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Tibetan Nomads Before the Chinese Invasion

Thomas Cox

In the Himalayan Research Bulletin (VII.1:2-3) Drs. Melvyn Goldstein and Cynthia Beall assert that nomadic pastoralists in Tibet's Phala Shang region were, until 1959, "serfs of Tashilunpo, the seat of Tibet's second great incarnation, the Panchen Lama." This assertion constitutes a potential exception to the conclusions of Robert Ekvall (1964; 1968), who, after eight years of fieldwork in Tibet in the 1920's and 1930's, concluded that pre-Chinese invasion Tibetan nomadic pastoralists had a great deal of freedom and autonomy and were not serfs to monastic institutions.

Ekvall argued that the autonomy of nomadic pastoralists was greatly facilitated by the mobility of their herds. This mobility enabled nomadic pastoralists to move almost at will over a large area, thus making it nearly impossible for monastic officials to control nomadic herds as "endowments to monasteries, or as fiefs to vassals, as has been done so often in Tibetan history with soil fields and the peasants who till them" (Ekvall 1968:24). Ekvall (1968:82) concluded that the relationship between nomadic pastoralists and Tibet's monastic institutions was characterized by voluntary mutual support. Nomadic pastoralists supported monastic institutions through large donations of butter, cheese, wool and livestock. In return monastic officials gave nomads (1) a place in the monastery to store wool, clothing, skins and other possessions, (2) a religious education and, (3) provided a variety of ritual services.

While Ekvall considered the nomadic pastoralists' economic support of monasteries to have been voluntary, it is apparent that nomads also depended, to an extent, on monastic institutions for ritual services, and thus felt obligated to give economic resources. The nomadic pastoralists' need for ritual services, however, apparently did not, in general, seriously compromise their autonomy. If one monastery became excessive in their demands for economic resources nomadic pastoralists could often move to a new location and enter into a relationship with another monastery. Thus, while monastic institutions did exert a certain amount of influence in their relationship with nomadic pastoralists, this apparently did not generally result in the serfdom of nomads.

Ekvall (1964) concluded that Tibetan nomads had as much autonomy and independence in their relationship with the central Tibetan government, as they did with Tibet's monastic institutions:

. . . the power and pattern of movement-inherent in the concept and practice of nomadism . . . enabled each nomadic community to evade, with marked success, the imposition of royal law. Even in areas under direct centralized control, enforcement of the official law of the land was sporadic and limited mostly to cases where the financial interest of the central authority was involved (Ekvall 1964:1112).

Nomadic pastoralists . . . because of their basic mobility and evasive capability that mobility conferred, had even greater local autonomy and independence than that possessed by other segments of the population (Ekvall 1964:1122).

Ekvall (1964:1113-1114) also argued that the mobility of livestock enabled nomads to escape legal sanctions in their own society to the same extent that it enabled them to escape laws of the central Tibetan government. Ekvall (1964:1114) pointed out that when nomads did choose to move to a new herding group (for whatever reason) acceptance was

usually not a problem, as nomadic communities almost always needed extra manpower for defense, trading expeditions, herding, and other activities.

The autonomy and independence of pre-Chinese invasion Tibetan nomads was perhaps best expressed by a Tibetan ruler in response to a specific "instance of insubordination."

How do you control one of the aBrog Pa (wilderness ones)? They can always leave and get away. How do you stop one of them? Do you put iron hobbles on him, put all his livestock in a pen and deep them there, and do you try to padlock and chain his tent to the ground? or do you keep a mounted patrol watching him at all time? His animals all have four legs. He is always mounted to control and protect his herds. He is always armed for the same purpose. What can you do to stop him? A nomad simply goes wherever he wants to go (Ekvall 1964:1122).

There must have been some variation in the degree of influence which monastic institutions exerted over nomadic pastoralists in pre-Chinese invasion Tibet. However, there is nothing in Ekvall's accounts to indicate that monastic institutions could have maintained nomadic pastoralists in a state of serfdom. Indeed, the very terms "serf" (defined as "an agricultural laborer who is bound to the land to such an extent that he may be transferred with the land to another lower," [Seymour-Smith 1986, 255] and "nomadic pastoralist" (defined as a people who have no fixed location, but wander in a systematic way from one pasture to the next) seem mutually exclusive.

If the Phala Shang nomads currently being studied by Goldstein and Beall were serfs of Tashilunpo it would have important implications for anthropological conceptions of Tibetan nomadic pastoralists before the Chinese invasion. However, one unsubstantiated assertion is not enough to constitute a meaningful exception to Ekvall's conclusions. How exactly do the Phala Shang nomads fit into the wider context of pre-Chinese invasion Tibetan pastoralist society? How did Tashilunpo maintain the Phala Shang nomads in a state of serfdom? How long did this state of serfdom last? Would the Phala Shang nomads themselves describe their pre-Chinese invasion condition as one of serfdom, or is that just a descriptive category that Goldstein and Beall have imposed on them? In short, what real evidence is there that the Phala Shang nomads were serfs of Tashilunpo? I look forward to reading the answers to these questions in the publications that will hopefully emerge from Drs. Goldstein and Beall's current research.

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