

Are We Legend? Reconsidering Clan in Tibet

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1. Introduction

Tibetan Studies is relatively familiar with the theme of clan. The so-called “Tibetan ancestral clans” regularly feature in works of Tibetan historiography, and have been the subject of several studies.¹ Dynastic records and genealogies, often labelled “clan histories,” have been examined, and attempts have been made to identify ancient Tibetan clan territories.² Various ethnographic and anthropological studies have also dealt both with the concept of clan membership amongst contemporary populations and a supposed Tibetan principle of descent, according to which the “bone”-substance (*rus pa*), the metonym for clan, is transmitted from father to progeny.³

Can it be said, however, that we have a coherent picture of clan in Tibet, particularly from a historical perspective? The present article has two aims. Firstly, by probing the current state of our understanding, it draws attention to key unanswered questions pertaining to clans and descent, and attempts to sharpen the discussion surrounding them. Secondly, exploring new avenues of research, it considers the extent to which we may distinguish between idealised representation and social reality within relevant sections of traditional hagiographical literature.

2. Current Understanding: Anthropological Studies and their Relevance

Current understanding of Tibetan clans and descent rules has been informed by several anthropological studies,⁴ including those of

¹ Stein 1961; Karmay [1986] 1998; Vitali 2003.

² Dotson 2012.

³ Oppitz 1973; Aziz 1974; Levine 1984.

⁴ The “current understanding” referred to here is that prevalent amongst members of the Tibetan Studies community; I address the way that evidence from

Nancy Levine on the Nyinba people, Michael Oppitz on the Sherpa, and Barbara Aziz on ethnic Tibetans from Dingri.⁵ The anthropological training and rigorous fieldwork conducted by those involved ensured that they used the term “clan” in a very specific fashion (discussed below). Problems of access greatly hindered fieldwork-based studies in Tibet itself. However, the subjects of these studies were apparently ethnic Tibetans, so findings about them seemed relevant to populations in Tibet.

Amongst Tibetan ethnic groups in Nepal where clan membership is a significant feature of the society, that membership relies upon a system of descent according to which the father’s strong “bone”-substance contrasts with the mother’s weak “flesh” or “blood”-substance. This seemed to provide proof that the Tibetan principles of descent, so often cited in discussions about Tibetan culture, were built upon such a distinction. Decades ago, however, Melvyn Goldstein and Aziz reported that amongst contemporary Tibetan populations hailing from central Tibet, these distinctions seemed to be of negligible importance.⁶ Divergent understandings in notions of descent between populations inside and outside Tibet would seem to be linked to variations in social structure. *Clan-based* systems, we note, are relatively common amongst societies residing in the borderlands or outskirts of traditional Tibet, including not only the highlands of Nepal, but also Arunachal Pradesh in India, and Yunnan in China. Conversely, vague assertions aside, there seem to be *no* attested or well-documented cases of contemporary ethnic Tibetans within traditional Tibetan lands who organise themselves into clans. What might account for this distinction? And why are Tibetans in Tibet apparently so resolutely non-clan? Such questions have not been seriously addressed.

When groups, such as those in Nepal, with the aforementioned concepts of descent, organise themselves into clans, and employ clan names and related terminology of apparent Tibetan origin, it seems reasonable to believe that they follow a Tibetan model. Investigation reveals, however, that some of those most devoted to this supposed Tibetan model, such as the Tamang, cannot in any straightforward sense be regarded as people of Tibetan origin.⁷ If a “clan-isation” of

anthropological studies seems to have been interpreted in that community. No attempt is made to represent current anthropological thinking, more generally, on the topics of clan membership, descent, and the models for conceiving of them.

⁵ Levine 1988; Oppitz 1973; Aziz 1974 and 1978.

⁶ Goldstein 1971; Aziz 1974.

⁷ Politics in Nepal complicate judgements of what counts as a Tibetan ethnic group. Claims to Tibetan origins do not sit well with campaigns to gain official recognition as a *janajati* (“indigenous ethnicity/nationality”). Despite this, if we

such peoples has occurred as part of a process of their Tibetanisation, it calls for us to re-evaluate our understanding of the latter phenomenon, and expand it beyond the limited domain of religion. It might seem logical to assume that Tibetan ethnicities such as the Sherpa, Nyinba, and Hyolmo (Yolmo), who probably migrated to Nepal from Tibet within the last five to six centuries, are likely sources for the introduction of Tibetanised concepts of descent and clan affiliation. There is, however, no clear understanding of how the migratory experience may have shaped the cultures of such peoples. As such, simply to assume that the clan-based systems they follow reflect what used to flourish in Tibet seems unwise. In summary, there are huge unanswered questions about the borders of identity and the processes of acculturation amongst the various ethnic groups. Until a framework is developed for understanding the evolution of social structure in the region, historical extrapolations about Tibet based on contemporary societies in Nepal and elsewhere seem problematic.

3. Current Understanding: Historical Studies and their Relevance

The relevance of certain Tibetan historical sources here seems incontestable, particularly when they proclaim themselves (or have been interpreted) as dealing specifically with clan. The frequency with which Tibetan historians through the ages have referred to the four or six Tibetan ancestral clans (the supposed 'original' Tibetans) indicates a long-held belief that Tibetan society grew from clan roots. But what evidence is there linking these legendary pre-historical groups with verifiable entities from the historical era? David Sneath sees parallels between Tibet and Inner Asia, where he argues that the image of societies organised into clans and tribes represents a myth, constructed largely during the colonial era.⁸

Legends about the Tibetan ancestral clans have been subject to some degree of historical analysis.⁹ One aspect of Sneath's assertion about Inner Asia is found not to be applicable to Tibet. Far from a colonial-era invention, the *vision* of a clan-based society is seen to

view Tibetan origin in terms of some degree of self-identification, credible accounts of migration, and supporting linguistic evidence, then the Hyolmo (Yolmo), for instance, certainly deserve to be regarded as a group of Tibetan origin. It is often claimed that the Tamang are also of Tibetan origin. But Tamang relations with Tibet are more complex. As I argue in my DPhil thesis (Samuels 2014), it seems unlikely that Tamang ancestral roots are Tibetan.

⁸ Sneath 2007: 93–119.

⁹ Stein 1961.

have been a stock feature of Tibetan histories at least as far back as the twelfth century. Literary representation of these clans reaches its apex in the works entitled *rus mdzod* (literally: “clan repositories”), perhaps the best known of which, the *mGo log rus mdzod*, seems to be of relatively recent origin.¹⁰ Its compilers are vague about source materials.¹¹ The historical credibility of the *rus mdzod* texts (which undoubtedly contain some valuable information) seems somewhat compromised by their obsessive schematising. Despite building upon much earlier literary traditions, schematic representation reaches a crescendo in the *mGo log rus mdzod*, where distinctions between the clans are often reduced to symbols (their respective totems) or various elements (earth, water, etc.) with which each was supposedly associated.

Whatever challenges such indigenous sources present, a more fundamental problem is the understanding of clan amongst historians. Roberto Vitali's 2004 study claims to trace the “History of the rGya Clan,” between the seventh to thirteenth centuries. The rGya, we are told, occasionally disappear from history, only to resurface at a later date.¹² The study may chart the progress of the name rGya through history. Whether or not this can be interpreted as the continuum of a clan is, however, harder to judge: the author neither clarifies what he means by “clan,” nor considers the possibility that the name rGya may have applied to different entities through time. In other studies, it is commonplace to describe, seemingly at random, the same group as “clan,” “lineage,” “dynasty,” or “(ruling) family,” as though these were interchangeable synonyms—their authors apparently unaware that they might connote different things. Equally, little attention is paid to nuances or possible historical variations in Tibetan terminology related to social organisation. This potentially obscures significant historical evidence.

In line with other Tibetan historical works, a large portion of any *rus mdzod* is devoted to genealogy. These are always hereditary lines of *authority*, with claims to ownership, custodianship, or rights to ministry (religious or secular). In support of such hereditary lines of authority, the *rus mdzod* claim that each can be traced back to one of the ancestral clans. The authors seek to portray a continuum, whereas

¹⁰ The work, also known as: *Bod mi bu gdong drug gi rus mdzod me tog skyed tshal*, was compiled by Gyi lung bkra shis rgya mtsho and Thugs mchog rdo rje (1991).

¹¹ The colophon cites: “the *bKa' 'gyur* and *bsTan 'gyur*, ancient texts, records, clan repositories, reliable narratives, songs, and oral traditions of the elders”, *bka' bstan dpe rnying yig tshang rus mdzod dang | sgrung glu gna' mi'i ngag rgyun dag khul rnams* (Gyi lung bkra shis rgya mtsho and Thugs mchod rdo rje 1991: 123).

¹² Vitali 2004: 10.

in fact they make a fundamental shift from the nebulous concept of a supposedly corporate body (i.e., an ancestral clan) to the detailed genealogy of a narrow hereditary succession. The general vagueness with which most historians approach the concept of clan contributes to their failure to notice this shift. A key question is whether the *rus mdzod* are simply manipulating the vision of the ancestral clans in support of hereditary authority or describing the historical erosion of corporate units that split into more narrowly defined lines.

Investigation of the past is not helped by current Tibetan understandings of the term “clan” (*rus*). Names such as IDong (the name of one of the ancestral clans) are not uncommon in contemporary Amdo, and modern works such as *Bod kyi gdung rus zhib 'jug* describe these as “clan names” (*rus ming*).¹³ Despite the clan associations of such names, however, they do not currently seem to indicate membership of groups that can in any meaningful sense be called “clans”. All group names (whether family, clan, or other) are *rus ming* in the aforementioned work. The revival in the use of *rus ming* that the authors call for,¹⁴ represents their evoking some vague image of the past, where all Tibetans had names that indicated belonging to a social group, unlike today, where many only use given names. As with descent, we encounter a major gulf between rhetoric and actuality, and a need to clarify what clan is (or what it might have been, if it ever existed).

Clans seem integral to historians’ views of early Tibet: Sam van Schaik portrays the Tibetan pre-state era as one dominated by “clan struggles.”¹⁵ Similarly, the role of rivalries between the sBa and other clans in the eighth-century debates about religion at bSam yas Monastery are standard in modern discussions of Tibetan history.¹⁶ Clan here seems reduced to a form of chauvinism; one that manifests only in situations of strife. It is difficult not to conclude that the loose and indiscriminate usage of terminology encourages a falling back upon “tribal” stereotypes and clichés, none of which bring us closer to the phenomenon that is supposed to have spawned all of this enmity.

4. Clan: Towards Clearer Definition

In the anthropological studies, such as those cited above, “clan” refers specifically to “a group or category of people who claim to

¹³ IDong ka tshang dge shis chos grags et al. 2001.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 1.

¹⁵ Van Schaik 2011: 2–4.

¹⁶ See, for example, Ruegg 2013: 112.

share descent from a common ancestor."¹⁷ The form of descent in question here is *unilineal*: it is traced exclusively either through male ancestors of the father's line (patrilineal descent) or through female ancestors of the mother's line (matrilineal descent). Lineages also rely upon unilineal descent. The difference between lineages and clans is that with the former, the genealogical links to an apical ancestor are known, whereas with the latter, they are not.¹⁸ A clan, however, may encompass numerous lineages.

The one-sided reckoning of the unilineal descent system that is usually associated with clans obviously contrasts with the dominant form of descent in Europe and North America, where, despite the tradition of inheriting the father's name, systems are predominantly *bilateral*: a person's descent is traced equally through his/her mother and father.

In addition to ancestry, differences in the systems are marked in notions of relatedness. In a bilateral system, an individual is related equally to those on the mother's and father's side (for instance, cousins). Typically, consanguineal relatives (i.e. relatives by birth) are limited in number to those with whom one shares known genealogical ties. In contrast, according to the unilineal system of reckoning, links stretch over numerous generations, through a series of often untraceable genealogical ties—with the shared clan name as the main 'proof' of common ancestry. Hence the clan that an individual belongs to may form a large group or category, and those that might officially be counted as the individual's consanguineal relatives may run to hundreds or even thousands.¹⁹

Distinctions between the two descent systems also express themselves in practices of marriage. In a bilateral system (such as in the modern Western world), an individual's kin (consanguineal relations) are limited to a small group (aunts, uncles, etc.) beyond the nuclear family. The rule of exogamy (as it relates to the requirement that the individual marries someone who is not his/her kin) places far fewer restrictions upon potential marriage partners: the field is generally more open. In the unilineal system, where according to Claude Lévi-Strauss, "true consanguinity, [...] is often impossible to establish,"²⁰ restrictions on marriage are more of a "purely social phenomenon by which two unrelated individuals are classed as 'brothers' or 'sisters' or 'children',"²¹ and the rule of exogamy becomes merged with the prohibition on incest. In societies where

¹⁷ Parkin and Stone 2004: 456.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 458, and Keesing 1975: 148.

¹⁹ This is certainly true of the Tamangs, for instance (as discussed in Samuels 2014).

²⁰ Lévi-Strauss 1969: 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*

descent is traced unilineally, marriage is often treated as a form of exchange between substantial groups or categories of people (such as clans).

The term "clan" may, generally speaking, refer to a centralised corporate group, owning territories, and sometimes linked with particular forms of political or administrative structure; yet equally it may refer to a descent category, comprised of individuals living in a dispersed fashion.²² Whilst there must be numerous cases where clans (either as groups or categories) have become embroiled in disputes, conflict can hardly be seen as the defining feature of clans. As these are largely exogamous groups, there is a reproductive imperative that they cooperate with one another, not least to facilitate the exchange of marriage partners. In societies where clan membership is a significant feature, there is often a strong emphasis upon egalitarianism and coalition building.²³ The discussion of such topics may be common fare in anthropological literature. Yet it seems a world away from academic understandings of historical Tibet, where society appears to be dominated by organised religion, political institutions, and social stratification. Here, a large part of the logic of the society and relations within it is to be discovered in its concepts of descent, kinship, and marriage relations.

The relevance of this social vision of clans to Tibet can only be tested when indigenous historical sources are questioned with greater rigour. Stricter adherence to anthropological nomenclature is not a case of imposing alien models and technical vocabulary, but a way of injecting more preciseness into analysis of indigenous terms and concepts, to understand them and their evolution over time. Unless we exercise greater rigour (including making basic distinctions between families, lineages, and clans), a whole dimension of Tibet's past will remain closed to us.

²² Roger Keesing (1975: 29), for instance, distinguishes between *descent groups* and *descent categories*.

²³ Some form of egalitarianism is relatively common in small-scale societies. There is much discussion in anthropological literature of the way that hierarchical inequalities are introduced and institutionalised in societies where egalitarian principles once prevailed. As Polly Wiessner (2002: 234) argues, however, egalitarianism is "not the tabula rasa of human affairs." Egalitarian structures and ideologies can be complex, and have arisen to reduce the transaction costs of exchange in those small-scale societies. Further investigation is required to determine how much of this is relevant to the historical evolution of Tibetan society. It should be acknowledged that in the Tibetan context it has been more common to associate clans with vertical relationships, and at least one anthropologist contends that the link between clan and hierarchical division goes back to the dawn of Tibetan society (see below).

5. *Questions about Unilineal Descent*

Aziz, who remarks upon an “almost total absence of patrilineal or any other type of descent system” amongst the Dingri population,²⁴ seems to be the first to clearly articulate doubts about unilineality in Tibet. Contradicting the assertions of earlier writers, such as Rolf Stein, she concludes that lineal descent is “in the case of Tibetan material, largely a notion of its writers.”²⁵ Seeing herself as “unburdened of the hoary notion that Tibetans were organized into patrilineal and lineages,”²⁶ Aziz suggests an alternative model for Tibetan society in which the residence has played a crucial role. Aziz does not overtly evoke Lévi-Strauss’s concept of the “house society” (*sociétés à maison*), but in dismissing unilineal descent and stressing the importance of the residence, she clearly moves towards it as the more appropriate model for understanding Tibetan society.²⁷ Bilateral descent is typical in household societies, and the system that Aziz describes is essentially bilateral. Aziz’s findings are regularly cited by others, including Geoffrey Samuel and Sneath,²⁸ who are sceptical about a widespread system of unilineal descent in historical Tibet. Although Aziz projects unilineal descent as largely a work of Tibetan literary fiction, she still has to account for the fact that the Tibetan ethnicities in Nepal follow the system. She concludes that the “process of migration” must have fundamentally altered the social structure of these groups.²⁹

Aziz, Samuel (and others) rely almost exclusively upon data from the twentieth century, and presume that synchronic studies can serve as the basis for inferences and generalisations about the distant past. Their conclusions might be correct, but assume an extraordinarily static model of Tibetan social structure through the centuries. Furthermore, neither Aziz nor Samuel entertains the idea that an alternative explanation could account for the aforementioned discrepancy between the rhetoric and practice surrounding descent, and the fact that clan systems are absent from Tibet, but present in its

²⁴ Aziz 1974: 26.

²⁵ Aziz 1974: 24–25.

²⁶ Aziz 1978: 5.

²⁷ Although mentioned in earlier lectures, Lévi-Strauss first proposes his concept of a “house society” in *The Way of the Masks* (1982), as a means of explaining certain societies that did not seem to fit with traditional kinship theory. It has been described as: “a society consisting of corporate domestic estates that transmit their titles, properties, and prerogatives to their members over the generations” (Parkin and Stone (eds) 2004: 457–58). I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for comments on this section of the current article.

²⁸ Samuel 1993: 126–30; Sneath 2007: 113.

²⁹ Aziz 1974: 35.

borderlands. This alternative explanation is that such differences might be the result of historical shifts *within* Tibet. Historians of Tibet have not generally shown great interest in the area of social organisation, but they would presumably seek to defend their position regarding the historical reality of Tibetan clans. The only obvious way to reconcile this with the present-day absence of clans (certainly from Tibet's central regions) is to infer that, at some stage in history, a shift from the unilineal to bilateral descent occurred. The general decline of unilineal descent is a well-documented phenomenon in academic literature: factors commonly cited for it include the growth of the state, increased social stratification, and the influence of organised religion. All of these are apposite to the history of Tibet.

As noted above, much Tibetan historical literature (even writings purportedly dealing with clan) preoccupies itself with hereditary lines of succession associated with power and prestige. This literary representation, which some might interpret as supporting Aziz's conclusion about a restricted role for lineal descent in Tibet, has contributed to the popular idea that clans were inextricably linked with elites and social stratification. It has even been proposed that early Tibetan society was comprised of a four-fold division of vocational clans, hierarchically divided, much like the *varna* model of ancient India.³⁰ However, historical materials have not been used to seriously test this linkage, and the divide between social reality and literary projection in these materials has not been examined.

6. Old Sources, New Questions: Distinguishing between Idealisation and Social Organisation

The obvious biases of Tibetan historical literature present particular challenges when investigating the norms and practices of "worldly" society. The tendency of Tibetan authors towards idealisation is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the genre of hagiography,³¹ with its extraordinary depictions of exceptional individuals. For Aziz, what such works say about descent is unreliable.³² A greater willingness to interrogate the sources, however, would surely help us to draw out from them at least some information regarding descent systems and other aspects of mundane historical reality. To demonstrate this point, I shall turn to a short segment appearing in

³⁰ Allen 1980.

³¹ By "hagiography," I refer both to biographical writings (*rnam thar*, *mdzad rnam*, *rtogs brjod*, etc.) and autobiographical works (such as *rang rnam*).

³² Aziz 1978: 121, n. 6.

the introductory section of a large number of hagiographical writings,³³ describing the origins of the central figure.³⁴

The tradition of providing details of the protagonist's social background at the onset of the narrative, with reference to three specific terms, can be traced back at least as far as the eleventh century (see below). Increasingly, from perhaps the fourteenth century, *rigs rus cho 'brang* seems to establish itself as the most common subheading for the organisation and presentation of these details. The three terms (i.e. *rigs*, *rus*, and *cho 'brang*) that are fused together to create this subheading all ostensibly relate, in some way, to descent. But other information is also regularly given in the section; especially details of the protagonist's birthplace, which is often formulaically portrayed as a land of plenty, eulogised for its fertility, wonderful livestock, good-hearted inhabitants, and strong religious traditions.

Generally speaking, the sense that the aforementioned terms refer to three distinct concepts (requiring that authors supply three separate pieces of information) appears to decrease over time. By the eighteenth century, authors rarely treat them as separate terms, and give few indications that they appreciate their erstwhile significance. By that stage the discrepancy between the purported and actual content of these sections is considerable, and they are sometimes devoted almost solely to discussion of the main figure's illustrious forebears.

Authors through the ages seldom neglected the opportunity to advertise a subject's eminent ancestry. Whether or not the information provided is of a genealogical nature (describing specific

³³ The confines of space permit me to offer only a few observations about hagiographical literature. Although modest in number, the works cited here span the many centuries during which mature hagiographical writings about indigenous historical figures have been produced—ranging from an eleventh-century biography of the translator Rin chen bzang po (958–1055), to a late eighteenth or early nineteenth-century biography of Klong chen rab 'byams pa (1308–1364). The writings cited are from a variety of religious schools, including the rNying ma, dGe lugs, and Shangs pa bKa' brgyud. These works are only a portion of those consulted, but contain the best examples I am aware of to illustrate some of the points made here. My research in this area is ongoing. As such, some of the conclusions, particularly related to periodisation, are provisional. But unless otherwise stated, the passages and the works that they are drawn from should be understood as entirely representative of numerous others in the tradition, in terms of style, presentation, and detail.

³⁴ The details in some works are sparse, and very occasionally, entirely absent. An author's lack of access to relevant historical information is at least one likely reason for omissions. In some cases, however, sensitivities regarding the central figure's parentage or even the ideological convictions of the author may have played a role. These issues must be explored elsewhere.

lineages or lines of succession), the overwhelming sense is that the discussion of ancestry is there to support the notion that the protagonist's path to greatness was predetermined. Significant forebears were not necessarily religious figures. Descent from those of high status and "worldly" achievement (political or even military) were treated by many as guarantors of eventual spiritual pre-eminence. By contrast, humble origins were rarely celebrated. Claims that a protagonist's "descent" (*rigs rus cho 'brang*) was "superior" (*che ba*), "distinctive" (*khyad par can*), or "good" (*bzang po*) seem to be based almost solely on the author's ability to cite noble predecessors.

There are both variations in usage and also elisions of the three descent-related terms. Despite this, some tentative generalisations about the concepts and information associated with each can be made.

Rigs

Authors of hagiography use *rigs* primarily to convey the idea that the central figure's father belonged to a narrow social group, membership of which was defined by shared vocation and common ancestry, traceable over many generations. The implication is that the protagonist is in some way the beneficiary of his ancestry's legacy. The origins section in the biography of Chos rje Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan (1372–1437?) has a typical description:

His father was of the (sMug po) sDong clan, one of the four great original clans [...]. He belonged to the "royal grouping" (*rgyal rigs*). This was in the lineage of Chi hu du dBen sha,³⁵ who ruled the "kingdom" (*rgyal phran*) of sTag mgo Nor bu gsum pa during the time of Kublai Khan. His successors were almost all Dharma-kings.³⁶

³⁵ I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for pointing out that *chi hu du dben sha* is almost certainly a rendering of *chi fu tu yüan shuai* ("chief military commander"), a title from the Yuan dynasty.

³⁶ *gdung ni rus chen sde bzhi'i nang nas che bar grags pa smug po sdong [...] rigs ni rgyal rigs te / de yang chi hu du dben sha zhes bya ba / se chen gan gyi rgyal phran stag mgo nor bu gsum pa la dbang byed pa'i rigs rgyud yin la / de dag kyang phal cher chos kyi rgyal po sha stag tu byung bar snang ngo*. From the biography of Chos rje Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, in Nam mkha' bsam grub rgyal mtshan et al. (1996: 437–38). The dates of Nam mkha' bsam grub rgyal mtshan and other anonymous compilers of this historical anthology of biographies of figures from the Shangs pa bKa' brgyud tradition (who lived between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries) are unknown.

The Tibetanness of the father's patrilineal group is 'verified' by claiming its roots are traceable to the sMug po branch of the sDong ancestral clan.³⁷ The author also proposes that the protagonist's patrilineal ancestors were of the "royal grouping". Here *rigs* is unquestionably intended to suggest the idea of a distinct "class." In such descriptions a "lordly class" (*rje rigs*) also often features, and there are tangential references to a "commoner class" (*dmangs rigs*). The suggestion is evidently that society is divided along hierarchical lines, with partitions that bear a striking resemblance to the *varṇa* ("caste") model of Indic literature. Is this evidence of an ancient Tibetan four-fold social division? Firstly, judging by the frequency with which Tibetan authors mention this division, even when conjuring up images of non-human social structure (amongst *nṅgas*, spirits, etc.), it must be viewed as a form of literary default. Secondly, passages such as the above do not describe clan-based vocational divisions stretching back into time immemorial. Instead, we hear of a specific "lineage" (*rgyud pa*). The 'sovereign' status of members of this lineage probably derived solely from their claim to be able to trace their ancestry back to a local ruler, upon whom a military rank was bestowed during the Yuan dynasty, just a few generations before the birth of the biography's central figure.³⁸

The possibility that the progenitor of the lineage claimed a noble pedigree even prior to his official recognition by the Mongols cannot be entirely ruled out. This description is, however, consistent with the way that lineages are regularly depicted in Tibetan literature. The lineage *begins* with some notable figure, religious or secular. Genealogical detail prior to this figure seems largely irrelevant. The author here endeavours, in the vaguest of fashions, to link an apparently historical lineage with the vision of a four-fold social divide in Tibet. Suspiciously, however, the central figures of such biographies seem, almost to a man, to belong to one of the noble classes. The attempts to insert specific lineages into this four-fold structure are so riddled with inconsistency, anachronism, and historical distortion (including occasional claims that wholly indigenous groups belong to the Brahmin class!) that it is difficult not to conclude that they have more to do with literary creativeness (or

³⁷ sDong is a common variation in the spelling of lDong.

³⁸ The term *sTag mgo* (literally: "tiger's head") *might* refer to the "tiger-head button," an imperial reward mentioned by Luciano Petech (1990: 121). Yet, as it appears to be attached to the name of this supposed kingdom, it seems more likely to be a variation on *rTa mgo* ("horse's head"), the name of an administrative division created for the Mongol census of Central Tibet (1268–1269). This was comprised of a meagre fifty "households" (*hor dud*). For further discussion of these divisions, see Petech 1990: 46–49.

even conventions) than social reality.

The ancestors of the protagonists are not always said to belong to one of the four-fold divisions. There is an alternative set of more Tibetan-sounding *rigs*, including a *bon*, *sngags pa* (*māntrika*), *yogi*, and even a scholarly class. In the minds of authors of hagiography, it seems, these *rigs* represent designated or prescribed classes to which their subjects must have belonged, and all of them are associated with religious or secular authority. Patently, authors attempted to ennoble the origins of their subjects. References to humble origins are conspicuous by their absence on the father's side, although mothers are occasionally said to be of the "common class" (*phal ba'i rigs*)—a term that seems to include farmers, nomads, traders, etc. (i.e. the majority of the population).

The manipulation of ancestry here seems blatant. Where references to the descent group of the subject's mother appear, it is not the sign of ambilineality, the practice in some societies where an individual may choose to belong either to his/her father's or mother's lineage. These are instead selective choices made by *authors*, favouring notable figures from the secular and religious domains, who may have been linked with the subject by distant (usually unspecified) ties of descent. These were then used to construct fictional classes, populated entirely by noteworthy personages sharing a religious or worldly calling.

Further illustrating the extent of the idealisation with which *rigs* is associated, the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) glosses the term in the origins section of his autobiography thus:

As for *rigs*, [someone who is] knowledgeable and smart, courageous and daring, true to his word, of broad vision, straightforward, amiable and so forth, and whose conduct is worthy is one who holds the *rigs*.³⁹

Here *rigs* is totally dissociated from concepts of descent. Combining native views on admirable character traits with the religious concept of being a "lineage-holder" (Sanskrit: *kaulika*), it represents more of a personal ideal to which individuals might aspire.

Descriptions of *rigs* in hagiography can yield credible detail about a group's social background: a family's traditions or affiliations, for instance, when they are said to be a *bon rigs*, or genealogies relating to specific lineages (*rgyud pa*). But such information must be extracted

³⁹ *rigs ni mkhas mdzangs dpa' zhing rtul phod pa bka' btsan la dkyel che ba gzhung bzang la 'grog bde ba sogs ya rabs kyi spyod tshul ni rigs dang ldan pa*. From the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1989–1991: 21).

carefully, and with the awareness that *rigs* serves as an umbrella term. This term encompasses distinct elements relevant to social organisation (including lineage and household), but conflates these with indigenous and imported notions of class and privilege—major portions of which seem to be fictionalised.

The fact that *rigs* was also used to render a number of discrete Sanskrit terms—*varṇa* (“caste”), *gotra* (“clan”) and *jñati* (“lineage”)—strengthens the impression of its vagueness, and should certainly lead us to conclude that, as far as terminology denoting specific concepts of descent go, *rigs* is an impostor in the ranks.

Rus

In contrast to the chaotic muddle of concepts represented by *rigs*, *rus* (*pa*) is generally used in a singular fashion to denote an apparently indigenous concept of “clan.”⁴⁰ The term *rus* is not totally immune to hyperbole, although its honorific equivalent (*gdung*) is more commonly exploited to convey the ‘superiority’ of dynastic lines (royal and religious).⁴¹ The Fifth Dalai Lama, following his embellished description of *rigs*, says of *rus*: “*rus* is what passes through the lineage of a father whose line is not tarnished.”⁴² These words exemplify the distinction between the ways that *rigs* and *rus* are reported. Whilst *rigs* serves as the basis for bloated claims related to hierarchical distinctions, details of *rus* tend to be sober. Sections on *rus* regularly make reference to indigenous concepts—such as, in the present case, assertions about the process of patrilineal transmission and the need for lineal integrity (i.e. that there be no gaps or questions about the father’s ancestral line).⁴³ Mostly, however, the *rus* ‘sub-section’ consists simply of a name, presented in a procedural manner, like an item on a register. That is, *rus* is associated less with exaggerated claims, and more with routine information. Moreover, even though the names of the ancestral clans do often occur, the

⁴⁰ More generally in Tibetan literature, Tibetan translators and authors have, for centuries, displayed a marked preference for limiting *rus* to the domain of discussions about Tibetan concepts of descent.

⁴¹ The same *rus* substance passes from father to offspring whether the descent group described is a clan or lineage. Historically, however, *rus* primarily seems to refer to larger sets of people (either corporate groups or descent categories), whereas *gdung* is generally favoured for the more exclusive lineage.

⁴² *rus ni rigs ma nyams pa'i pha de'i bryud las byung ba*. (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1989–1991: 21).

⁴³ In addition to proclaiming the superiority of the central figure’s descent group, authors were also keen to project them as “pure” (*gtsang mā*) or “complete and perfect” (*phun sum tshogs pa*), implying that genealogies could be substantiated.

central figure's *rus* is frequently one that is relatively anonymous or totally unknown in historical terms.

The usage of "clan-names" (*rus ming* or *rus mying*) appears to have been standard during the imperial era. Authors of hagiography generally seem both able and compelled to provide a *rus ming* for their protagonists well into the thirteenth or fourteenth century. A name alone does not, of course, yield information about the specific form or relative significance of the entity to which it was applied. Also, as unilineal descent encompasses both clans and lineages, we cannot be certain that these names were attached to larger corporate groups. We can, however, potentially learn something about historical and regional patterns from the usage of such names. Furthermore, the style of their reporting in hagiography suggests that authors viewed them not as vertical badges of distinction (by means of which a subject's superior social origins could be conveyed) but as horizontal badges of social inclusion. This contrasts with contemporary practice in much of Tibet, where group names are regularly associated with claims to social distinction (linked to property and heritage), but is more consistent with the way that they are employed amongst the aforementioned societies in contemporary Nepal and elsewhere, where the group (i.e. clan-) name is simply a social requirement.

Cho 'brang

Although there are questions about how this term is employed in other forms of literature, its usage in hagiography seems largely to conform to the way that it is glossed in contemporary lexicons, where it is said to denote relations on the mother's side.⁴⁴ But if the mother's descent group is included alongside the fathers' in the *rigs rus cho 'brang* rubric, as though they were an equally essential component of descent, is this compatible with a patrilineal system? Might it even offer evidence of bilateral descent? It is perhaps prior to the eighteenth century that authors seem more inclined to restrict *cho 'brang* to the mother's group. Information about the respective descent groups of the father and mother often seems superficially similar: both may include accounts of illustrious forebears and praises of the virtuousness of each parent.

Despite this presentational parity, there are marked contrasts in the quality of the information provided about the two groups. Even

⁴⁴ For example *ma'i rigs* ("the mother's side") in *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (Krang dbyi sun et al. 1993: 823).

in a society following a patrilineal descent system, sufficient genealogical information about the mother's descent group must be retained to guard against incestuous unions. Knowledge of that group, however, is necessarily subsidiary to that of the patriline. Seeming to support this, origins sections often include absolutely no information about the mother's descent group. Where the mother is mentioned, her personal name is regularly unaccompanied by any group name or affiliation. The disparity is further emphasised by the fact, mentioned above, that whilst it seems acceptable for the mother to be of lowly stock, the same is not true for the father. These facts seem consistent with a patrilineal descent system. If some works give the impression of a degree of parity between the two descent groups, the most likely explanation is not that this reflects a bilateral descent system, but that some authors have chosen to downplay the divide. The possibility that a religiously-inspired literary aesthetic, inclined towards symmetrical representations of male and female constituents, might have influenced reporting here is another factor that should be considered.

The way that *cho 'brang* is explained in some hagiographies offers a particularly Tibetan perspective on the mother's descent group. The Fifth Dalai Lama, and a number of subsequent authors, such as Glag bla chos 'grub (1862–1944), in the hagiography of Klong chen rab 'byams pa, gloss the two syllables of the term separately. Both of these authors link *'brang* with the verb "follow" (*'brang ba*), suggesting that it refers to the "traceability" of three separate descent lines (i.e. *rigs*, *rus*, and *cho*).⁴⁵ The Fifth Dalai Lama also seemingly left open the possibility that *'brang* could be related to a place of residence (a *'brang sa*).⁴⁶ Thus far, this is the sole hint of a possible house society dimension to the terminology generally used in hagiography to define a group's origins. Both authors are in complete agreement regarding *cho*. The Fifth Dalai Lama says: "*cho* refers to the *zhang po* being of a verifiable source."⁴⁷ Glag bla chos 'grub, using almost exactly the same wording, offers the further clarification that *cho* refers to a clan (*rus*).⁴⁸ Hence both assert that *cho* refers to the mother's descent group. Much earlier, in the eleventh-century biography of Lo tsö ba Rin chen bzang po, composed by his student Khyi thang dpal ye shes (dates uncertain), in place of the term *cho 'brang* in the three-fold rubric describing the central figure's origins,

⁴⁵ *'brang ba ni bshad ma thag pa rigs rus ma nyams pa de dag gi rjes su 'brang nas.* (Glag bla chos 'grub 1996: 16–17).

⁴⁶ *'brang ba ni bshad ma thag pa gsum po dang ldan pa'i spyod pa'i 'brang sa 'dzin pa.* (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1989: 21).

⁴⁷ *cho ni zhang po khungs dang ldan pa.* (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1989: 21).

⁴⁸ *cho ni zhang po'i khungs te yul gyi rus ni.* (Glag bla chos 'grub 1996: 16–17).

we find the term *zhang po*.⁴⁹ Whilst *zhang* is more generally associated with the “wife-givers,” *zhang po* specifically denotes the maternal uncle/wife’s-brother. As I have elaborated elsewhere, this kinship figure was the focus of a peculiarly Tibetan form of an apparently ancient cult.⁵⁰ Only traces of it remain in Tibet, but it persists amongst the societies of Himalayan peoples, such as the Tamang, who follow a patrilineal clan system.

7. Tentative Realities: Legends within a Real Landscape

As stated above, at any given point in history, the usage of a name, such as IDong, cannot alone be seen as a guarantee of the existence of clans. Quite apart from the possibility that some group may have ‘groundlessly’ (in terms of descent) appropriated the name, according to the rules of unilineal descent, lineages (functioning either within or exclusive of clans) could claim equal right to its use. Occasionally, however, the origins section of a hagiographical work will include an invaluable passage, such as the following:

His clan was Mal. There were about a thousand of them, sharing the clan and *chos* traditions of this Lord. They were related through genealogical lines that were unbroken for seven generations [...].⁵¹

Given that the subject of this passage is Tsong kha pa (1357–1419), one of the most eulogised of Tibetan religious figures, it is remarkable for both its content and unostentatious style.⁵² Free from the usual inflated claims of descent from one of the ancestral clans or of belonging to some re-imagined Indic social class, the only possible hint of idealisation here relates to the supposed rule that descent be both known and verifiable over seven generations. The credibility of the information seems enhanced by the fact that other historical references to the Mal are difficult to find. The special significance of the passage lies in its unambiguous assertion that the Mal constituted

⁴⁹ Images of a handwritten manuscript version of this work, catalogued under the title *Lo tsā ba Rin chen bzang po'i rnam thar*, are available on TBRC (www.tbrc.org); Resource Code W4CZ1547. The *rigs rus zhang po* subheading appears on folio 2a.

⁵⁰ Samuels 2013.

⁵¹ *'di'i gdung rus mal yin la / rje nyid dang gdung chos gcig pa tsam du gtogs pa la mi ngo stong phrag longs pa yod cing / bdun rgyud ma chad pa'i gnyen dang snag gi gnyen mtshams kyang shin tu rgyas pa zhig ste.* (mKhas grub dge legs dpal bzang 1982: 5–6).

⁵² This biography of Tsong kha pa (Blo bzang grags pa), ‘founder’ of the dGe lugs tradition, was composed by mKhas grub dge legs dpal bzang (1385–1438), one of his chief disciples, who is notorious for his immodest style of expression.

a distinct group, one that on sheer numerical scale demands to be regarded as distinct from a lineage. Some might question whether the author's assertion that the Mal formed a "clan" (*gdung rus*) constitutes substantive historical evidence of large corporate groups or descent categories of consanguineal relatives. However, that really would be to miss the point. Unilineal descent, particularly on a clan level, as alluded to by Lévi-Strauss,⁵³ is not to be judged in terms of genealogical verifiability; it is about groups or categories of people who organise themselves around the often vague concept or belief that they share descent. The question is whether there have been large groups who have organised themselves and their traditions around such a belief. The passage's suggestion that clan affiliation obliges its members to follow the same *chos* (religious) traditions seems to offer further support for the position that in historical Tibet there indeed have been such groups.⁵⁴

8. Conclusion

There is an impression that the topic of clan has been reasonably well covered in Tibetan Studies. This impression, I have argued, is false. Scrutiny reveals that there is no coherent picture, and that there is a major divide between the way that historians and anthropologists approach and understand the topic of clan. The criticisms here are, to some extent, the common ones about the gulf between un-anthropologised historians and a-historical anthropologists. In an attempt to bridge the gulf, and to encourage more dialogue between the two camps, I have attempted to move the topic of clan outside of the hazy domain it currently occupies for most historians, by explaining how in anthropology it refers to a specific way in which groups or categories of people organise and conceive of themselves, around a distinctive form of descent. I have also demonstrated that a more anthropologically-informed interrogation of Tibetan historical literature helps us both to recognise some of its distortions as well as gather potentially significant information from it. The contribution of historians to discussions about Tibetan social organisation is sorely lacking. In its absence, historical generalisations, made by certain anthropologists who presume that the past can simply be reconstructed by extrapolating from the present, go untested, and are consequently greatly devalued. The historical existence of some form

⁵³ Lévi-Strauss 1969: 29; see also above.

⁵⁴ The same phrase "those of the same clan and *chos*-traditions" (*gdung chos gcig pa*) is found in a number of texts.

of residence-based or house society in Tibet must be acknowledged. But to dismiss clan and unilineal descent in Tibet as literary fictions or the stuff of legend is simply not an option.

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