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TRANSCENDENCE AND PRAGMATISM:

A STUDY OF SHERPA RELIGION

This thesis is submitted to the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology, Australian National University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for M.A. degree by Course work/Thesis. It is based wholly on library research.

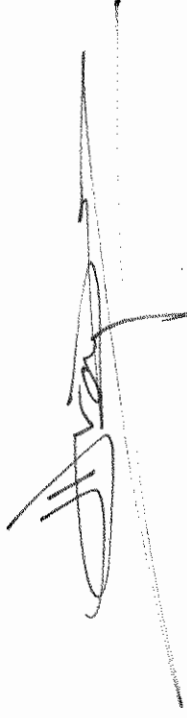
May, 1985



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Caroline Ifeka and Dr. Chris Gregory of the Australian National University.

I would also like to thank Associate-Professor Michael Allen of the University of Sydney, Dr. Geoffrey Samuel of the University of Newcastle, Ms. Lissa Stutchbury of the Australian National University, and many others who contributed in different ways to my thinking about Sherpa religion. The thesis was made possible by the financial support of a Commonwealth Postgraduate Course Award. It is my hope that the thesis conveys in some way the warmth, wisdom and vitality of the Sherpas themselves.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'L. Stutchbury', written over a horizontal line.

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SYNOPSIS

Sherpa Buddhism can be divided analytically into three different components: mahayana (represented by the monastic establishment), shamanism (represented by a variety of shaman-curers and diviners) and vajrayana (represented by married, village-based, tantric lamas). Such a division suggests that there are important differences between components within Sherpa religion. Mahayana emphasises transcendental, other-worldly concerns. Shamanism on the other hand deals with pragmatic, this worldly concerns, while vajrayana encompasses both. Now the problem with such a division is that it tends to ignore the overlap and cooperation between components found in the day to day practice of religion. Monks can be very worldly, shamans can become lamas, laymen can become ascetics. Lamas and shamans prescribe each other's rituals and often work alongside each other.

The central concern of this thesis then is to explore both the differences and the relations between components, to understand how and why different doctrines, practices and practitioners coexist and are reproduced over time. I conclude that Sherpa religion is essentially a unified system, that differences are contained within and necessary to the articulation of a cohesive yet everchanging whole. To demonstrate this I focus not so much on outer forms as on inner connections. In particular I identify an underlying relationship of interdependence between transcendental and pragmatic orientations or 'modalities'. Transformations of this relationship are to be found within components as well as between them. Central to the relationship is the mediating influence of vajrayana. This relationship continues to pervade Sherpa religion, despite the increasing alienation of the transcendental from the pragmatic as result of changes this century.

This is not to say that the relationship is an equal one. The monastic establishment is clearly dominant at an ideological level. Yet the interdependence of modalities encourages a basic pragmatism in everyday life. Worldly activity is essential to the material support of the clergy but the reverse is also true - the knowledge that transcendental concerns are being looked after is integral to the continued worldly activity of the laity; Sherpa religion is shown to be at once spiritually satisfying and pragmatically efficacious.

NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

Terms in Sherpa dialect have been italicised throughout the text. Their transliteration follows that of Ortnner (1978). This system is neither phonetic nor based on a standard set of conventions but is designed to be readable. A glossary is provided at the conclusion of the text. Terms in Sanskrit, where these are not in common usage, are identified by a preceding 'Skt', and those in Tibetan by a preceding 'Tib'.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of the religion of the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, Nepal. The Sherpas are followers of the Nyingmapa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Nyingmapa is particularly influenced by the vajrayana tradition,⁽¹⁾ which is characterised by emphasis on the pragmatic concerns of everyday worldly existence as much as on the more transcendental, other-worldly concerns of salvation or rebirth. The ultimate aim of vajrayana is liberation from suffering through a realisation of the interdependence and essential oneness of these concerns.

When encountering Sherpa religion for the first time, however, I was struck in particular by its transcendental aspect. It appeared to deny the reality of day to day existence, to encourage withdrawal from social secular responsibilities, and to concentrate its efforts on the pursuit of salvation. This impression of course was not totally unfounded. The Sherpas support and venerate a monastic establishment which has close links with the 'orthodox' mahayana tradition⁽²⁾ in Tibet. This tradition has become somewhat rationalised in the sense that pragmatic concerns are increasingly separated from transcendental pursuits. Mahayana espouses the doctrine (well known

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- (1) It is perhaps more accurate to refer to the vajrayana as a vehicle, or component, or even strand within a general rubric of Buddhism. The term 'tradition' may imply a historically distinct and observable religious order. Vajrayana, mahayana and hinayana have often been distinguished in this way. However the three 'traditions' were all taught by the Buddha and each, I suggest, deals with the same aim of achieving liberation, though at different levels of interpretation according to the needs and abilities of different followers in different contexts. The notion of historically distinct religious orders is difficult to demonstrate in the case of Tibet and even more so in the context of Sherpa religion, as I shall demonstrate. Nevertheless I shall use the term 'tradition' because it is in common usage in the ethnography. When I use the term however I refer not to historically distinct religious orders but rather to components identifiable at the level of analysis but not necessarily observable in every day religious activity.
- (2) The mahayana tradition in the Sherpa context of course is no more 'orthodox', in the historical sense, than the vajrayana tradition. I use the term in the sense that its doctrines enjoy the highest status and are perhaps the most institutionalised in much of the Tibetan Buddhist world today. This usage conforms with that in the ethnography. However it should be remembered that Sherpa religion, prior to the introduction of monasticism early this century, was essentially vajrayana.

in the West) that evil, sin and suffering are caused by ignorance of the true nature of reality and the delusions and worldly attachments which this ignorance produces. It encourages participation in ascetic, monastery-led rituals such as *Nyungne* and a variety of other time-consuming and often expensive merit-making activities in order to expiate sin, increase one's chances of a favourable rebirth, and prepare oneself for the world beyond. The ethnography pays considerable attention to the mahayana tradition and its transcendentially oriented doctrines and practices (see in particular Paul 1970).

Yet the Sherpas are far from detached from the material world. The securing of adequate food and shelter, the establishment of satisfying social relationships, and the maintenance of physical health are as important to the Sherpas as to anyone else. For how can salvation be pursued in the absence of the material requirements for survival? A spiritual life of ascetic withdrawal may be ideal for some, but it does not appear to be considered ideal by all. Is it a true liberation, the vajrayana tradition asks, which denies what, at the level of experience, is very real? Is not the spiritual life, in practice, fraught with hypocrisy, if not actual difficulty? If some are to pursue a spiritual life, others must pursue worldly activity to support them. Furthermore, differences in wealth and status render the spiritual life (and the acquisition of merit) more accessible to the wealthy. While acknowledging, at a theoretical level, the importance of transcendental concerns, the Sherpas, in practice, are essentially pragmatists, actively engaged in manipulating and altering their karmic existence in this world as much as the next. To what extent is this pragmatism catered for within Sherpa religion, and how? Are Buddhist doctrines sufficiently flexible to adapt to the exigencies of daily life, or are they incompatible? How can a religion that advocates renunciation maintain legitimacy in the everyday world?

Upon closer examination of the data, the pragmatic orientation of Sherpa religion became particularly evident. This was something of a revelation for me since, like many analysts still labouring under the influence of Cartesian rationalism, I had assumed a separation of religion from society, and of the transcendental from the pragmatic. The data however indicated a myriad of local deities and supernaturals who are intimately concerned with the day-to-day affairs of worldly existence such as illness, social conflicts and agricultural productivity (see Funke 1969, Frerkes 1982). Many rituals and practitioners are devoted to the propitiation and manipulation of these deities. In fact the pragmatic aspect of Sherpa religion appears to be the most popular (and perhaps the best understood) among the Sherpas themselves.

The Sherpas place considerable importance on the *Sang Ngak* texts of the Nyingmapa sect. These texts encourage the performance of particularly fierce tantric rituals such as exorcisms. These rituals are clearly designed to promote pragmatic worldly activity and many appear to be even anti-orthodox, though, as I shall show, this notion is somewhat misleading. They are performed not by celibate monks but rather by married, village-based tantric lamas (called *banzin*) of the vajrayana tradition. Prior to the introduction of monasticism early this century, these lamas were in fact the principal representatives of Buddhism in the Solu-Khumbu.

What I am suggesting here is that exorcism, the vajrayana tradition and the tantric lamas who represent it might be portrayed as somewhat in conflict with the passive, peaceful, transcendental orientations and prescriptions of the monastic establishment. The sexual licence of the *banzin* lama contrasts with monastic celibacy; sociality and worldly involvement contrasts with monastic asociality and ascetism; tantric rituals manipulating and exorcising demons appear incompatible with orthodox

doctrines which ultimately deny their reality (see Ortner 1978).

Furthermore, the status of *banzin* lamas has suffered recently, relative to that of monastic reincarnate lamas (*tulku*) and monks. How is this situation to be explained? Are Sherpas perhaps becoming increasingly transcendentially-oriented? How can a religion which espouses a doctrine of karma tolerate the active manipulation of circumstances and fate through ritual?

In addition to lamas, Sherpas also utilise the services of a variety of shamans for divination, curing, and other pragmatic activities. These specialists are historically linked with the shamanic *Bön* tradition in Tibet. There are important differences between shamans and lamas. In fact, compared with shamans, lamas and their rituals appear transcendental in orientation. Lamas are exclusively males and are recruited from specific lineages, the members of whom may accept or reject their right to the lamaist vocation. They are primarily responsible for regular, village-wide rituals and mortuary rites (which include exorcisms). Their rituals are prescribed in sacred texts and involve the worship of 'high' deities. Shamans, by contrast, may be male or female, may come from any section of society, and are involuntarily 'called' by local deities to their vocation. They deal primarily with the pragmatic worldly concerns of individuals such as divination and curing, through the active manipulation of local supernaturals. They adhere to an oral tradition which enables much ritual innovation. Like lamas, however, they too have declined in status and power in recent years.

To summarise thus far, it is possible to identify, at an analytical level, three different 'traditions' within the general rubric of Sherpa Buddhism. The first is the essentially transcendentially-oriented orthodox mahayana Buddhist tradition. It is represented by the monastic establishment and seeks salvation through separation from worldly concerns. The second

is the essentially pragmatically-oriented shamanic tradition. It is represented by a variety of shaman-curers and diviners who are vitally concerned with such this-worldly problems as illness. The third is the vajrayana or tantric Buddhist tradition. Rather than regarding salvation and worldly existence as irreconcilable opposites, vajrayana regards them as interdependent, interpenetrating and ultimately identical. The power released in the union of such apparent opposites is used by lamas for both transcendental and pragmatic purposes.

Now the identification of a third vajrayana tradition represents something of a modification within the ethnography of Sherpa religion, which tends to distinguish between only two traditions, namely orthodox Buddhism and shamanism (see in particular Paul 1970⁽¹⁾, Ortner 1978). This notion of two distinct traditions derives in part from the pervasiveness of models of dichotomy (e.g. the Great/Little Tradition dichotomy) in the ethnography of Southeast and South Asian communities more generally. As applied to Sherpa religion however it has some significant drawbacks. First, it evades the simple fact that vajrayana was and still is a fundamentally important tradition in its own right. Second, it does not account for the means by which different traditions are mediated. Vajrayana is very important in this regard because it contains within it so many elements of the other two traditions. Third, it fails to account adequately for the anomalies between stated belief and observed behaviour which ethnographers have so often noted. Fourth, it is essentially a static construct and therefore ignores the changes which take place in and between the traditions over time.

The division of Sherpa religion into three traditions then, and the emphasis on the mediating influence of vajrayana helps to overcome some of the drawbacks of models asserting a rigid, static dichotomy. It warns

(1) In Paul's later work (particularly 1982) he gives more attention to the mediating influence of vajrayana. See Chapter 2.

against over-simplistic assumptions concerning the homogeneity and other-worldly function of Sherpa religion and alludes to important cleavages within religion, between the clergy and the laity, and between rich and poor within Sherpa society more generally (see in particular Ortner 1978).

However such a division still does not fully resolve the problems discussed above. In particular, it risks ignoring the important similarities between traditions and the evidence of overlap and cooperation that characterises the actual practice of religion in everyday life (see von Furer-Haimendorf 1964, Samuel 1978b). Intrinsic to the Sherpa view of reality is the notion of the interconnectedness of the universe. This is reflected in orthodox mahayanist doctrines of dependent origination, the emphasis on compassion, and the perceived self-defeating nature of all violence. It is also reflected, however, in tantric practices inculcating experience of the essential unity of opposites, and in shamanic curing rituals seeking to restore relations between individuals, between a community and its environment, and between the natural and supernatural realms. All three traditions share this emphasis on the relations between things.

Lamas and shamans both prescribe and perform each other's rituals. They are often observed to work alongside each other, and even to fill in for the other if the need arises. While lamas implicitly acknowledge the existence of local supernaturals in their rituals, shamans also acknowledge the ultimate supremacy of 'high' orthodox Buddhist deities in their divinations and often give up shamanising later in life in favour of more transcendental pursuits. A lay person may consult a lama to confirm a shamanic 'calling' and then, having become a legitimate shaman, prescribe a tantric exorcism in which the shaman plays an active role. The laity frequently employ the services of a shaman, lama and monk (and more recently, in the case of illness, a Western doctor) simultaneously, if they can afford to do so.

A number of ethnographers have been puzzled by the apparent inconsistency between doctrine and practice arising from this pragmatism. Paul (1979) provides the following example. One day a lama was busy picking up worms from his potato field and setting them free in the adjoining forest. Asked why he was doing this the lama explained that killing in all its forms brings bad karma and is prohibited by Buddhist doctrine. Preservation of life on the other hand is an important means of earning merit. The next day the same lama approached Paul with a request for pesticides to kill the worms, who had returned and were eating his crops. This time the lama explained that the higher path to salvation could not be followed without food to sustain one.

How then, does one reconcile the differences between doctrines, practices and practitioners with the evidence of overlap and cooperation? How, and why, does a religious tradition tolerate and even encourage practices that appear to be in conflict with those of its own clergy? What is the relationship, in the Sherpa religious context, between ideology and experience, between doctrines and rituals, between stated beliefs and observable behaviour?

Part of the problem here of course lies in the difficulties and limitations of cross-cultural analysis itself. The terms 'tradition', 'shamanism', 'orthodox' etc and the differences they imply are, to a certain degree, the creation of analysts. As such they reflect categorisations, demarcations of boundaries, and perceptions of reality that do not necessarily conform with each other, let alone with the conceptions of the Sherpas themselves. The imposition of analytical divisions and classifications appears forced at times in the context of a culture where interpenetrating multiple realities are the norm, where differences are (according to at least one tradition) held to be illusions, and where

the notion of objective truth is a relatively recent import resulting from a process of rationalisation.

There are perhaps four main alternatives in analysing Sherpa religion. The first is to assert a single, undifferentiated religion. In view of the differences between traditions already outlined, this approach can be seen to be misleading. It is not adopted by any of the ethnographers. The second alternative is to assert opposed and conflicting religious traditions. To a certain degree this is the approach taken by Ortner (1970, 1978) but the evidence of cooperation between traditions already outlined suggests that this approach, too, will be misleading. The third alternative, and the most common in the ethnography, is to assert that two or more conceptually distinct traditions articulate within one single religious 'field'. Within this alternative, however, there are a number of possible approaches; distinct, but not necessarily mutually exclusive. The first is that the traditions are opposite but complementary; that differences are manifest within and necessary to the articulation of the whole. To a certain degree this is the approach taken by Paul (1970, 1982). The second is that one tradition is contained within the other, something in the manner of Chinese boxes according to one's particular vantage and focus. The third is that the traditions represent historical layers, superimposed and congealing through time, but not as yet set. The fourth is that two major traditions are mediated by a third or even a fourth tradition. Each of these variations of the third alternative deserve consideration. Perhaps the most appropriate image here is that of a plait in which three separate strands overlap and combine to form a whole which is more than the sum of its parts and which would not remain intact without each of the three strands.

The fourth alternative however, and the one which I arrive at in this thesis, is to focus not so much on traditions as such but rather on more general orientations towards the problem of human

existence. These orientations are reflected within but are not necessarily exclusive to one or another tradition. This alternative has the important advantage of overcoming the arbitrariness of boundaries between traditions and is able to account for the overlap and interpenetration between them in everyday life. Furthermore, it is responsive to the mediating influence of vajrayana, is able to provide an explanation for changes over time, and is readily recognised by the Sherpas themselves.

In this thesis I take note of each of these four alternatives. In particular I explore the evidence for a focus on differences on the one hand, and a focus on relations on the other. I conclude that - while differences certainly exist - an emphasis on them will provide a fairly limited and misleading picture of Sherpa religion as a whole. A focus on relations must complement - if not in fact replace - a focus on differences. In summary, I make, and provide evidence for the following five major propositions:

- (i) The orthodox, tantric, and shamanic traditions in Sherpa religion should be analysed not so much as discrete, objective entities but rather as general, interpenetrating orientations or 'modalities', orthodox Buddhism representing transcendental orientations (but incorporating pragmatic concerns); shamanism representing pragmatic concerns (but incorporating transcendental orientations); and tantrism encompassing both. The differences between traditions when analysed in terms of underlying structural relations, are shown to be manifest within and necessary to the articulation of a cohesive yet everchanging whole. Differences must be identified if one is to understand relations; and relations must be identified if one is to understand differences.
- (ii) The relationship between transcendental and pragmatic modalities is a dynamic, symbiotic, interdependent and mutually legitimating one.

Transcendental orientations are made possible by virtue of their relation to pragmatic concerns, and vice versa. The pragmatism of the laity is essential to both the moral and material support of the orthodox monastic establishment, yet the reverse is also true: the knowledge that transcendental concerns are being effectively looked after is integral to, and enables the continued worldly activity of the laity. The result is a cultural system which is at once spiritually satisfying and pragmatically efficacious.

(iii) This relationship is reaffirmed by transformations of the relationship at a number of different levels. The interdependence of transcendental and pragmatic elements within a *gyepshi* exorcism, for example, is shown to be structurally homologous to that between *gyepshi* and the more pragmatic *dodzongup* exorcism; between lamaist exorcism as a whole, and shamanic divination; and between religion as a whole and society.

(iv) Although interdependent, the relationship is asymmetrical in that the doctrines of orthodox Buddhism are accorded superior status and have been institutionalised to a greater degree than notions more characteristic of other traditions. However, the pragmatism of the laity ensures that tantric and shamanic activity also remains important in everyday life. Depending on one's vantage, shamanism is not so much opposed to orthodox Buddhism as contained within it, and vice versa.

(v) Central to the relationship is the mediating influence of vajrayana which encompasses both transcendental and pragmatic elements and ultimately demonstrates that the differences between them are not real. This tantric influence appears to be more significant in Sherpa religion than in other Southeast and South Asian communities.

My approach in this thesis is heavily influenced by the structuralist school of anthropology. It is perhaps not surprising that an approach which

emphasises underlying relations and inter-connectedness should so usefully and accurately illuminate Sherpa religion. I have attempted in this thesis, however, to move beyond structuralism per se. To know that a relationship exists is not particularly meaningful unless we also know what is related to what, how, and why.

Nor is it particularly useful if it ignores the realities of inequalities and exploitation, or the effects of contact with other socio-cultural formations and political systems. The relationship between traditions in Sherpa religion is dynamic and everchanging. To 'freeze' this dynamism, to identify relations without also exploring how they change over time, is to convey an incomplete and unrealistic picture of Sherpa religion. Religion is a thing 'done' as much as believed; actions speak louder than words. I am especially concerned, therefore, to explore the relationship between traditions as it is manifest in everyday life; to reconcile structure and action, doctrine and ritual, belief and behaviour.

In the first Chapter I review some of the approaches which ethnographers have developed to deal with the relationship between different traditions in Southeast and South Asian communities. I am particularly critical of those models which assume a dichotomy between traditions, and I note the lack of emphasis on mechanisms of mediation in models generally. With this background I provide a brief ethnographic introduction to the Sherpas in Chapter 2. I draw attention to the evidence of both transcendental and pragmatic modalities and discuss the ways in which ethnographers have analysed this evidence. In Chapter 3 I offer a more detailed description of two important arenas of religious activity, namely tantric exorcism and shamanic divination. Using this material I adopt something of a devil's advocate technique and state the case for a focus on differences as a way of approaching Sherpa religion. I explore alleged differences firstly within

a tradition (between exorcisms), secondly between traditions (between Lamaist rituals as a whole and shamanism) and thirdly between religion as a whole and society. In Chapter 4, however, I re-examine this data, point out the limitations of a focus on differences alone, and demonstrate the importance of focusing on relations. In particular I explore how a relationship of interdependence and mutual legitimation between transcendental and pragmatic modalities is reaffirmed by transformations and the all important mediating influence of vajrayana. Finally in Chapter 5 I explore how my analysis may be applied diachronically to illuminate and explain change.