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While Dr. C.M. Beall and I were in western Tibet conducting the final thirteen months (5/1987-6/1988) of fieldwork among the nomadic pastoralists that I reported on in the **Himalayan Research Bulletin** (VII 1:2-3, 1987), a comment on that report titled "Tibetan Nomads Before the Chinese Invasion" was published in the **Himalayan Research Bulletin.** It has just come to my attention and I would like to take this opportunity to respond.

Mr. Cox, the author of that comment, takes issue with a statement in our brief report that the Tibetan nomads we studied were serfs of the Panchen Lama in the pre-1959 era. He argues that this is different from the conclusions of Robert Ekvall 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."

Cox's comments, however, are based on a lack of understanding of Tibetan history, geography and ethnology. To begin with, he either misunderstands or misrepresents Ekvall and his work. First, Ekvall did not live in Tibet (i.e., the state ruled by the Dalai Lamas). Instead, Ekvall actually lived in the western Chinese province of Kansu, an area that was controlled at that time by a Chinese Muslim (Hui) warlord and had been under Chinese control for centuries. (For more detail on the complex history of that region and its ethnic groups see, J. Fletcher, "A brief history of the Chinese Northwest Frontier," in M.E. Alonso, China's Inner Asian Frontier. Cambridge: The Peabody Museum, 1979; Louis M.J. Schram, The Mongours of the Kansu-Tibetan Frontier, Philadelphia, The American Philosophical Society, Part 1, 1954 and Part 3, 1961).

The people Ekvall wrote about, therefore, were ethnic Tibetans living in W. China under a totally different political system from that extant in Tibet "proper".[1] In essence, the Tibetan populations in Kansu were analogous to the ethnic Tibetan populations of Ladakh (India), Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. We would, of course, not expect that the political organization of peasants in Lhasa, Tibet would be the same as those in Leh, Ladakh or Thimbu, Bhutan, so the fact that our account of nomads in western Tibet differs from that of nomads living 1,000 miles away in a Chinese province ruled by a Chinese Muslim warlord, is not surprising--it is what most reasonable observers would expect.

Second, Cox's assertion that Ekvall was conducting fieldwork while he lived in Kansu Province is also incorrect. Ekvall was there as a Protestant missionary (See: Robert Ekvall, Cultural Relations on the Kansu-Tibetan Border (Midway Reprints [originally, U. of Chicago Press, 1939] 1977, pp. 1-3). In other words, his reportage appears not to be based on detailed fieldnotes and a specific research design,-- but rather derives from recollections of his life in the area. This does not mean that his reports are incorrect or not of great value, but it certainly raises questions about their reliability. We know all too well how selective memory can be.

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[1] Part of Cox's apparent confusion derives from Ekvall's misleading use of the phrase "Kansu-Tibetan border," this implying that the Tibetans in question were living in Tibet. Careful reading of Ekvall's account, however, makes it clear that he is talking about an ethnic border, not the political border between the polity of the Dalai Lamas and China.

I mention this not to deprecate Ekvall or his contribution to Tibetology, but simply to set straight the record, given that Cox has so naively raised Ekvall's work to the pedestal of anointed "truth." In fact, one of the aims of our project on western Tibetan nomads was precisely to obtain comparative data on some of Ekvall's generalizations (e.g., those dealing with political organization and demography) since I had felt for years that they were unrepresentative of conditions in Tibet "proper." The larger question of how accurate Ekvall's work is for the groups with which he lived, leave alone other groups in Kansu, has to wait until anthropologists are able to conduct serious research in Kansu and Chinghai--hopefully in the near future.

Which leads me to Cox's apparent shock at the thought that monasteries and lamas in Tibet had fief-like estates and bound subject populations (leaving aside whether we should call these bound populations by the Tibetan term miser, or serfs (as we prefer) or simply subjects). Cox has apparently read (or absorbed) nothing on Tibetan ethnology. I and other scholars have discussed at some length the nature of the politico-social-economic system in traditional Tibet, and the question of whether the Tibetan politico-economic system is best conceptualized as a form of serfdom or not. While there is considerable controversy over the appropriateness of the term "serf" for the social categories that Tibetans call miser, there is little disagreement over what actually existed, i.e., that aristocratic and monastic lords controlled vast estates with subject populations who, while they could not be evicted, also could not legally leave.

Cox's ignorance of this literature, moreover, has lead him to erroneously assume that our use of the term "serf" implies we contend that Tibetan nomads had no personal freedom. If he had read any of the articles I have written on this subject, he would have known that this is not at all what my use of the term "serf" conveys. This is obviously not the forum to re-review for Cox's benefit the lengthy literature on the nature of the traditional Tibetan state with its juxtaposition of a central government and feudal-type aristocratic and monastic/religious lords, but apropos of Mr Cox's comments, it is interesting to note that one of the greatest explorers of this century--Sven Hedin-- actually passed through the area of our research in 1906-8 and clearly mentioned the control of nomad groups by the Panchen Lama's government. In Trans Himalaya (vol. 1:199) Hedin wrote, that in the "country near the Dangra-yum-tso, [a lake just north of Phala] ... the nomads are under the administration of Tashilhunpo." Consequently, our statement that monasteries had subject nomadic pastoralist populations we called serfs (and others would call miser or subjects) is something that anyone familiar with the ethnological literature on Tibet might expect.

In addition, there is ample evidence in the literature that monasteries in Kansu and Chinghai had estates with subjects (miser, serfs) from which they derived income and services via taxes in kind and corvee. For example, Li An-che, a Western trained Chinese ethnographer, conducted a study of Labrang monastery in Kansu in 1938-41 and reported clearly that Labrang monastery controlled and administered farming and nomadic populations (Labrang. Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, 1982, see pp. 3-15). He reports there were "13 villages" under the administrative control of Labrang--13,249 villagers, 26,427 tent-dwellers, and 7,640 monks. In his detailed lists of these, he says of one such subject unit: "Samkhogthang fifteen miles to the west of the monastery is inhabited by Tibetans in a group of 250 tents. ... The people are directly governed by a monk official called Hgo-ba, appointed once in every three years from among the eighty attendants to Hjamdbyangs [the incarnate lama of Labrang)." (ibid.: 9-10). Professor Fletcher (op. cit.: 27) also commented on this phenomenon. Again, Cox's comments in the **Himalayan Research Bulletin** reveal not the unusualness of our data, but his lack of familiarity with the literature on Tibet and China.

In closing, while Cox correctly indicates that our findings differ from those reported by Ekvall, it is naive that he sets this up as an "either-or" situation-- either Ekvall is correct, or we "over throw" him! For anthropologists, in particular, the notion that there is one mode of social organization per ethnic group is absurd. Leave alone the Tibetans living in Tibet and Kansu, we expect to find important differences among the Tibetan nomads in Tibet proper, and in the coming years will be trying to sort out such similarities and differences.

The social and political organization of nomadic pastoralist populations is an important topic for the ethnology of Tibet and for anthropological theories on the nature of pastoralism, and that is one of the reasons why we undertook this research.[2] My colleague Professor C.M. Beall and I will discuss these over the next few years in a series of articles and monographs. For the time being, I suggest that those interested in a more detailed overview of the Phala nomads, including a short section on the traditional society, see "Nomadic Pastoralism on the Western Tibetan plateau," Nomadic Peoples, (forthcoming 1989). A discussion of the impact of recent reforms on the nomads can be found in: "The impact of China's cultural and economic reform policy on nomadic pastoralists in Western Tibet." Asian Survey. forthcoming.

Cleveland
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[2] For example, with regard to pastoralism as a mode of production, O. Lattimore (Inner Asian Frontiers of China. Boston: Beacon Press, 1962: 66-73), reports a feudal structure among Mongolian nomads, and P. Salzman also talks about a feudal-like structure for nomadic pastoralists in southern Baluchistan ("Adaptation and Political organization in Iranian Baluchistan," Ethnology. X (4), 1971).