiz, and Uzbek republics, as well as Xinjiang. However, they tend to ignore the fact that—either through its expanding political empire and/or through its *trade* links, for at least 1,400 years—Tibet has influenced *and* been influenced by events that affected its Turkic, Mongol, Afghan, Kashmiri, Pakistani, Nepalese, Indian, Burman, and Chinese neighbors.

However, in light of Samuel's obvious awareness of Tibet's contacts with so many Islamic—as well as Hindu, Buddhist, Confucianist, etc.—neighbors, his choices for "Islamic parallels," i.e., the Berbers and Arabs of Morocco, the Libyan Bedouin, and the Pathans of Swat, seem peculiarly inappropriate. Why select the "maraboutic crisis," rather than the earlier or contemporary *Turkic* systems? Certainly there are stronger similarities between Tibetan and Turkic social organizations, such as their "asymmetric bilateral kinship systems" (Bacon 1958), than with any Saharan peoples.

Beyond the organizational patterns that were common to Central and Inner Asian peoples, Tibet added its own unique features. When a Tibetan state was again created in the seventeenth century, the Dalai Lama was able to validate his claims to *secular* control over the plateau through his incarnation link with the literal "father" of the Tibetan people, the Bodhisattva Chenrezig (Avalokiteśvara), *and* with its historic emperors. Removing the possibility of hereditary claims to the title and position of the Dalai Lama insured that no single family—or even a group of related families—could monopolize the title. The mechanism of "discovering" the succession of Dalai Lamas allowed them to be found in areas and among groups that were threatening to pull away from Lhasan control (Miller, 1958, 1961). (Earlier, this same principle had allowed the Fourth Dalai Lama to be found among the Mongols who would install the Dalai Lama as the "ruler" of Tibet.)

The effectiveness of the Dalai Lama's control over outlying areas cannot be judged by the "revolving door" incarnations of the nineteenth century. However, when the Dalai Lama survived and attained secular control (as did the Seventh [Petech 1950],

the Thirteenth, and the Fourteenth), he had administrative mechanisms, other than military control, that were effective within the Tibetan social context. (For that matter, while it may be heretical to suggest it, some of the methods had their parallels in the political structure of the United States, which dates from roughly the same period. For example, except during war, the United States had no significant standing army until after World War II. It lacked a national police until the creation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation earlier this century. Instead its *federalist* patterns accorded significant authority to the individual states. *Local* forces, such as the police and courts, were readily employed by local elected or self-appointed leaders to enforce their "law" and to suppress dissent. I do not intend to offer this as an alternative to Samuel's "Islamic parallel," but a "federation" model *might* have some merit.)

Samuel notes that the large, landholding monasteries and aristocratic estate holders, both in central Tibet and "outside of the area of the Dalai Lama's administration . . ." enjoyed only "restricted" or "limited" authority (p. 218). It is unfortunate that he did not use any primary sources, such as the registers (censuses) of "hearths," herds, and fields, and the tax records (including authorizations to "forgive" taxes, to distribute grain supplies, normally held in the Tibetan equivalents of the "ever-normal granary"—usually associated with monasteries—when there had been a succession of poor harvests, etc.). Had he done so he might have been able to shed some light on the factors of *central* control that were at least partially responsible for those restrictions and limitations.

All Buddhist doctrine calls for *individuals* to seek their own paths to enlightenment. Tibet's religious history is replete with saints who secluded themselves from all human contact for years to pursue their own quests *and* with scholars who dedicated themselves to helping "all to become Buddha" (Miller 1958, 1974). Samuel is correct to assert that all schools of Buddhism contain both individualistic and social components (p. 216) and that "Buddhist societies" integrate their Buddhist traditions so that they help them to cope with their own ecological settings and their sociopolitical histories. This being the case, how can one find the Sherpa *more* representative of Tibetan society than the inhabitants of Tibet? Would he be equally willing to view the Louisiana bayous' "Cajun" population as "more representative" of French Canadian society than the Québécois? The Sherpa have lived under Nepalese Hindu political and economic domination for roughly the same length of time as the Acadian refugees have experienced the laws and mores of the United States, despite their relative isolation from "mainstream" America.

There is another serious question. Why does Samuel exclude Bon practitioners from among the prime Tibetan "sources of magical power and assistance . . .?" (p. 217). Certainly, *some* Tibetan Buddhist "lamas"—especially those associated with the Sakyas, Kargyud, and Nyingmapa schools—have major magical powers. However, *all* monks, even if they are "lamas," geshe, or rimpoche, cannot and do not make similar claims to such expertise, *nor* are they expected to.

Finally, there are some minor annoyances with Samuel's paper as it appeared in the *JAS*. They arise from several indications of sloppy editing and/or proofreading. On page 221, it should be the seventeenth century (not the nineteenth) that marked the effective end of "unstable alliances between aristocratic rulers and monastic orders. . . ." On page 222, the third paragraph makes no sense unless it was supposed to read: "The more remote areas . . . *never* have been fully under the control. . . ." Lastly, two "other" hands (p. 224) led me to see a three-handed author.

BEATRICE DIAMOND MILLER
Madison, Wisconsin

List of References

- Bacon, Elizabeth. 1958. *Obok: A Study of Social Structure in Eurasia*. New York: Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, no. 25).
- Miller, Beatrice D. 1958. "Lamas and Laymen: An Historico-Functional Study of the Secular Integration of Monastery and Community." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington.
- . 1961. "The Web of Tibetan Monasticism." *JAS* 20, 2:197–203.
- . 1974. "Lamaist Laity and Sangha in West Bengal, India." In *Religious Ferment in Asia*, ed. R. J. Miller. pp. 141–55. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.
- Petech, Luciano. 1950. *China and Tibet in the Early Eighteenth Century*. Leiden: E. J. Brill (T'oung Pao Monographs, no. 1).

Reply

I am pleased that Professor Miller found my article stimulating, and grateful for several of her suggestions (e.g., the use of tax records and household registers). Some of her other points reflect the nature of my article, which is condensed and presents a model of Tibetan society at a general level. I perhaps should have spelled out more explicitly the difference between "lamas" and "monks" in Tibet, and the senses in which I see Bon as part of, and as *not* part of, the "Tibetan Buddhist" model presented in the article. In the book referred to on page 226, these matters are discussed at length. Miller is quite correct about the errors on pages 222 and 224, and I can only apologize. On page 221, however, I said, and meant, the *nineteenth* century, and that brings me to areas of substantive disagreement.

1) In my article, I opposed a "decentralized" model of Tibet to a "centralized" model of other Buddhist societies. Ethnic Tibet, even in modern times, had a variety of political regimes, some of which (e.g., the Sherpas or the regimes in much of Khams and Amdo) were more decentralized, others (e.g., Central Tibet under the more effective periods of Gelukpa rule) more centralized. Miller implies (a) that I underrate the centralized nature of Gelukpa rule under effective Dalai Lamas, and (b) that that regime at its strongest can be taken as typical of Tibetan polities. On (a) the evidence is inconclusive, but to describe the Lhasa regime even under the Fifth and Seventh Dalai Lamas as an unstable alliance between monastic and secular powers does not seem to me unreasonable. On (b) I simply disagree.

Miller's comparison of Sherpas and Cajuns is misleading. Certainly most Sherpas nowadays speak Nepali, in addition to the Sherpa dialect of Tibetan, and in recent years (quite recent) there has been strong Nepali influence. There is nothing particularly "Nepali," however, about the decentralized politics or the Nyingmapa-style Tibetan religion of the Sherpas, and these can be paralleled from many other parts of ethnic Tibet.

2) I do not argue that all "monks" (i.e., *grwa pa*) are seen as sources of magical power, let alone that they see themselves primarily in those terms. I do suggest that all "lamas," and in particular all "incarnate lamas" (*sprul sku*), including those of the Gelukpa school, are seen in that way and are expected as part of their role to perform rituals based on that assumption. It may be true that many lamas, in all monastic