Emblems and Representations of Social Status in Tibetan Societies

24–25 November 2016

Conference of the Franco-German Project

“Social Status in the Tibetan World (TibStat)”

Thursday 24 November
Goethe Institute, 17 av. de Iéna, 75116 Paris, salle du deuxième étage

Friday 25 November
Maison de l’Asie, 22 av. du Président Wilson, 75116 Paris, Grand Salon
THURSDAY 24 NOVEMBER

9h00–9h15
Welcome and Introduction

Morning Session

Chair: Alice Travers

9h15–9h50
Peter Schwieger: Deeds and Status in the Early Ganden Podrang Government

9h50–10h25
Stefan Larsson: The Social Status of the Wandering Yogins

10h25–11h00
John Bray: Hats, Robes and Hybrids

11h00–11h30
Tea/Coffee

11h30–12h05
Petra Maurer: Buried Uphill or Downhill? Aspects of Social Order in the Land and the Ground

12h05–12h40
Lobsang Yongden: Misdiagnosed? Re-examining Lobsang Palden Yeshe’s Death From Smallpox in 1780

12h40–13h50
Lunch

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13h50–15h45
Visit to the Musée Guimet for Conference Presenters

15h45–16h15
Tea/Coffee
Thursday Afternoon Session
Chair: Peter Schwieger

16h15–16h50
Charles Ramble: The Social Order on Display: Guidelines for a Nineteenth-century Ceremony in a Himalayan Principality

16h50–17h25
Alice Travers: Changing Emblems of Social Domination: a Brief Note on a Few Aristocratic Family Crests

FRIDAY 25 NOVEMBER

Morning Session
Chair: John Bray

9h00–9h35
Jeannine Bischoff: Passing on Dependency among Central Tibetan mi ser

9h35–10h10
Kalsang Norbu Gurung: Who were the tax collectors in pre-1959 Tibet?

10h10–10h45
Tea/Coffee

10h45–11h20
Berthe Jansen: Ragtag Buddhism: of Storytellers and their Social Status

11h20–11h55
Teresa Raffelsberger: The Representation of the Ladakhi Kings of the Namgyal Dynasty in Written Sources from 16th to 19th Century

11h55–12h40
Film: Inside Tibet (1943), Documentary of Ilya Tolstoy and Brooke Dolan’s visit to Lhasa (US Government Office of Strategic Services)

12h40–14h00
Lunch
Friday Afternoon Session
Chair: Petra Maurer

14h00–14h35
Maria-Katharina Lang: Artefact Transfers and Objects of Relation

14h35–15h10
Saul Mullard: Drums, Bells and Silence: Status Symbols of the Multi-ethnic Aristocracy of Sikkim

15h10–15h40
Tea/Coffee

15h40–16h15
Fernanda Pirie: Brave Tigers, Heroic Warriors, and Skillful Mediators: the Many Lives of a Status Symbol

16h15–16h50
Jim Rheingans: Mind the Head: The Yellow and other Tibetan Hats and Some Curious Incidents Surrounding their Social and Religious Symbolism

16h50–17h30
Business Meeting

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Jeannine Bischoff: Passing on Dependency among Central Tibetan mi ser

Within the study of Central Tibetan mi ser it is generally assumed that an individual’s status was transmitted along parallel lines of descent according to gender, viz., that sons would be the dependents of their fathers' estate lord, while daughters would be those of their mothers'. The physical inter-estate mobility of mi ser due to marriage—among other factors—made it necessary to administer dependency and create “means of evidence” that could be referred to from either party that might be in doubt about it. Hence, this presentation aims at providing insight into the practice of using documents as material evidence of representing a mi ser’s status.

John Bray: Hats, Robes and Hybrids

With this paper, I wish to develop a conversation about robes and—more particularly—hats. The paper is a continuation of an earlier enquiry in that I start with a 1921 photograph taken by Sir Charles Bell from my earlier SHTS paper on Ladakh’s Lopchak (lo phyag) mission to Lhasa. The photograph, which shows the Lopchak leader and his entourage, is remarkable for—among other reasons—the variety of headgear on display. Taking this image as a
starting point, I discuss the role of hats as a marker of both hierarchical and horizontal social status in Ladakhi society. Drawing on a wide range of 19th and early 20th century photographs and drawings, I consider the hats worn by kings, aristocrats, Buddhist laypeople, Muslims, Western travellers, officials, missionaries and Christian converts. The paper points to changes in popular style already in the early 20th century as well as more recently. I take particular note of ‘hybrids’—cross-cultural dressers who adopt the headgear of other social groups—and point to the role of hats (or their absence) as a marker of social change. While focussing primarily on Ladakh, I conclude by pointing to similar patterns in other parts of the Tibetan plateau, in full confidence that the study of hats will become a running theme throughout the TibStat project.

Kalsang Gurung: Who were the tax collectors in pre-1959 Tibet?

This paper explores some questions regarding the status of tax collectors in pre-1959 Tibet. The tax collectors in question are bkar yong, a compound of bkar rgya ba (store manager) and yong bzhes pa/yong sdud pa/bsdud pa (revenue collector), rtsam bzhes pa, ’bru bskyel do dam pa, etc. On the one hand these positions seem to have been appointed temporarily only for the purpose of collecting taxes, and therefore may not be considered as a professional career (Bod kyi lo rgyus rig gnas dpyad gzhi'i rgyu cha bdams bsgrigs vol. 4, pp. 145-46). However, other references suggest that they were a well-established position and a professional career that one would hold for many years (Petech 1973, French 1995, Goldstein 2013). Since the tax collectors play a vital role in securing the government’s income, it becomes important to understand how these positions were filled and what procedures were followed to select qualified candidates. This paper aims to examine the designation and legitimacy of the Tibetan tax collectors, and to investigate their duty of collecting taxes through their use of titles and seals.

Berthe Jansen: Ragtag Buddhism: of Storytellers and their Social Status

The general narrative we are presented with is that all aspects of Tibetan culture and heritage have been reasonably well preserved by Tibetans in exile. While arts and crafts are particularly visible, Buddhism is seen to be flourishing. Some cultural and religious traditions, however, have fallen by the wayside and have not been able to re-establish themselves after the Chinese occupation, the Cultural Revolution, and the onslaught of modernity. Intangible heritage is of course particularly vulnerable and we find that certain oral traditions are close to extinction. To understand the processes of preservation and demise of these features of Tibetan culture, we need to come to terms with the way these are and
were connected to social status. In this paper, I will look at the history of oral traditions, with particular reference to the practice of Buddhist storytellers, the so-called *Lama Mani (Bu chen)* tradition. I will argue that the imminent demise of this tradition is partly due to its religious and social status in the past, a past still lived today.

**Maria-Katharina Lang: Artefact Transfers and Objects of Relation**

Artefacts may link or relate histories, spaces and persons and they also express social status and power. The artefacts concerned in this contribution, mainly Buddhist ritual objects from the 19th and 20th centuries, belong to the Tibetan and Mongolian world, and thereby bridge geographical borders. In the world of these artefacts, if one perceives them as having social lives and biographies, there might also be a kind of hierarchy or social status. For example, sacred objects brought from Tibet were regarded as especially sacred, and therefore valuable and highly regarded. One main interest of my current research project, *Nomadic Artefacts*, is how artefacts turn into ambivalent objects, uncertain to deal with, and the ways in which people engage with them. Their status may change and inverse completely under certain circumstances – from highest to lowest rank. In this presentation I intend to relate artefacts with persons. One person, the Eighth Jetsundamba Khutugtu and later Bogd Khan, Tibetan by birth, became Mongolia’s highest clerical figure and theocratic ruler. Historic photographs show his changed, destined status through emblems of Mongolian nationality. How were his status and role in society represented by material culture? This not only concerns his robes, emblems, seals but also his private collections. European and foreign items served as symbols of status and luxury, and so did architectonic representations such as palaces and temples. Object flows and artefact transfers were activated by processes of gift exchange. Artefacts and material culture mirror social history and politics.

**Stefan Larsson: The Social Status of the Wandering Yogins**

Drawing upon biographies (*rnam thar*) and songs (*mgur*) of the mad yogin gTsang smyon Heruka (1452–1507) and his direct disciples that were printed in the 16th century, this paper will examine the social status that the homeless wandering yogin had in pre-modern Tibet. According to these texts, the yogin should ideally leave both his family and his monastery behind. Having turned his back on the so-called ‘eight worldly concerns’ (concern for obtaining: gain, fame, praise, pleasure; and concern for avoiding: loss, obscurity, slander, and pain) he sometimes paradoxically achieved worldly success, high status and influence. The yogin was an outsider of sorts who overturned and ignored hierarchies, yet his (or occasionally her) radical lifestyle contributed to his (or her) achieving honour and prestige. Although gTsang smyon and his disciples lived a long time ago, the lifestyle they promoted
through their personal example and their literary works (gTsang smyon’s version of the life of Mi la ras pa is the most famous example), influenced people in Tibetan cultural areas and beyond and has continued to do so to this very day.

Saul Mullard: Drums, Bells and Silence: Status Symbols of the Multi-ethnic Aristocracy of Sikkim

Styles of ornamentation are often used as markers of social status within Tibetan societies. For example, amongst Tibeto-Sikkimese people single turquoise earrings and buttoned hats signify the noble status of the wearer, and depending upon the variety are indicative of social rank. Yet Sikkim is, and has been since the 13th century, a multi-ethnic society. This gives rise to several questions regarding intersection between ethnicity on the one hand and social status on the other. This presentation examines this relationship by studying the use of objects that give advance notice of individuals of a certain status; in this instance drums and bells. The use of sound-producing objects to clear traffic from roadways and path is a common one, from the cow-herd’s bell to modern emergency sirens, or on the mountainous roads: the car horn. Yet in Sikkim the use of such objects to indicate one’s presence is tied to one’s social status with rules governing their use and type and rules that direct others to respond to their sound with silence and respect. This paper looks at several documents issued by the Sikkimese crown that gave special rights to use bells, drums and other objects as symbols of social status and asks how and why these differed amongst Tibeto-Sikkimese, Lepcha and Limbu (and later Newar landlords) as a means towards understanding the relationship between ethnicity and social status in Sikkim.

Petra Maurer: Buried Uphill or Downhill? Aspects of Social Order in the Land and the Ground

Texts on geomancy (sa dpyad) provide several information on social rank from different points of view as for example from attributes of persons, colours of the ground or the position of a grave. The topography of the land, the shape of a mountain or of a certain area are usually described by means of comparisons: places are considered to resemble a king with a staff (rgyal po ’khar ba thogs pa) or a beggar with a stick (long sprang dbyug pa thogs pa), a queen with a cape (btsun mo go zu) or a widow with a blanket (yugs sa phyar hrul). The status of the person and his / her attributes defines accordingly the quality of the land. Another aspect related to a person’s social rank can be found in the color of the ground: white ground is for the king and yellow for the aristocracy, the ground for the common people is black. These characteristics were however borrowed from the Indian tradition, the Gṛhyaśūtras. Furthermore, the position of the graveyard might reveal the rank of person: the upper part is reserved for the ancestors, but illegitimate male persons are buried in the lower
part on the right of the hill whereas the left side even further downhill is reserved for females.
In the paper I would like to present some aspects regarding the social order as it can be
deduced from texts on geomancy.

**Fernanda Pirie:** *Brave Tigers, Heroic Warriors, and Skillful Mediators: the Many Lives
of a Status Symbol*

The tiger and fox were used to denote heroism and cowardice, respectively, in the period of
the Tibetan empire. Insignia—presumably in the form of tiger skins and fox pelts or tails—
were used to mark out the status of those recognized for bravery or shamed for cowardice.
There is evidence that such symbols continued to be used in later periods of Tibetan history.
Curiously, these status markers also had an after-life in legal texts, where they came to
signify quite different social and political attributes. In this presentation I discuss three of
these texts: the lDe’u chronicles, with its presentation of imperial laws, in which the symbols
are clearly linked to bravery and cowardice; the *Khrims gnyis lta ba’i me long*, in which they
take on a wholly different meaning, linked to mediation and compensation for theft; and the
*zhal le bcu drug*, in which they revert to a more military significance. These developments
may tell us something, both about Tibetans’ complicated relationship with violence and
warfare, but also about the long life of a status symbol.

**Teresa Raffelsberger:** *The Representation of the Ladakhi Kings of the Namgyal Dynasty in
Written Sources from 16th to 19th Century*

During the last four centuries of the Ladakhi kingdom the kings of the Namgyal dynasty
faced an area of conflict regarding cultural, social and political matters that often caused a
discrepancy between imaginary and real order. In this context representation played an
important role in legitimating the claim of power and maintaining status. Secular as well as
religious buildings and objects illustrate the effort the royal family made to demonstrate and
strengthen their position in public. However, conclusions on the self-portrayal and self-
concept of the Ladakhi kings can also be drawn from sources that are not primarily visual
evidence. The *La dvags rgyal rabs*, for example, gives us a quite distinct idea of the concept
of an ideal ruler to which the members of the Namgyal dynasty generally tried to conform,
while a respectable number of legal documents provide indications of how this conception of
the perfect reign influenced actual ruling practice. In addition to these sources, documents
which contain foreign perspectives on the Ladakhi kings, such as hagiographical accounts or
chronicles from neighbouring kingdoms, widen our understanding of the representation of the
rulers of Ladakh. In this paper I will take a closer look at the motives and phrases that were
used in written sources to characterise the Ladakhi kings and their status. In this regard, I will also examine to what extent legal documents confirm the aspects stated in other sources. Furthermore, I will discuss how the representation of the kings of the Namgyal dynasty changes over the period from the 16th to the 19th century.

**Charles Ramble:** The Social Order on Display: Guidelines for a Nineteenth-century Ceremony in a Himalayan Principality

Caste systems are often conceived as vertically-organised sets of communities defined by occupation – a scheme that one sceptical commentator has referred to as the “football league table” model of society. The constellation envisaged by A.M. Hocart, by contrast, proposes a radial scheme in which the ruler occupies a central position and maintains reciprocal relations with the component groups of his realm – priests, warriors, artisans and others - surrounding him in an imaginary circle. The distinctiveness of each of the groups is exemplified by the symbolic role each social entity, be it a politico-religious office or a social cluster, plays in the context of certain core rituals. Until the 1960s the dukedom of Baragaon, comprising 18 settlements, in Nepal’s Mustang District featured an annual occasion that had precisely such a function of symbolically unifying the polity’s components in a collective ritual activity. This ceremony, the liturgical nucleus of which was a mdos ritual from the cycle of Char ka nag po (a wrathful form of Mañjuśrī), has been the subject of a preliminary study by this writer (1992-93) and a more extensive treatment by Nicolas Sihlé (2001). The present contribution will examine a 19th century document from the archive of the former Duke of Baragaon that sets out in great detail the various duties and honours accruing to the different groups and individuals who took part in the ceremony, revealing a three-dimensional society that was defined not just hierarchically but also horizontally, in terms of the religious and secular status of its members.

**Jim Rheingans:** Mind the Head: The Yellow and other Tibetan Hats and Some Curious Incidents Surrounding Their Social and Religious Symbolism

White or red, round or square, fluffy or hard, ornate or simple – hats are almost omnipresent in the Tibetan cultural sphere, ceremonial hats being often connected to sophisticated religious symbolism. Guru Rin po che’s “lotus hat” is, for example, supposed to indicate that he is empowered by the five Buddha families. It is also a garment that clearly indicates a certain social status within a community. Some incarnation lineages are named after a hat (for example the various Red Hat lineages, zhwa dmar) and the placing of such implements can be highly significant in certain ceremonies. Even a whole sect, the dGe lugs pa, is sometimes
named after the “Yellow Hat”. Jo nang Tāranātha’s (1575–1634) incarnation was proclaimed to be a dGe lugs tulku as a means of political hegemony over the Jo nang pa beginning in 1650. An incident from Tāranātha’s autobiography served – among others – as ‘evidence’ that he had intended to incarnate as a dGe lugs pa: in a dream the famous Bu ston presented him with a yellow scholar’s hat and mentioned: “from now on, you should only wear this.” On the basis of selected textual sources, this paper will use such and other incidents to illustrate the significance of the Tibetan hat as a representation of social status.

Peter Schwieger: *Deeds and Status in the Early Ganden Podrang Government*

On the occasion of the 360th anniversary of the Ganden Podrang Government in 2002 the Department of Information and International Relations of the Tibetan government in exile published a brief text in honour of the Fifth Dalai Lama, praising him for “the fact that through sheer brilliance in diplomacy he was able to re-unify the whole of Tibet as a nation and to rule it as its undisputed sovereign. The Great Fifth Dalai Lama established the Ganden Podrang Government of Tibet, a unique form of governance based on the principles of chosi-sungdril or the harmonious blend of religion and politics.” The text conceals that in fact the early Ganden Podrang was a complex and fragile balance of power and social status characterised and described by scholars rather controversially. Deeds, titles and seals and their use in social and political practice offer a way to analyse how the protagonists represented and perceived their respective status and power—in relation to each other, to their subjects and to the principal neighbouring powers.

Alice Travers: *Changing Emblems of Social Domination: a Brief Note on a Few Aristocratic Family Crests*

The central Tibet aristocracy as a group displayed its superior rank in the Tibetan society and its internal hierarchy through a great variety of practices as well as material means (house, furniture, costumes, hats, jewelry, horses’ adornments, etc.). During the first half of the 20th century, a few noble families started to use crests in their correspondence (both writing paper and envelopes). This paper proposes a preliminary inquiry into those crests, their origin, their use and the possible Tibetan and foreign underlying influences that have shaped them.
Lobsang Yongden: Misdiagnosed? Re-examining Lobsang Palden Yeshe’s Death From Smallpox in 1780

Social status played an important role in dealing with infectious disease in traditional Tibetan society. In the case of smallpox, it was usually ordinary people who were inoculated and often high lamas did not undergo inoculation. Because they were reluctant to take this preventative measure, some Tibetan Lamas suffered and died from this disease. The death of the Sixth Panchen Lama, Lobsang Palden Yeshe, in Beijing in 1780 clearly demonstrates how his status as the Panchen Lama cost him his life. Unlike his entourage, he was not inoculated. By using his Tibetan biographical accounts and relevant documents in Chinese and English, I shall show how misdiagnosis, the Panchen Lama’s own refusal to be inoculated and the Qing officials’ discouragement of inoculation, caused the death of the Panchen Lama in Beijing. In doing so, I argue that the Panchen Lama’s death was largely due to his status as Panchen Lama, one of the highest religious figures in the Tibetan world and an imperial guest and spiritual teacher. Because of his profile as the Panchen Lama, neither Tibetans nor the Qing officials were willing to take the risk that inoculation posed for him; indeed, they actively discouraged it. As a result, he was not inoculated and died from smallpox. This led some Tibetans to believe that the Qing officials might have played a part in the death of the Panchen Lama.