

From the “Good Tradition” to Religion on Some Basic Aspects of Religious Conversion in Early Medieval Tibet and the Comparative Central Eurasian Context

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What Western academic literature described as ethnic or cultural Tibet in fact implies something composite and processually constructed: Tibet then often appears as a typical example for explanations of collective identity (and ethnicity). Such approaches increasingly are applied in present-day anthropology and historical studies, highlighting the historical conditions and the politically, socially and ideationally constructed features of identity. In Tibet, identity-building was strongly related to the spread of Buddhism. The new religion was introduced in the time of the Tibetan Empire (seventh to ninth century), but it was only its later spread (from the eleventh century) that led to the effective, all-embracing establishment of Buddhism in the Highlands. It was interlinked with regionally different forms of political manifestations—the founding of Buddhist kingdoms at the periphery and the emergence of monastic hegemonies in the central regions. These developments correlated with processes of conversion, which in its narrative model is described as an act of conquest, taming and civilizing the physical universe and which in theory actually never ends. Apart from considering current anthropological discussions of the phenomenon of religious conversion, this paper will include a comparative view of the history of Christianization in early medieval Europe (especially in Western Europe—the Frankish kingdom and the barbarian zones North of the Rhine and the Danube, fifth to tenth century). Inter alia this also raises questions about the initial social forces and interests promoting the new religion’s

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adoption, and to what extent formal similarities with the Tibetan case are ascertainable in Europe.

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Introduction

The Early Middle Ages was a period of severe upheaval in the political and religious landscapes not only in Europe but in whole Central Eurasia.¹ The Frankish Kingdom, the (first and second) Türk Empire, the Tibetan Empire, the Arab Caliphate and others such as the Turkic successor states of Khazar or Uighur all emerged during this period (AD c.500–1000—in the case of the Franks actually at the turn of Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages). Several empires disappeared at the end of this period (Tibet, Uighur), others secured a change of dynasty and other circumstances the continuity (Carolingian Frankish Empire, Abbasid Caliphate). These powers left a lasting legacy; this relates to the significant boost in the spread of the universal religions in the context of these newly formed powers: the advance of Christianity (in Europe), of Islam (in the areas of Iran and Western Central Asia), of Buddhism (long resident as an international religion in Central Asia and China, it found new adaptations in Turkic-controlled regions or in Tibet), but also of Nestorianism and Manichaeism (the latter especially in the Uighur Kingdom) and Judaism (the Khazar Kingdom) (cf. Beckwith 2009, 112–139 et passim). Some authors see the plague or Black Death, which occurred in Central Eurasia (and also beyond, such as in Egypt) at regular bouts in the same period, as a reason for increased readiness to accept the religions (McNeill 1977, 94f., 149, 152). This statement is certainly not sufficient, if not naive; but the spread of the plague points to the fact of a “greater history” that connected the old empires through the enormous military and economic movements in the Central Eurasian Silk Road regions and its vicinity.

Of all these religious conquests, undoubtedly the Christianization of Europe, the Islamic conquest of Iran and Central Asia and the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet were the most sustainable for the later cultural developments in these regions—often with a significant impact on processes of ethnogenesis and nation, as has been shown by recent research in particular in relation to Europe (cf., for example, Geary 2002; Pohl 2004).

There were different forms of religious conversion—forcible transfer in a conquered territory, targeted proselytizing, or the adoption of the new faith by the ruling house for pragmatic considerations; the latter was in many cases the actual starting point in Central Eurasia’s conversion histories, so also in the Tibetan Empire (AD c.600–850). The history of Tibet’s adoption of the religion of the Buddha has been much studied (cf. esp. Kapstein 2000; Kollmar-Paulenz 2007), but it is still less known to historians outside the immediate area of Tibetan studies. This contribution comes from an anthropologist and points to some of the key aspects of the transformation processes following the adoption of Buddhism in the Highlands in the eighth century. It is

easy to find a common comparable point for the scale of the historical transformations: it was the encounter of religion with a tradition of social and religious practices that in the Tibetan pre-Buddhist context was described as the “good tradition”. The consequences were enormous (with the building of a Buddhist concept of imperial cosmopolitanism or the development of certain religious and political institutions as its more immediate implications). But as elsewhere, the new faith in Tibet had no place of adhesion other than the old-time tradition; this not only seems to explain the frequently observed gradualness in the assimilation of religion (cf. Buckser and Glazier 2003), but also the continual presence of older elements existing within (or alongside) the new religious and cultural manifestations.

The Tibetan Empire and the “Central Eurasian Cultural Complex”

The emergence of the Tibetan Empire (endonym Bö or Böchen; “Great Bö”) around AD 600 in principle was in the tradition of the coming and going of empires as was typical for centuries in the Central Asian regions. The economic and political heartland of the Tibetan Empire was the agrarian central Tibetan regions, the actual Bö, where rival (and at the same time affinally related) clan-based local rules had had their territories for centuries. The unification of these regional chiefdoms by one of them led to the founding of the Empire. In this sense, Tibet was an agrarian civilization, which from the very beginning also saw the neighbouring sedentary centres (China, Nepal, India and Khotan) as models; in any case it was from these civilizations that the most important cultural adaptations came. The looking to other cultural models indeed took place very early and is expressed above all in the introduction of a writing system, in adoptions in medicine, art, architecture and various fields of expertise. As early as the 630s, under the second emperor (*tsenpo*), Songtsen Gampo (d. AD 649), there was the plan to introduce Buddhism and hence to connect the establishments with a new moral law. The “religion of Nepal”, as the new religion was also called in Tibet at that time, found its expression in the founding of some prestige temples (mainly based on Nepalese models in terms of artistic features, inventory and also cultic implications); but only in the second half of the eighth century can we speak of conversion, starting with the conversion of the emperor himself.² Thus the very foundation of the empire was the indigenous archaic order, which at the time of the chiefdoms had already experienced a certain homogenization. This includes all the social, religious and customary law requirements needed for the realization of this greater project of imperial power. And this centre was essentially the alliance of emperor and the warring nobility—the latter consisting of the leading clans of the old chiefdoms, which had gradually been integrated into the project of empire building (or had joined voluntarily), without entirely losing their old territorial rights. This fundamental alliance was regularly renewed at assemblies by mutual oath of loyalty. The assembly itself, which like the (camp) residence of the *tsenpo* was constantly changing its location, was the place of jurisdiction, administrative measures and military decisions—all embedded in a symbolic discourse in which the sanctification of the lord was also rooted.

The Indo-Eurasianist, linguist and Tibetanist Beckwith ([1987] 1993) was the first to put the Tibetan system of allegiance into a larger context. As he noted in his seminal *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia* (16), the oath of fealty was closed “in true medieval Central Eurasian fashion”. He sees this alliance as the core of what he calls the “Central Eurasian cultural complex” (CECC; developed in Beckwith 2009). The CECC, as this approach is often abbreviated, is described of having its roots among the Indo-Europeans, whose spread (by warrior bands—the chariot warriors) covered large parts of Eurasia by the beginning of the first millennium BC. The evidence is of an archaeological and especially linguistic nature, according to which local Creoles or new branches of Indo-European daughter languages emerged in the surroundings of the new (ethnically mixed) settlements (Beckwith 2009, 30).

In connection with the various empire buildings in the Indo-Europeanized region Beckwith recognizes the variants of a common origin myth, which he calls the “Central Eurasian national origin myth”—itself the modification of what he describes the “First Story”, with mythological beliefs going back to the Proto-Indo-Europeans. It is the exemplary narrative of a divine, Beowulf-like hero who escapes his forcible removal and after extended wanderings in the wilderness returns to kill the evil king and to establish a new and righteous rule with the help of his sworn friends—that is, his escort, entourage, or also, the *comitatus*. This Latin term for entourage in Tacitus’ *Germania* designates the lord’s—warrior friends, who as his guards swore the lord their loyalty till death, and in return were richly rewarded. This form of alliance “formed the heart of every newborn Central Eurasian nation”. The *comitatus* establishment can be found in historical realities of the

North Sea to the Japan Sea and from the sub-Arctic to the Himalayas—in other words, throughout Central Eurasia and among all well-described Central Eurasian peoples from the Hittites at least down to the adoption of world religions in the Middle Ages. (Beckwith 2009, 14–17)³

The similarities in the characterization of these “friends” in the sources are striking: their fierce nature and irresistibility in battle, their fight for the lord (quite in line with *Germania* 14.5–7: *principes per victoria pugnant, comites per principe*), whom they were prepared to follow into death, which symbolized for them a return to home and the entering of paradise in the sense of the ruler’s paradise. By consequence, they were usually buried together. By contrast, any breach of that loyalty meant endless shame, with implications for future generations as well (Beckwith 2009, 17). Other significant elements include the institution of the royal hunt (cf. Allsen 2006) or the “golden tent”, the architecture of the palace tent inside the campus of the *comitatus*. Last but not least, the *comitatus* was closely linked to trading: the wealth (gold, silver, precious stones, weapons and horses) circulating among the (close and extended) *comitatus* came partly from raids and from tribute, but more importantly from trade. Following Beckwith’s argument, the Silk Road was not something like a pipeline or network running between the major centres in the East and West—with stopovers in some oases sites, preferably leading around aggressive and “parasitic” nomads, who due to their economic dependence on exchange were continually

attacking the old sedentary centres: in general, this narrative is one of the most persistent myths perpetuated by Silk Road historians. In Beckwith's understanding, which I share and strive to further elaborate here, the Silk Road was simply the economy of the Central Eurasian people(s), which also included the forced military establishment and maintenance of frontier trade cities within their realms (2009, 26, 328, 342f.; cf. also Walter 2009, 69–71).

If one accepts this concept of a Central Eurasian cultural complex, we would then speak of phenomena whose similarities are based on a certain “internal” relatedness. They are not merely the results of borrowing or copying; they share an archetypal concept of political domination, which may be addressed as “*comitatus*-based rule”. This provides a more precise comparative quality than “(barbarian) kingdom”, “tribal rule”, “early state”, etc. It would then also be the ideal-typical model of many of the socio-political and religious situations of the Central Eurasian region that the world religions encountered during their propagations in the Early Middle Ages. In this connection, Beckwith's observation that the *comitatus* system gradually disappeared as a result of the increasing contact with the world religions appears to be convincing.

There may be some qualifications regarding the suggested range of the CECC,⁴ but for Tibet there is no doubt that it indeed helps to understand significant phenomena of the early imperial history, interlinked with other formative aspects of the Tibetan kingship (Dotson 2011). These include the mode of establishing trade connections, military organization, royal hunt, funeral tradition and council meetings. Since these features were all related to the *comitatus*,⁵ we may obtain an idea about the actual meaning of the somewhat terse “according to the tradition” formula in the Tibetan inscription (see below). There remain a number of points to be observed, however, when theorizing Tibet's relation to the CECC, not least with a view to the later transformation into a Buddhist empire.

The Core and the Extended Comitatus: Kinship Relation, Ethnicity and Proto-nation Building

It is essential to distinguish between core and extended *comitatus*, whose boundaries are often not so clear in the sources. When the sources speak of a retinue of 10,000 and more, it evidently does not refer to the category of guards or escorts who used to commit suicide after the death of the lord. Chinese sources speak of five or six persons who together with the *tsenpo* formed the group of the “common-fated ones”, who after the death of the ruler were buried with him. There is to my knowledge no literal counterpart to this term in Tibetan sources, but there are indications of the close *comitatus* as represented by the six guard-corps lineages (the *yabang rüdrug*), which are already mentioned in the pre-imperial period as companions of the king (and companions at the royal hunt). In the imperial period, they had their territorial counterpart in the establishment of the “bodyguard districts” situated in the “horns” (*ru*), a name for the territorial basic divisions of the core region of Bö. The extended *comitatus* more or less included the core of the government and the military

machine, if we assume that the chief agents were all bound by specific oaths to the emperor.⁶ As members of the (largely Bö-based) ancestral lineages, they represented both the leadership of the administrative and military subunits of the empire (*de*) and the representatives of the old, largely dynastically organized territorial identities (Hazod 2009, 175–192). Their status as members of a great lineage was upheld on the part of the throne and the sources paint a fairly clear picture of the attested lineage rights in their home areas, with the addition: “as long as they are not disloyal”. In other words, the alliance of the lord and his friends (and extended *comitatus*) was an alliance of lineages (including here the affinal aspect, according to which certain lineages alternately served as bride-givers and providers of a new *tsenpo*). Beckwith’s statement, according to which the (close) friends’ family-like closeness to the ruler made their bonds to their ancestral groups obsolete, cannot be confirmed for Tibet (and—as I see it—is not observable elsewhere either).⁷ On the contrary, the lineage arguably served as means of securing the *comitatus* system for the next generation, and at the same time ancestry constituted the fundament behind regional identities. In this respect, the phenomenon of an anarchic tendency, which appears to have constituted a concomitant element of the alliance system, needs to be mentioned. In early Tibet regionalism always remained a menacing factor for the state. This was expressed, for instance, by the claim for autonomy of several chiefdoms on the grounds of their asserted kinship relation with the lineage of the *tsenpo*, or also by the tendencies of followers to withdraw and either independently establish a new regional power or look for a new lord. Elsewhere in Central Eurasia it explains the often only transitory nature of similar federal units. Smith’s (1995, ref. in Walter 2009, 134) observation that “warrior nobilities” reinforced the ethnic identity of clans in a tribal confederation and that they rather hindered a greater unity may with some qualifications also be true of Tibet. On the other hand, there were mechanisms to overcome such regionalism. The fact that the regional gods of the conquered territories were integrated into the Tibetan state cult (that is, recognized as gods to be invoked during the assembly) relates to such a mechanism of political integration. In fact it appears that there was no structural basis for centralization other than to bind the regional identities by constituting a sworn group of companions. It also provided the ideal framework for the first establishment of the imperial geography.

An old Tibetan document reports of a meeting with Emperor Songtsen Gampo, where he summarizes the first success of the Kingdom’s expansion in the early seventh century to the assembled ones as follows:

As for ourselves [who are gathered here], we are the lord and ministers

As for Yarmo, the length of her water

Extends from the lowlands [in the east] to Tsang [in the west]

The breadth of Yarmo

Stretches from south to north

As for the enemies, on all four borders they are defeated. (Hazod 2005, 241)

This describes a *comitatus* meeting where the lord metaphorically portrays the extent of the empire as the extent of the river Yarmo, the main river of the homeland of the lord's lineage. This Yarmo land is elsewhere described as a four-corned zone (that is, Yarmo-nashi, "Four Parts of Yarmo"). The signal is clear: all those assembled here were part of the lord's home country at large (= Great Tibet), whose enemies in all directions served to construct the victorious parties as a sworn community.⁸ We may see this statement as the first testimony of a proto-nation-building discourse, which Buddhism would later take up and further develop.

National Origin Myth, Council and the Principle of "Invitation"

Indeed, a variant of the above-mentioned prototype of "CE national origin myths" is found in the Tibetan tradition but in a secondary Indianized form. It is partly merged with the indigenous version, where the appearance of the hero, the mythical "first king", is addressed in the context of a heavenly descent (itself a widespread Central Eurasian motif). He is described in the classical version as the "neck throne", because after his arrival in the land of men he was carried by four people on their shoulders or necks to the palace—an obvious *comitatus* motif, which significantly emerged again later in the Buddhist cultic tradition around central protector gods associated with the Tibetan kings (Hazod 2005, 249, 300; Figure 1). More precisely, he arrived at the invitation of the people, with the "invitation" *topos* here representing a significant feature of the Tibetan allegiance system to be found in the Highlands' political history until late in the post-dynastic period (Ramble 2006). It is uncertain to what extent this invitation principle had any parallels in Central Eurasia. It appears also to have been a structural component of the Tibetan "mobile centre", whose characteristics of a spatial separation of council and residence of the *tsenpo* similarly appears to be unique (Dotson 2009, 43f.). On the other hand, in important decisions the emperor was united with his ministers in a camp, and indeed in an architecture typical of the CECC (Beckwith 2009, 148). The council itself may also be comparable to the Germanic "people's assembly" (*thing*), if we see the *concilium* as described in Tacitus' *Germania* (Tacitus 2011, 12f.) or in sources related to later periods as the mere historical sequence of a greater genealogy of community gathering.

The "Good Tradition" and the Religion

The religious realities of pre-world-religions are commonly described (in particular by historians) as barbaric or pagan religions, or one speaks of (pagan) polytheism, all somewhat clumsy if not problematic and also ahistorical terms.⁹ There were worship, rituals and certain cultic traditions in a more or less organized form, but no separate realm that can be called "religion" in the Eurocentric sense of a systematized doctrine (Smith 1998). The religious was part of everyday society-making. In a recent study, Bloch (2008) has introduced the term "transcendental social", a concept developed on the example of African ancestor-worshipping societies to provide an alternative approach to the recognition (much debated in modern anthropology) that the category separations of



Figure 1. The escorting of the god: a *comitatus* motif and echo of the “good tradition” in the Buddhist context of the “Great Offering” festival held at a temple from the imperial period (cf. Hazod 2005, 300).

“religious” and “social”, “sacred–profane” or “mundane” and “supernatural” are rather questionable instruments to describe “religion” in “primitive” or “archaic” societies.¹⁰ Such estimates can also be found among historians, although the emphasis here is quite different (Padberg 2004, 34f.).

For Tibet, the still common names or designations for the pre-Buddhist “religion” are Bon, Tibetan Shamanism or even Bon Shamanism, but they are ahistorical. Bon is actually the name of a post-imperial religion (albeit with strong links to old narratives and ritual traditions), and Shamanistic traits (with the characteristics of ecstasy, flight, soul retrieval), some of which were adopted by Tibetan Buddhism or by Bon, are only partial aspects (Bjerken 2004, 25); they are found in the whole Eurasian region, most notably in “Tengrism”—with pre-Indo-European roots.

Among the terms for practices in pre-Buddhist Tibet to be found in contemporary documents there is actually none that suggests anything more than “tradition”; it more precisely speaks of “good tradition” (*lugsang*), “tradition of the ancestors” (*yabmelug*) or “tradition of heaven and earth” (*namsalug*). A somewhat more specific term is *tsug* (or *tsuglag*), which depending on context relates to certain “sciences” (divination, astrology), to wisdom or it simply means “custom” as also the more common term *chö* (a word probably deriving from *chaba*, to make, construct). Both *chö* and *tsuglag* were then used for the religion of the Buddha. When the first Buddhist temples were built in the seventh century they were called *tsuglag khang*, “house of *tsuglag*”. It was a wise (= *tsuglag*) decision that also signals the intention of a more gradual adoption of the new religion.¹¹ Only much later did essays appear on what is the wrong and what is the right (= Buddhist) *tsuglag* (van Schaik 2007).

In Tibet, the ritual assembly place or dancing ground is among other things described as the “pure surface” and as a “mirror of the sky”. It is a significant formulation for a place where heaven and earth come together and where society was organized by means of the customary practice (*chö*). Buddhism came from outside to this field, which one text realistically describes as the place where the new faith could sprout: “If Buddhism is built on the field of the people’s *chö* it will grow like a fruit” (Stein 1993, 223). Tibet here represents an example where, in the sense of Bloch, “religion” developed from something “nothing special” to being something “central”, a turning point, which occurred in similar procedures in early Christianized Europe and elsewhere in converted regions of the Early Middle Ages (Bloch 2008, 2058–2059).

The First Dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet

A Korean Buddhist pilgrim who on his way to India travelled through Tibet in the early eighth century noted: “The king and the common people do not know Buddhism. There are no monasteries ...” (cited in Kapstein 2000, 233). There was indeed no universal spread of the Teaching at that time, but with interruptions there was some Buddhist practice in the form of ritual care of the existing shrines or *tsuglag* houses, which had been erected as temples for the emperor on the model of the Nepalese Buddhist Kingdom. Buddhism in this sense was a big issue within the aristocracy, which preponderantly rebelled against the foreign religion in the 750s, as noted with regret in one of the writings of Tisong Detsen (742–c.800). The latter was the emperor who had personally adopted the new faith and fought for its enforcement.

From the 760 s Tisong initiated a comprehensive restitution of Buddhism and *per edictum* declared the religion of the Buddha as the official religion. This happened

after the consecration of Samye (AD 779), Tibet's first monastery and teaching centre constructed on the Indian model, which became the focal point of fundamental change. It was the site of the first ordination of Tibetans and the place of translation of and intensive intellectual engagement with the basic texts from India, initially under the auspices of Indian scholars who were invited to the imperial court.¹² Contemporary documents describe the emperor's efforts in the implementation and dissemination of the new faith. It is said that after Tisong Detsen was convinced of the reasonableness of the religion of the Buddha he thought "how the Buddhist religion should be practised and spread". During several meetings, the *tsempo* first opposed the followers of the old tradition, whom he accused as being addicted to all sorts of bad actions (such as worshipping the mountain gods and using improper rites, painting the body red, casting spells or causing disease among people and cattle). He arranged the writing of a summary of the history of Buddhism in Tibet and a summary of the Teaching, which together with a copy of his edict he had distributed to the temples and to the outer districts. Finally, he had the members of his family and the ministers take their oath according to the new rules (Richardson 1998, 89–99).

Those who swore probably included only a small section of the aristocracy (the respective document speaks of fifty-one people) and the majority still remained those who some years previously had insisted that "the gods and religion of Nepal" were false (Richardson 1998, 93). What was still recently wrong was now right, and vice versa. But in reality the old practices remained intact. The old gods were still invoked at the meetings to witness the vows, and the inscriptions honour the ruler in the customary title and as the warrior king, who in accordance "with the tradition of the ancestors" and thanks to his "mighty helmet" has led the kingdom to its greatest power.¹³ A few lines later in the same inscription then follows his appreciation as a "Buddhist king" (*chögyel*; Skt: *dharmaraja*) and great Enlightened One, who introduced the new religion to the country, which he had "bestowed as a favour on all" (Richardson 1985, 39). In contemporary documents there are numerous similar pieces of striking evidence of the co-existence of the two orders.

An outstanding example of substantive engagement with the old faith is the (incomplete) narrative "The History of the Cycle of Birth and Death" edited and analysed by Imaeda (2007). It is a kind of instruction text with details on how to overcome the old beliefs and practices—in Imaeda's assessment generally the first testimony to the efforts of the Buddhists to spread the Teaching in the country.

The core issue is the confrontation with the question of what happens after death. Similar to other Eurasian cultures and beyond, the question is here linked to a cyclical idea of time, after which a happy or "good period" (characterized as the time "when gods and human beings were not separated") was followed by stages of degeneration (characterized by the presence of a demon from the underworld) before the cycle starts again with the good period. The cycle was coupled with the conception of the afterlife, where depending on moral behaviour a "country of miseries" (*dugyül*) or conversely a heavenly "country of joy" (*gayül*) was provided for the deceased. The *gayül* was reserved for those who had practised the good customs and traditions (*tsuglag*) in their lifetime. The descendants arrived there with the help of a psychopom

animal (usually a sheep), which during the funeral directed them over the “river” (a widespread symbol for a threshold).

It is significant that the text proposes intermediate stages, which made it gradually more plausible for the addressees to accept the new faith. Thus an initial transformation is about the necessary departure from the old funeral practice, which included animal sacrifice (and in some cases human sacrifice), which is totally incompatible with Buddhist ethical principles. In its place the chanting of Buddhist formulas is suggested, yet the destination itself remained unchanged—the pre-Buddhist paradise. Only in a later phase of the instruction is it replaced by the samsaric explanation of life and death. The manuscript existed in several copies, and as Imaeda concludes it is evident that the text “notwithstanding some inexactitudes from a purely doctrinal point of view, was well accepted in the Tibetan world of this period, and must have been intended for wide circulation” (Imaeda 2007, 172). In this respect the lineage structure may have served as an appropriate way to bring the Teaching to the people, when it says in one document, for example, that monks returning to the homeland made the members of their clan abandon the old beliefs and practise Buddhism (Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 63).

With the conversion of the *tsenpo* Buddhism definitively emerged from its previous merely accessory function and provided the foundations of a universal cult embracing all beings, linked with a new form of legitimacy. It is associated with the establishment of the cosmic Buddha Vairocana, whose mandalic realm combined with the figure of the emperor was associated with the vision of imperial cosmopolitanism (Kapstein 2000, 58f.). In fact, the Buddha mandala was conceived as the new imperial design that was to replace the old *comitatus*-related geographical model (see above). In this respect Kapstein refers to the almost simultaneous and similarly Indianized developments of imperial cults in other areas of Asia, such as the Khmer kingdom in the ninth century (Kapstein 2000, 231).

Moreover, with the formation of the monastic community the conditions were provided for the effective social integration of religion. Later imperial edicts proclaim that “the gate to liberation” is open for all Tibetans “from the nobility downward” and that in future the abbots and religious leaders should be chosen from all qualified persons (regardless of their status) (Richardson 1985, 79). In practice, the choice of the ordained and of religious functionaries remained in the ranks of the aristocracy, but this principle of opening to all demonstrated that we are not dealing with a religion for the elite. In line with other universal religions, the fundamental questions of the Buddhist religion address human existence as such, and this is exactly what the edict indicates. For the ordinary people it not only meant participation in the holy, but necessarily also their participation in the process of religious integration.

A pioneering institution (est. in c.800) in this respect was the “Three Baskets Offering”, where as part of a ritual celebration of the Teaching the peasant communes brought (or were called to bring) offerings of their products to the shrines at certain temples and to Samye. The people here assumed the function of the donor, a central socio-religious institution in Buddhist societies, whose hierarchical summit was represented by the emperor himself, who as chief patron was the greatest donor. The

festival actually represents the precursor of the spectacular “Great Offering” festivals of the Dalai Lama period and it also constituted a starting point for one of the most characteristic institutions of Tibetan Buddhism: the (ritual) pilgrimage to the symbols of the Three Jewels (that is, Buddhist shrines). Due to its correlation with the system of karmic merit as a means of liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*), in pilgrimage the questions of individual existence turned into a comprehensive common cult of worshipping religion (Hazod 2005, 289f.).

The End of Buddhism in Tibet’s Empire Era

The Samye watershed correlated with conditions that some researchers also see as reasons for the decline of the empire. This mainly concerns the increasing influence of the Buddhist clergy. The religious elite regularly came together in the newly established “religious gathering” (*chö dünsa/ma*), which was held in the presence of the emperor. Later sources refer to this meeting as the “great council”, whereas the conventional *comitatus* meeting is only ranked as “small council”. The situation culminated in the institution of the “monk minister” (*chölön*), who by the early ninth century practically headed the governmental power. At the same time the regulation of (civil and military) tax exemption for the monasteries and the allocation of households for the maintenance of the religious institutions supported the emergence of an economically (and partially also legally) independent power factor, as also happened almost at the same time in Tang China (cf., for example, Kollmar-Paulenz 2007, 322). The rebellion on the part of the clan aristocracy that led to the expulsion of the Buddhists followed by the disintegration of the imperial court in the mid-ninth century may in fact have had its cause in the incompatibility of the two spheres of power (with the quasi division of a *comitatus*-based *tsenpo* and a Buddhist *tsenpo*). A statement in one later chronicle sums up this situation, where it says, “If a lay official salutes the king 16 times the king simply ignores it”, and “if (the king) sees a religious person even at a distance, he salutes him” (Karmay 2003, 60). But there were some other issues that led to serious conflict.

The later chronicles see the rhythm of acceptance and rejection of the new religion as being correlated to the onset of natural disasters and epidemics at that time, the cause of which was either seen as the revenge of the old gods for the adoption of the new religion or as bad deeds by the followers of the pre-Buddhist religious practice. These are not merely secondary populist interpretations but point to the existence of a deeper crisis that the new religion was required to prove its competence to solve. Religious conversion of the people necessarily also demanded its counterpart in the symbolic world. This is expressed in the narrative of the submission of the deities of the country, for which a specifically trained tantric master of the Indian Vajrayana tradition was invited to the Tibetan court. This relates to Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), who was brought to the court on the recommendation of the (Mahayana) scribe and teacher of the *tsenpo* to bring the situation caused by the local gods under control. He is revered in Tibet as the “second Buddha” and together with Tisong Detsen and his teacher and court chaplain (Shantarakshita) forms the “trinity of the Tibetan conversion” (Kapstein 2000, 49). His historicity is uncertain, but in any case he stands for

the ritual practices starting in the late eighth century that aimed at the conversion of the divine representatives of the physical world. It touched the structural and one may say emotional bonds of the old identities much more directly than the rather gradual instruction of the Teaching. While for the latter we can observe a more gentle form of convergence, in the context of the tantric practices for the first time the factor of violence comes to the fore.

The representative concept was *dülba*, which means disciplining in the broadest sense. The master secured successful violent submissions of the local gods by means of certain magical techniques, making them swear henceforth to protect the religion. It is the prototypical story of the emergence of a “protector of religion” (*chökyong*) and guardian of the doctrine (*tensung*), one of the most important institutions of Tibetan Buddhism, especially in terms of the connections to the ordinary people or the “nameless religion” (that is, the term for the Tibetan folk-religious tradition introduced by Stein 1993, 222f.).

The narratives around Padmasambhava are rather to be read as a precedent to events that were actually implemented in a later phase of Buddhist formation. According to an early post-imperial document, Tisong Detsen is said to have sent the master back immediately (or he was forced to send him back on the advice of the aristocracy), as he was much dreaded because of his magical power. The emperor said: “You have already achieved what was in my mind; you have already bound by oath the gods and the water spirits and so on. That is enough ... Please return to your homeland” (Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 58).

The Second Dissemination: Ritual Discourses of Barbarizing and Civilizing

The history of the religious conversion in Tibet would not be complete without considering the events during the “second spread of Buddhism” in the post-imperial period (from eleventh century). Moreover, this renaissance period involved the actual Buddhization of the Highlands (or central parts of it). It was the story of the varied forms of ritual realizations of *dülba*, combined with new geographizations and of ideal concepts of a “Buddhist nation”. This was against the background of a new political landscape, where new local principalities emerged in the milieu of the various sub-lines of the *tsempo* dynasty. The dominant factor of these developments was again the old aristocratic lineages, which in some way regionally revived both the old *comitatus* structures (and “invitation principle”) and the institution of the “religious king” introduced during the time of Tisong Detsen.

Now it was the priests of the renaissance who awarded this title to the secular patrons, under whose protection they started to establish the first post-imperial monasteries (in connection with the founding of different orders or schools). They had learned with Indian masters, who were brought to the country (with the lure of gold), or who had travelled extensively to India for study purposes on their own initiative. For generations it was a process of learning that lasted until the thirteenth century¹⁴ in the course of which the Highlands became increasingly flooded with new traditions and practices. This second “Indianization” also promoted the idea of Tibet as a

Buddhist nation, a somewhat anachronistic development, as actually no empire existed any longer; yet in the regional milieu of the various religious schools there was obviously the consensus of a common subordination to the all-convincing vision already pre-destined in the imperial period: the transformation of the Highlands into a Buddha-realm, a virtual empire “governed by superhuman insight and law” (Kapstein 2000, 65). The hundreds of monasteries, temples, natural sanctuaries (esp. mountain sanctuaries) or institutions such as the (ritual) “sealing of territories” by religious hegemony set up in the Highlands all stand for this fundamental transformation.¹⁵

These processes coincided with a radical departure from older patterns of identity. History was rewritten, so to say, starting with the fact that corresponding to its Indian orientation Tibet now saw itself as a mere satellite of the Indian Buddhist cosmos. Böchen is no longer the “pure earth” or “centre of heaven” as it was once praised, but the remote and barbarous border region of the mandalic Indian centre. The Snowland is now depicted as a realm of darkness populated by monsters or “non-human beings”, which only became human as a result of the compassionate gift offered by the hero Avalokiteshvara, and thus became beings who were able to hear and understand the Teaching. The result was the construction of a civilized heartland, “inner Tibet” (Bönang), in which all ethnic or otherwise defined identities receded into the background compared to the fundamental boundary of converted/non-converted, civilization/savagery. The non-human beings were now equated with the reportedly wild, raw-meat-eater and incestuous natives of the Himalayan forest areas. But the barbarian (*khob*, “raw”) was not only identified with the periphery—we also find it within the inner circles, ultimately defined by the distance from the religious law and the way of virtue as measured on karmic merits. Both the barbarians at the periphery and those of the interior form integrative elements within one and the same civilized universe (Hazod 2005, 294). In brief this is what can be drawn from the *dülba* programme as related in the narrative cycle of Avalokiteshvara; the spiritual son of Buddha Amithaba, who is embodied in the founder of Tibet’s first temples (*tsempo* Songtsen Gampo), became the “father of the Tibetan nation”. The foundations were laid in the eleventh/twelfth century in the wake of the cultic re-occupation of the Lhasa temple (Jokhang), the national temple of the Tibetans.

Things changed when Tibet (or certain circles of the Tibetan scriptural tradition) began to identify “real” enemies of religion. This refers primarily to Muslims, who after the conquest of India in the thirteenth century were made responsible for the extinction of Buddhism in the “holy land”. The satellite Tibet saw the holy sites of the motherland threatened, which were of the highest level in the hierarchy of pilgrimage sites, and which were ritualized in complex connections to the geographies of the Tibetan Buddha land (Huber 2008, 58f.). The centuries-long presence of Muslim rule in India, but also the dominance of Islam in other neighbouring areas of the Highlands, turned the followers of the Islamic religion more generally into a prototype of the enemy of religion. They filled the role of the non-Indians (Skt. *mleccha*, Tib. *lalo*), who according to the apocalyptic prophecy of the *Kalacakratantra*, a text distributed in Tibet from the eleventh century, would initiate the Age of Degeneration (Huber

2008, 167). A representative of the later Tibetan *Kalacakra* tradition noted that the Muslims “will be sure to go to the greatest hell” because they “expound such a brutal religion” (cited in Huber 2008, 168). However, similar to the tantric rituals to overcome the local gods, the fight against the enemies as described in the *Kalacakra* tradition is seen as mere visualization, as virtual battle and means for the practising yogi on his way to spiritual maturity. In other words, the enemy image remains in the esoteric world, transmitted through particular initiations of empowerment by the teacher (*lama*); it does not necessarily mirror a broader attitude of society.¹⁶

The real “secret” of the esoteric traditions in Tibet—so we may conclude this brief excursion into the post-imperial period—is their bonds and correlations to the social and political realities. The monasteries and all other religio-political manifestations are the testimonies of a true transformation of religion, which received its decisive contours in the field of the nameless traditions.

Concluding Remarks

The religious conversion in Tibet was the story of a self-conversion, starting with Emperor Tisong Detsen. In this respect he may be seen as a distant counterpart of the Frank Clovis, the warlord and king whose baptism (AD 498) set in motion the processes of Christianization and of imperial geographization within the originally regionalistic and pluralistic world of Germanic Western Europe.¹⁷ Here as there, the adoption of a universal religion seems to have been the almost inevitable consequence of empire building, which itself had its background in the history of contact with neighbouring powers. In Tibet it meant the development of two related components characteristic of the Central Eurasian world: the advancement of a “lord and his friends”-based alliance of power and the military securing of the Silk Road markets as part of the rising power’s economy; the latter went together with a principal openness to adopting new cultural elements. In retrospect, this Central Eurasian empire represented a quasi-interim step towards the later self-understanding of a civilized (= Buddhist) Tibet.

Before Buddhism, in Tibet there was the practice of the “good tradition”, which came from a world without religion (in the Eurocentric sense of the word); originally there was not even a term for it, but for concepts of a greater something, which *inter alia* included the religious and the job of ritual specialists. In contrast, for example, to the religious heterogeneity of early medieval Germanic Europe before its Christianization (Simek 2004), in Tibet with the “good tradition” we already recognize a certain degree of systematization, which had its liability in the sanctification of the imperial alliance of ruler and his followers. Conversely this explains the organized form of resistance to the new religion, although the reasons were probably more political than religious. The old warring nobility obviously had difficulties in continuing their allegiance to a Buddhist lord and accepting the gradual subordination to the new religious elite. The empire collapsed even before the conversion had captured the greater social geography of Böchen.

The actual Buddhization in the post-imperial period, with its idealization of the mother country of religion (India), led to a radical shift of identity, where we find the new civilization programme interlinked with a proto-nation-building discourse. The basic contours had already been laid with the concept of a universal monarch initiated during the reign of Tisong Detsen, but the highly ritualized approach of the “second conversion” (Kapstein 2000, 65) did not have much in common with the way the religion was propagated in the period of the Empire.

In any case, in the form Buddhism was incorporated into the framework of the older tradition we see the reason for a certain continuity of older beliefs. In numerous studies it has been demonstrated that significant elements of the older tradition lived on in everyday ritual practices even in the core Buddhist region of Central Tibet, or that in many respects their contours are traceable in the later narrative and ritual recourses to the “glorious Empire era”. These reflective links themselves served as a legitimizing factor for the enforcement of Buddhist cults in the latter’s dimension as an instrument of power in a landscape of competing, religiously dominated hegemonies (Sørensen and Hazod 2007).

To sum up: while we see imperial universalism, proto-nation-building, a new identity concept and monasticism as some of the immediate implications of the religious conversion in imperial Tibet, the concurrent observation of older pre-Buddhist religious elements, albeit in a modified or reinterpreted form in the later history, eventually constituted a decisive factor in the actual establishment of the new religion and of its acceptance in the world of the “good tradition”.

Notes

- [1] As to the delimitation of Central Eurasia, here I follow Beckwith (2009, xix), which regarding the period of the Early Middle Ages includes most of Europe and to the East extended as far as to the Pacific (incl. Korea and Japan).
- [2] This is a very simplified description and the precise reason or circumstances for this first introduction of the new religion in the seventh century (but also the question of the extent of Buddhist influence at that time, such as on law, written in 655) is not so clear. According to the representation in the later Buddhist historiography, the “idea” of bringing Buddhism to the Snowland (Tibet) did not come from the *tsenpo* and his circle, but from outside; it arrived there via Tibet’s matrimonial relations with the Buddhist ruling houses of Nepal and Tang China, in the form of prestige statues brought as a dowry for which the “barbarian king” promised to erect temples. Corresponding to this form of introduction quasi initiated from the outside is the story of the mythical first encounter, which tells of the arrival of Buddhism in the form of holy objects (images, texts) that fell from heaven onto the roof of a Tibetan prince’s palace. The reign of this prince is to be dated somewhere in the fifth century AD, and the account may indeed reflect historical events of the first contact with the Indian religion at that time (Sørensen and Hazod 2005, 45). At a later point, the Tibetans also had encounters with other world religions, where it is interesting that a document from the Nestorian church (dated to the 790s) lists Tibet among the desired candidates to adopt the faith; and in 715 the Tibetan court had reportedly contacted an Arab governor to send a teacher of Islam. Manichaeism apparently was less attractive, since its prophet is depicted as liar in a Tibetan document of the late eighth century (see van Schaik 2011, 31). This altogether

- gives the impression of an all-round interest in providing the empire, or its leadership, with an international religion.
- [3] An exception is the Islamized *comitatus*, an adaptation by the Arabs of Central Asia (Turks and Sogdians), which in various regional milieus survived far beyond the Early Middle Ages (Beckwith 2009, 23f.; fn. 107). In several areas the *comitatus* is only traceable in myths (as in the Roman, Indian or Greek contexts). And it is in many ways echoed in later folk traditions, customs and lores, such as those related to the “Wilde Hunt”/“Wild Hosts” *topos* (cf. Keshaw 2000).
 - [4] Thus, for example, historians have difficulty seeing Tacitus’ *comitatus* as an institution valid for the Germanic regions of late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages—due to the rather pluralistic regional histories and cultural realities (the latter also dependent on the factor of relative proximity of Germanic groups to Rome). Pohl (2004, 69f.), and the references given there. And also Beckwith’ statement that the true *comitatus* is unknown among non-Central-Eurasian peoples I think needs to be further examined.
 - [5] See Walter (2009, 18–36), the first to discuss some of the key CECC elements in the Tibetan context in greater detail.
 - [6] That is, the oath of loyalty (*lobanye*; lit.: “near to [the lord’s] side”). See also Walter (2009, 63–66, 204).
 - [7] The clan (or “Sippe”) organization among Germanic groups, for example, was clearly a formative moment of the alliance system (cf. Pohl 2004, 72).
 - [8] It shows some formal parallels with the “Centre of the World surrounded by Enemies/Barbarian/Wild Nations”—constructions in the early European contexts (cf., e.g. Halsall 2007, 35f.). However, in the present example the enemies were not considered “barbarians”. (Historically it relates to rebellious groups in the core regions of Bö subjugated during the time of this emperor, or to neighbouring powers, who opposed Tibet’s claim to be included in the Silk Road economy, or who had as it were blocked the way to the markets (such as Shangshung in the W, or the Tuyuhun in the NE, who were defeated during the reign of Songtsen Gampo).) In Tibetan, the “four borders”/“four directions” phrasing (*tashi/chogshi*) is often synonymous for “all” or “everywhere”; in other contexts it more closely marked a territorial unit (as in Yarmo Naschi; similar to the phrasing of *goshi/deshi*; “four doors”/“four divisions”), long before the use of the Indian mandala concept; see below. For the *chogshi* and the Tibetan (pre-Buddhist) “Lord of the Four Quarters” principle, see Walter (2009, 47).
 - [9] For “barbarian” and its often unquestioned use in history books, see the impressive albeit somewhat overstated critique in the epilogue to Beckwith (2009, 320–362). As to polytheism, the term is inapplicable to describe the pre- (or non-) Buddhist religious situations in Tibet (and nor is it used by the research), because it does not give any dissociation of Tibetan Buddhism. (The rejection of the faith in the old gods as programmatically demanded in the Abrahamic (monotheistic) religions as an absolute prerequisite for conversion and the attainment of salvation (cf. e.g. Matthew 18.3) has no comparable counterpart in Tibetan Buddhism, inasmuch as the old gods were integrated into the new system—as converted beings in a new clothes and classification.)
 - [10] Bloch (2008). The approach is based on the simple observation that namely the same certain social terms appear in the divine realm as well as in the social reality (e.g. the names of worshipped ancestors and the names of socially respected elders; Bloch 2008, 2057). This is again to be seen against the background of the much observed classification of the physical world, where gods and men, heaven and earth, etc. appear to be transcended into an indivisible unit—basically the mythically imagined oneness of the realms of death and the living, which makes a strict separation into religious and social spheres etc. improper.
 - [11] This is not least expressed by the fact that besides Indian, Chinese or Khotanese “traditions” (*lug*), the temples’ layout and inventory are described as originally also having included

elements of the pre-Buddhist tradition, in this context specified as *drung*, the ancient lores circulated by the traditional storytellers.

- [12] At the same time there were also Buddhist scholars from Tang China at the court, and the emperor's decision to follow the "Indian way" was preceded by debates about the different (Mahayanist) approaches of how enlightenment, the insight of "emptiness", was to be realized (Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 79f.; van Schaik 2011, 37–40).
- [13] This refers to the series of bloody wars during his term, with the defeat of Tang China and the temporary occupation of the Chinese capital (in AD 763) as its culmination.
- [14] That is, the period when Buddhism began to seriously decline in India.
- [15] Sørensen and Hazod (2007). While in many ways there are parallels between the medieval monastery in Tibet and Europe (in terms of scholarship, training, science, demesne, etc.), there appears to be no closer formal comparability in respect to this specific ritual function of the Tibetan cloister and shrine.
- [16] Muslims (mainly merchants) had settled in Lhasa since the fourteenth century, and they had had a mosque there, situated not far from the national temple in Lhasa, since the eighteenth century.
- [17] For the historical circumstances and immediate consequences of Clovis' baptism (reportedly followed by the voluntary conversion of 3000 of his warrior companions), see Padberg (2004, 47–57); for the "CECC elements" in the Frank's political (and religious) history in the Early Middle Ages, see Beckwith (2009, 101, 135f., 143–149).

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