# BARBARIANS AT THE BORDER AND CIVILISING PROJECTS: ANALYSING ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE TIBETAN CONTEXT

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## INTRODUCTION: A CALL FOR CRITICAL TIBETAN STUDIES[1]

During her presidential address at the opening convocation of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Janet Gyatso called for Tibetan Studies to engage with emerging trends in interdisciplinary critical theory.[2] Noting that studies of Tibetan society often place themselves outside the broader comparative frameworks offered by literary criticism, history, anthropology, postcolonial studies and other disciplinary areas, Gyatso suggested that Tibetology would benefit from engaging in dialogue with such scholarly approaches.[3] As a contribution to that larger project, here I take some preliminary steps towards opening a productive dialogue between Tibetan Studies and contemporary anthropological theory on the topic of ethnicity. My goal here is to trace the genealogy of 'ethnicity' as a concept through Tibetan Studies as a discipline, and offer some observations on its use, or more often, lack thereof, in a manner consonant with its theoretical deployment in cultural studies of other world areas.

I suggest that the absence of a nuanced analytical framework for understanding ethnicity in the Tibetan context is linked to the difficulty of recognising Tibetan roles as dominant orchestrators of their own 'civilising projects' in addition to being victims of Chinese ones. 'A civilising project', as defined by Stevan Harrell in the Chinese context, "is a kind of interaction between peoples, in which one group, the civilising centre, interacts with other groups (the peripheral peoples) in

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[1] I thank Mark Turin, Viranjini Munasinghe, and Robbie Barnett for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Any errors remain my own.

[2] St. Hugh's College, Oxford, September 7, 2003.

[3] Gyatso's statement follows in a long tradition of such pleas for broader theoretical engagement on the part of Tibetologists. See particularly Aziz (1989) and Miller (1993).

terms of a particular kind of inequality" (1995: 4). Such projects are the historical precursor to systems of ethnicity, which are established in modern nation-state contexts as a means of hierarchically categorising social difference. Ethnicity codifies the relations of power between dominant groups at the centre and subjugated populations at the periphery initially constructed through civilising projects. In this paper, I suggest that we must recognise the difference between 'Tibetan' as a dominant *national* identity which contains its own networks of ethnicity established through civilising projects, and 'Tibetan' as a peripheral *ethnic* identity within other national contexts, such as China, Nepal and India.

In order to understand the dynamics of power and cultural contestation in contemporary Tibetan contexts, we must ask how social difference has been organised at different times and places. How have central Tibetans historically treated the peoples at their borders, such as the groups now commonly called Monpa, Lhopa, Thangmi, and others?[4] Furthermore, how do groups with different regional and linguistic identities, such as Amdowa, Khampa, or Gyalrongpa, relate to central Tibetans and to each other, and how have they done so in the past? Answering such questions will entail extensive ethnographic work at local, regional, national and transnational levels to document how ethnicity is understood and enacted in variously constituted Tibetan worlds.

The present paper is based on a review of existing literature in Tibetan Studies, and is therefore largely analytical in nature. Future ethnographic work will refine the suppositions made here. However, in the belief that theory and ethnography constitute each other dialectically, it is my hope that this set of observations may help clarify some of the questions requiring further research, even if I cannot at this point provide the answers.

In writing about ethnic identity for the Thangmi (Shneiderman and Turin 2000; Shneiderman 2002), who have populations both in contem-

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[4] These ethnic names all indicate the marginal position of those who carry them from the perspective of Tibetan speakers: Monpa literally translates as 'barbarians', Lhopa as 'southerners', and Thangmi as 'border people'. Samuel suggests that the Mon area was culturally and politically linked to Tibet from the 12th century onwards, and cites 1982 Chinese census figures which show 6248 Monpa (Menba) and 2065 Lopa (Luoba) living within the TAR (1993: 103-104). It is not clear whether the latter ethnonym represents Tibetan *lho pa* ('southerner') or *klo pa* ('barbarian').

porary Nepal and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC), it has become increasingly clear to me that the academic worlds of Tibetan Studies and what we might call Nepal or Himalayan Studies are operating with distinctly different sets of analytical assumptions about ethnicity.[5] Nepal and the TAR share a lengthy modern border, as well as a rich history and many cultural, religious and linguistic practices that extend to broader Tibetan regions. In studying a group of people who cross this border on a day-to-day basis, I have found it necessary to consider ways to bridge the two academic frameworks.

I have approached Tibetan Studies from a distinctly southern perspective, coloured by my ethnographic experience in Nepal, where ethnicity is a gatekeeping concept at all levels of academic, political and lay discourse.[6] In the anthropology of Nepal, it is accepted without question that in most cases the primary marker of social difference is in fact ethnic identification. The terminological absence of 'ethnicity' as a key category of analysis in Tibetan Studies stands out by contrast. One of the questions I pose here is whether the different analytical frameworks applied within Nepal versus Tibetan Studies derive from genuine indigenous differences, or are simply the result of different disciplinary histories. Although the terms 'ethnic Tibetan', 'ethnically Tibetan' and 'Tibetan ethnicity' are used frequently in Tibetan Studies, there is very little discussion of what these terms actually signify, or of ethnicity as a relational system. Religious and regional differentiation is written about, but little attention is paid to the question of ethnic identity *within* the overarching category 'Tibetan'. Several scholars have discussed what unites so-called Tibetans (Shakya 1993; Ramble 1993), but I am more interested in what divides them. In other words, what are the relevant forms of social difference and ethnic classification, past and present, for those living within 'politico-cultural' Tibet?

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[5] Known as 'Thami' in Nepali, this group of approximately 40,000 people find their 'homeland' in areas of the Dolakha and Sindhupalcok districts of Nepal contiguous with the Tibetan border. There are substantial migrant populations living on the Chinese/TAR side of the border between Zhangmu/Dram/Khasa and Nyalam/Tsongdu/Kuti. Many Thangmi, along with members of other groups, make use of the 1992 Sino-Nepali treaty which allows residents within 30 km of the border on each side to travel freely within 30 km on the other side.

[6] Here I make use of Brackette Williams' (1989) tripartite framework for discussing ethnicity.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY: ETHNOGRAPHIC TIBET AND TIBETANS

As in any attempt to deal with a contested identity, I face the problem of how to refer to the various people, groups, and identities I am discussing without reifying the terminology already in use. 'Tibet' and 'Tibetan' are particularly challenging terms because they have been used to mean so many different things within as many contexts over time. As Toni Huber summarises, these terms are problematic because "they evoke the existence of stable or unitary social and geopolitical entities that readily gloss over an enormous actual complexity and fluidity both past and present" (1999a: viii). Here I outline several solutions to this problem proposed by contemporary scholars. My own approach emerges in the article throughout.

Several scholars have made the case for a distinction between 'political' and 'ethnographic' Tibet (Richardson 1984; Samuel 1993; Goldstein 1998; Huber 1999a). Building upon Hugh Richardson's writings, Melvyn Goldstein describes political Tibet as the polity historically ruled by the Dalai Lama, and roughly equivalent to today's TAR within China. Ethnographic Tibet is much broader, and includes "ethnically Tibetan areas of Amdo and Kham that are today part of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan provinces" (1998: 4). This distinction is useful, since it allows an acknowledgement of the broad parameters of 'Tibetan culture' (itself a vague term) while recognising the distinctive political histories of each area.

According to Goldstein, even the broader category of ethnographic Tibet includes only "the 4.6 million ethnic Tibetans who are now part of China, that is, those living in the heartland of Tibetan Buddhism" (1998: 4). It excludes those communities often referred to as the 'ethnically Tibetan' populations of the Indian and Nepali Himalayas. However, it is these communities who have provided much of the empirical information for anthropological studies of 'Tibetan societies' (Samuel 1993: 41), and other scholars have accordingly attempted to include them in even broader formulations of the Tibetan cultural world. For example, Charles Ramble has proposed the term 'Tibetosphere' to refer to the trans-Himalayan geographical region unified by similar cultural practices in modern China and beyond (personal communication). András Höfer has suggested the somewhat uncomfortable term 'Tibetanid' to describe peoples outside of Tibet whose cultural practices are similar to those inside Tibet (1979: 43). The very

fact that scholars have found it necessary to go to such lengths to find appropriate terminology, which nevertheless remains unsatisfactory, demonstrates the genuine complexity of the situation.

These frameworks are complicated further by the fact that, "it has now become apparent that since 1959 two quite different although related Tibetan societies, one in South Asian exile and the other under Chinese administration, have begun to emerge" (Huber 1999a: 9). For this reason, I take up George Dreyfus' proposal of 'politico-cultural Tibet' as a unit of analysis. As Dreyfus puts it, "the Tibet with which Tibetans have identified in previous times is not a nation-state defined by a boundary. It is a politico-cultural community whose existence is fleeting and can rarely be identified with established powers" (1994: 206). This formulation at once transcends the historical boundaries of any particular nation-state, yet locates the Tibetan sense of collective identity in a politico-cultural context. For the most part, I refer to this broadly defined field of identity production as the 'Tibetan context' or the 'Tibetan situation' rather than as simply 'Tibet'.

One of the problems with the argument for 'ethnographic Tibet' as a unit of analysis is that it takes ethnic identity for granted, as evidenced by Goldstein's use of the term 'ethnic Tibetans' to describe those living within China. There is no clearly understood definition of 'ethnic Tibetan' that does not reify either the Chinese state's or the Dharamsala Government-in-Exile's classificatory uses of the term.[7] For this reason, it is even more difficult to offer a functional definition of the subjectively defined terms 'Tibetan' and 'Tibetan-ness'. I argue below that 'Tibetan' refers to both a national and an ethnic identity, and that these two meanings of the term must be analytically separated. This separation will entail an eventual shift in terminology, which for the moment, I effect by using the qualifiers 'ethnic' or 'national' in front of the term 'Tibetan'.

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[7] See Gladney (1991) and Harrell (2001) for general discussions of the dialectical relationship between state-promoted ethnic categories and subjective identification in China.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NOW YOU SEE THEM, NOW YOU DON'T

Anthropologist Brackette Williams' definition of ethnicity provides a useful theoretical lens through which to consider the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism in the Tibetan context. She writes:

> In sum, *ethnicity* labels the visibility of that aspect of the identity formation process that is produced by and subordinated to nationalist programs and plans...*ethnicity* labels the politics of cultural struggle in the nexus of territorial and cultural nationalism that characterizes all putatively homogeneous nation-states. As a label it may sound better than tribe, race, or barbarian, but with respect to political consequences, it still identifies those who are at the borders of the empire. Within putatively homogeneous nation-states, this border is, however, an ideologically produced boundary between 'mainstream' and peripheral categorical units of this kind of 'imagined' social order (Williams 1989: 439).

The key point here is that ethnicity is a relational system that is fundamentally constituted within national frameworks. Following this logic, one reason why ethnicity may not have been developed as a major analytical category within Tibetan Studies is that Tibet never became a fully modern, independent nation-state, and therefore lacked the structures of ethnic identification typical of modern nations.

This explains the Tibetan situation in part, but does not fully account for its historical particularities. I suggest that structures of difference that articulate the constitutive distinction between "'mainstream' and peripheral categorical units", as Williams puts it, may have existed in pre-1959 Tibet and may continue to exist today. The apparent absence of ethnicity in Tibet may be an illusion, perpetuated both by political and academic discourses that fail to acknowledge Tibet as a full-fledged national entity in itself, complete with all of nationhood's negative implications, despite its political incorporation within China.[8]

There is a certain irony here, since the objective of many Tibetan political activists in exile is to assert Tibet's right to national independence. Working from the position of having lost the nation, Tibetan refugee activists have attempted to reclaim all of the positive aspects of nationhood by claiming it as a homogeneous whole, while distancing

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[8] This is not to suggest that Tibet continues to be an independent *state* in the international geo-political sense, but rather that it remains a distinctive *nation* in the consciousness of its inhabitants. It is important to note that this is not at odds with the Chinese perception of 'Tibetan' as a minority 'nationality'.

themselves from the negative aspects of nationhood that subvert hetero-geneity at the borders. In other words, if we are to accept the proposition that Tibet was and is an independent nation, we must also critical-ly engage the underlying nationalist rhetoric that constitutes it—as we do for other 'putatively homogeneous' nations.

Part of this process entails recognising how the nation manages the 'barbarians' at its borders, be they categorised as tribal, racial or ethnic others. Françoise Pommaret describes the Tibetan treatment of periph-eral groups as: "a certain condescending and despising attitude towards the surrounding regions which did not, in the eyes of the central Tibetans, reach what they considered to be the epitome of culture. This attitude could, in modern terms, be compared with a 'colonialist' atti-tude" (1999: 53). But by casting Tibetans as victimised ethnic others *vis-à-vis* the Chinese, and emphasising Buddhist ideals of egalitarian-ism and inclusion, the political agenda in exile has managed to avoid acknowledging these potentially less pleasant aspects of the Tibetan national past.[9] This results in the paradoxical political representation of Tibet as a less-than-complete nation without ethnic (or other) differ-ences, which has been echoed by academic literature.

Williams' discussion of 'cultural invisibility' (1989: 410) adds another dimension to our understanding of the Tibetan situation. According to Williams, "to be detribalized is not necessarily to be empirically de-ethnicized; it is simply to become invisible" (1989: 412). This perspective clarifies the process by which dominant groups within any national context become invisible in the larger ethnic pic-ture. Tibetans perform a rather unusual "now you see them, now you don't" trick in this regard. When the unit of analysis is China or the broader Himalayan region, Tibetan-ness is a marked, minority ethnic category. However, when the unit of analysis is the Tibetan nation, Tibetan-ness takes on the invisibility of dominance. In other words, 'Tibetan' operates as both an ethnic and a national category in different contexts, with Tibetan-ness slipping in and out of visibility according-ly. There is a parallel slippage in much academic literature, which gen-erally fails to distinguish the ethnic category of Tibetan from a nation-al one. Most scholarly work configures Tibetan-ness as a marked eth-

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[9] I do not intend to belittle the genuine and extreme suffering that Tibetans have experienced. Rather, I am calling for a balanced view that both acknowledges Tibetan victimisation and sees them as agents in the production of their own national identity.

nic category within other nation-state frameworks, such as China,
India, or Nepal. This identification is then transposed to other contexts
without a careful consideration of how 'Tibetan' represents the
unmarked dominant category within the putative 'Tibetan nation'.

## RELIGIOUS TIBETANS: INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

The history of Tibetan Studies is inextricably linked to Buddhist
Studies, and by the same token Tibetan cultural identity has often been
conflated with Buddhist religious identity. Donald Lopez (1995, 1998)
has extensively documented the histories of early Buddhist Studies and
Tibetology, which in their philologically-motivated quest for a reposi-
tory of 'pure' Buddhism in Tibet, initiated a pattern of research that
overemphasised religion to the exclusion of other aspects of Tibetan
sociality.

   The important point to make here is that in the Tibetan context 'reli-
gion' has often been interpreted as synonymous with 'culture'. This
conflated concept has been grafted onto Tibetan society as a homoge-
neous category in a manner reminiscent of structural-functionalist
anthropology's tendency to equate single, discrete cultures with single
societies. There is no question that this genre of scholarly portrayal is
linked to certain Tibetan self-representations that highlight Buddhist
religious identity as the most important aspect of Tibetan-ness. In a
1960 article that is probably the first attempt to address these issues
after the 1959 flight into exile, Robert Ekvall presents the following
scheme for understanding Tibetan views of themselves:

> Listed in the order of their importance, as the Tibetans state and rate
> them, these criteria are: (1) Religion...; (2) Folkways...; (3) Language...;
> (4); Race...; (5) Land... In both importance and sharpness of definition
> these five criteria are not equal. The first (religion) is the dominant one;
> the last two, (race and land) are admittedly of lesser importance (1960:
> 376).

Ekvall goes on to describe how the concept of 'religion' (Tib. *chos*), is
in fact a broad, almost ecumenical one which subsumes all 'arts, liter-
ature and science', 'law', and in fact any sort of written document or lit-
erature. According to Ekvall, "This wide inclusiveness is symptomatic
of the dominance of religion in Tibetan life" (1960: 376). However, he
does not question the easy equation between Buddhism and religion,

and therefore Buddhism and Tibetan identity. He and several other writers (Klieger 1992; Huber 1999a) describe the central differentiation that Tibetans make between themselves and others as that between *nang pa* and *phyi pa*—terms that literally translate as 'insider' and 'outsider'. Although these are vernacular rather than scriptural terms, they have come to be synonymous with 'Buddhist' and 'non-Buddhist', so that the primary metaphor used to describe *cultural* inclusion and exclusion is one of religious membership.

To demonstrate this principle, Ekvall gives the example of "individuals who...are no longer *Nang Ba*...Such persons and the members of certain communities on both the extreme western and northeastern borders of Tibet who have become Muslims, [and therefore] are no longer recognised by the Tibetans as being unequivocally Tibetan" (1960: 377). In this example, Ekvall presupposes the categorically Buddhist nature of 'the Tibetans', thereby assigning the privilege of deciding who is in and who is out to those who are already members of that category by virtue of their Buddhist identity. This move defines Tibetanness as a primarily religious identity, rather than as a national category within which various religions may be represented.

While Ekvall's emphasis on religious identity undoubtedly represents well the views of many central Tibetans at that time (and perhaps in the present also), it does not account for the potentially different viewpoints of Muslims or other non-Buddhists (or non-normative Buddhists in the case of practitioners of Bön and other variations on the Buddhist theme), who might see themselves as nationally and/or culturally Tibetan while not religiously Buddhist. In short, just as there are Buddhists all over the world who are not Tibetan, why can there not be Tibetans who are not Buddhist? The following quotation from the website of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile hints that, at least for Tibetan Muslims, the relationship between religious and national identity is far more complex:

> Mr Yusaf Naik, an official of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, is no different from his colleagues. He speaks fluent Tibetan, follows Tibetan customs, has complete faith in the leadership of the Dalai Lama and prays for the freedom of Tibet, but strangely enough he offers *namaz*, like any other Muslim, despite being a Tibetan.
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> Perhaps the most interesting aspect of his community is that while staunchly Islamic in their faith, the Kache, as the Tibetan Muslims are called, are thoroughly Tibetan in every other aspect. In a predominantly Buddhist nation like Tibet, they were able to preserve their identity and

at the same time absorb Tibetan social and cultural customs (PCT News Service: 2000).

The assertion that "strangely enough he offers namaz...despite being a Tibetan" indicates that such disjunctures between religious and national identity remain difficult for the dominant Buddhist Tibetan community to understand. Yet coming from an official Dharamsala publication, this article underscores the need to address such issues.

Goldstein provides a more up-to-date analysis of the relationship between religious, cultural and national Tibetan identity by describing Tibetan Buddhism as "a dominant ideological framework for both day-to-day life and the ultimate questions dealing with the meaning of existence and life" (1998: 5). He goes on to situate Buddhism as "the *raison d'être* of the Tibetan state", thereby highlighting the hegemonic linkage between Buddhist identity and state power. Here Goldstein acknowledges the very real conflation of religious and state power historically operating in what he calls 'political Tibet'. These forces taken together create the framework within which hegemonic subjects—like Ekvall's Tibetan informants—equate cultural and national identity with religious identity. In casting Tibetan Buddhism as an ideological force rather than an essential identity, Goldstein opens a space for alternative identities to exist within the overarching framework of the hegemonic Tibetan state. This is the context in which a diversified discussion of religious and ethnic identities within the Tibetan context can unfold.

## ETHNIC TIBETANS

Who exactly is an 'ethnic Tibetan'? The term 'ethnic' is often used as an adjective to modify the term 'Tibetan', but the noun 'ethnicity' is rarely, if ever, used to describe a larger set of social relationships in which such ostensibly 'ethnic Tibetans' participate. In order to better understand the provenance of such terms in the Tibetan context, I look first at how the classic literature locates Tibetan notions of difference in race and tribe, rather than ethnicity. I then consider how the term 'ethnic' has been used to describe 'Tibetans' in three contemporary politico-cultural and geographical contexts: the Himalayas, the Tibetan refugee settlements of Nepal and India, and, to follow Goldstein's usage, the ethnographically Tibetan areas of China.

*Race and Tribe*

Several writers (Ekvall 1960; Richardson 1984; Karmay 1998) use the term 'Tibetan race' in a descriptive manner without considering the broader analytical implications of a racialised notion of Tibetan identity. Ekvall notes that it is impossible to make a case for racial purity in Tibet, since Tibetans are phenotypically very diverse, and "unquestionably many peoples and tribes have been incorporated into the ethnic unit which the Tibetans consider distinctly Tibetan" (1960: 380). R.A. Stein concurs that "the fact that different groups exist is plain" (1972: 27). Yet despite this known historical diversity, Ekvall claims that "the Tibetan believes he is the member of a unique race, and cites that belief as one of the criteria on which his self-image is based" (1960: 381).

There are two issues to note here. The first is that these authors use the concept of 'ethnicity' almost interchangeably with that of 'race'. Ekvall asserts the 'Tibetan race' as a unitary identity, yet suggests that other 'peoples' and 'tribes' have been incorporated into this 'ethnic unit'. Stein similarly blurs these two categories: "Much the same is true of ethnic make-up. Different racial types live side by side or coalesce" (1972: 27). The second point of note is that for both of these writers, the category of 'tribe' is hierarchically subordinated to the joint category of 'Tibetan race/ethnicity'. The concept of 'race' seems to imply a greatness linked to 'civilisation' and literacy, while 'tribe' denotes a 'primitive', pre-literate orientation. This tendency is nowhere better illustrated than in Himalayan anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's introductory note to the 1978 *Himalayan Anthropology* anthology, a seminal attempt to develop shared categories of analyses across borders in the Himalayan region:

> In the Valleys of this great mountain range Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages dovetail and overlap, populations of Caucasian racial features characteristic of North India met and merged with Mongoloid ethnic groups, and the two great Asian religions Hinduism and Buddhism coexist there and interact in various ways. In neither of these spheres are boundaries clear-cut, nor are the sequences of events which brought about the present kaleidoscopic pattern easily discernible. While chronological data relating to developments within the great historic civilizations of the area are fairly well established, very little is known about the history of the many preliterate tribal societies which for long filled the interstices between the domains of more advanced cultures…for centuries [this area] has been a meeting point of distinct races and two of the

great civilizations of Asia (1978: ix-xii).

For Fürer-Haimendorf, 'race' seems to equal civilisation at the centre, while 'tribes' fill the interstitial spaces between great civilisations. If this was the accepted academic framework, it is hardly surprising that earlier Tibetologists went to great pains to assert Tibetan identity as unitary and racial, as befitting a great literate civilisation, in contrast to the fragmented, pre-literate, and ethnic 'tribes' at its borders.

We might easily forgive this formulation as an artefact of past scholarship that made use of accepted terminology at the time, were it not for the fact that similar descriptions persist in otherwise astute contemporary works. Samuel speaks of "the 'wild' nomadic and bandit areas within the borders..." (1993: 148), while Huber describes the "hostile tribal peoples with a penchant for ambush" (1999a: 4) with whom Tibetan pilgrims had to contend before 1959. To retrace the steps of my argument here in conjunction with Williams' framework, as introduced above: if 'Tibetan race' was early on equated with dominant civilisation at the centre, and 'ethnicity' was understood as synonymous with race, in opposition to 'non-Tibetan tribes' who were located entirely outside of the ethnicity paradigm, then we can begin to see how those termed 'ethnic Tibetans' are in fact the invisibly dominant group at the centre.

The most plausible explanation for the persistence of these otherwise conceptually problematic terms is that they closely reflect dominant Tibetan vocabularies for articulating difference. As I discuss in the final section of this paper, there is ample evidence of indigenous Tibetan ontologies which use the term 'barbarian' to describe those at the borders, but it is less clear that Tibetans use anything like the terms 'race' or 'ethnic' to describe themselves. Ekvall offers the term '*Mi Rigs gCig*' as an indigenous Tibetan category, which he translates as, 'human lineage one'. He then uses 'lineage' and 'race' synonymously in his further discussion. Although *rigs* may be translated as lineage, its literal and broader meaning is 'type'.

This confusion suggests that we need to look more closely at Tibetan language terms dealing with kinship and descent in order to understand indigenous epistemologies of inclusion and exclusion. Anthropologists Barbara Aziz (1978) and Nancy Levine (1981) begin to address these questions in their work on individual Tibetan communities, by discussing the concepts of *rgyud pa* (lineage) and *rus* (bone) respectively. Such work on kinship and descent is linked to an extensive literature on

territoriality as a feature of Tibetan identity. The concept of territory as a Tibetan identity marker is almost as well developed as that of religion, with scholarship primarily focusing on mountain deity cults (Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996; Blondeau 1998; Buffetrille and Diemberger 2002) and sacred space (Macdonald 1997; Huber 1999a, 1999b). A thorough discussion of these bodies of literature is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that revisiting classic anthropological literature on these subjects may provide important foundations for articulating theories of ethnicity in Tibetan contexts.

*Himalayan Tibetans*

The primary obstacle to using such studies as a foundation for future work on Tibetan ethnicity is that much of the existing research on kinship, descent, and territory has been conducted in Himalayan areas of Nepal, rather than inside political or ethnographic Tibet. Although it is clear that general Tibetan cultural practices traverse political borders on all sides, it is impossible to ignore the impact of the Nepali, Indian, and Bhutanese nation-state frames in which culturally Tibetan populations define their identities. For example, it is unquestionable that both the subjective experiences and academic portrayals of 'ethnically Tibetan' communities within Nepal have been affected by the legally codified Nepali ideology of caste. Levine (1981) describes how the Nyinba people of northwest Nepal with whom she worked use the Hindu/Sanskrit concept of *jāt* as a synonym for the Tibetan *rus*, which gives an initial indication of how such group identities are shaped by the national framework in which they live.

In a subsequent paper Levine describes the relationships between caste, state and ethnic boundaries within Nepal in detail (1987). Graham Clarke's article on blood and territory as idioms of national identity in the Himalayas (1995) proceeds in a similar vein. These and other works on what are alternately termed 'Tibetan', 'Tibetanid', and 'Tibetan-speaking' populations in Nepal demonstrate clearly that 'Tibetan' becomes an *ethnic* identity when it is subsumed within the Nepali national framework of ethnicity.[10] Levine shows how communi-

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[10] The Muluki Ain, which was propagated in 1854 and continued to serve as Nepal's primary legal code until the 1960s, categorized ethnic identity in a fixed hierarchy. Although now officially outlawed, its provisions continue to shape Nepali understandings of ethnicity and difference (cf. Höfer 1979).

ties in the northwestern Nepali district of Humla shift identity from Tibetan to Byansi, Bura and Chetri (all Hindu caste identities) and back again (1987). Similar shifts are well-documented for the Thakali ethnic group of Myagdi and Mustang districts (cf. Fisher 2001). In these cases, 'Tibetan', or Bhotiya (*bhoṭiya*) in Nepali, identity operates at the level of ethnicity within a broader national hierarchy of identities.

At the same time, however, Charles Ramble argues that Nepal's Tibetan communities are *not* a unified ethnic group. They do not possess national ethnic organisations like Nepal's other groups, and instead tend to cluster regionally. Ramble suggests that local territorial affiliation is the primary marker of identity for Tibetan-speaking groups all across Nepal's northern borders. In his view, "the Bhotiyas are not so much a distinguishable ethnic group as a sort of matrix from which ethnic groups crystallise, or whose members assume, for periods of varying duration, the names of Nepalese peoples" (Ramble 1997: 394). Here ethnicity is constituted exclusively *vis-à-vis* the Nepali state, rather than internally among Tibetan groups themselves in relation to each other. This description is in line with the common anthropological understanding that ethnicity is an effect of modern nation-states which is felt only within their borders. The same may also be true for politico-cultural Tibet: diverse groups may constitute their identities at the local level, with the systemic features of ethnicity only becoming apparent at the national level. In other words, 'Tibetans' may not be a single coherent 'ethnic group'—but rather a multiplicity of groups—for the same reasons that Nepal's Bhotiyas are not. The difference between the Nepali case and that of politico-cultural Tibet is that in the former, the term 'Tibetan' is used to name a minority ethnic identity within the overarching Nepali national context, whereas in the latter, 'Tibetan' must be understood as a dominant national identity within which ethnic difference may be articulated locally. Along these lines, we must work towards understanding how diverse sub-groups living in the TAR and elsewhere in China identify themselves in relation to the national rubric of 'Tibetan', and differently yet again in reference to the overarching state rubric of China.

## Chinese Tibetans

Ramble likens Tibetan communities resident in Himalayan states to those inside the TAR because both "regard their ethnic distinctiveness as being menaced by more vigorous cultures pressing on their boundaries" (1997: 386). Indeed, within the framework of the Chinese state, 'Tibetan' has been constituted as an official minority 'ethnicity' or 'nationality' since the 1950s. Since the TAR and other Tibetan areas have been politically subsumed by China, Tibetans have been compelled to reify their *national* identity as an *ethnic* minority one in order to avoid persecution by the Chinese state, as well as to gain benefits from it.[11] It is then hardly surprising that Tibetans in China have begun using the language of 'ethnic minority' to describe themselves, as required by the Chinese state. Here, Tibetans have certainly been compelled "to submerge the cultural distinctions within them and to present themselves as a single ethnic group" (Ramble 1997: 390).

Historically, 'Tibetan' was a national, and at times even imperial, identity on par with 'Han', 'Mongol' and 'Manchu', to name the competing historical powers. Several works deal with the relationships between the pre-modern Tibetan nation and these other entities (Shakabpa 1967; Smith 1996; Shakya 1999). Intriguingly, this position has been implicitly acknowledged by Chinese politicians since Sun Yat-sen first named the Tibetans as one of the five distinct 'peoples' that comprised the Chinese nation in the 1920s. Chiang Kai-shek reaffirmed this notion in 1939 by calling Tibetans one of the five 'great races' (Gladney 1991:83). Returning to the discussion of 'race' above, I would argue that these Chinese political pronouncements superficially subvert Tibetan (as well as Manchu, Mongolian, and Hui) national identity by converting it into a purely racial identity subsumed within the larger Chinese nation. The very need to acknowledge these five groups in particular as 'races', rather than simply 'tribes', implicitly acknowledges their history as national-level identities. In fact, it is the potential of these putative 'nations' to challenge the integrity of the Chinese nation as a whole that has required subsequent political figures to emphasise the language of 'race' in describing these particular groups. Although contemporary anthropological work must situate contemporary Tibet within the Chinese state, if we represent Tibetans

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[11] See Mackerras (1995) for a scholarly approach that follows Chinese state views on this issue.

only as an ethnic minority within China without acknowledging their national history—as most Chinese ethnology does—we may obfuscate the genuine complexity of ethnicity in the Tibetan context.

*Refugee Tibetans*

The discourse on Tibetan identity emerging from the Government-in-Exile in Dharamsala, India, has in certain paradoxical ways colluded with Chinese representations to reinforce the image of Tibetans as a victimised ethnic minority. As mentioned earlier, this is ironic because the overarching narrative emanating from Dharamsala is one of Tibetan independence and strength. But in order to make the case for sovereign power in the future, Tibetan activists often portray themselves as powerless victims in the present. P. Christiaan Klieger describes how this dynamic is similar for what he calls 'homeland' (inside China) and 'exile' (outside China) Tibetans:

> In both Shangri-La and Chinese centrist philosophies, Tibetan culture is supposed to vanish as a natural and evolutionary outcome of regional modernization. Of course, no groups of people relish the thought of becoming extinct—the strategy for Tibetan people in general, at least since the occupation in the 1950s, is to perpetually define oneself as different from the powerful 'Others' encroaching upon their territorial, political, and religious borders (2002: 2).

The primary 'Other' is of course China, the entity responsible for making national Tibetans into refugees in the first place. In the refugee context, however, Tibetans have had to contend with several more 'Others', such as the Indian and Nepali states, and the various ethnic populations of those countries. As Klieger notes, "strong ethnic barriers have been formed between the immediate hosts (Indians and Nepalese) and the refugees" (1992: 111). In a process of diasporic identity construction that is well-documented for other refugee groups, exile Tibetans have attempted to create a homogeneous narrative of authenticity, largely based on Buddhist ideals of egalitarianism and non-violence, in order to assert their Tibetan-ness as an ethnic identity within the pluralistic Indian and Nepali states in which they now live. This process has become a popular subject for researchers interested in 'Tibetan culture' (Nowak 1984; Klieger 1992; Korom 1997; Frechette 2002; Klieger 2002), since refugee communities are far more easily accessible than political or ethnographic Tibet, and constitute an ostensibly clearly defined unit of analysis.

In reference to the process of Tibetan identity construction in exile, Frank Korom notes that "the rapid dispersion of Tibetan ethnic groups gradually led to the establishment of a global communication network with Dharamsala at the hub. From this central location, Tibetan politicians attempt to maintain and project a self-perceived homogeneous culture" (1997: 2). Intriguingly, Korom's statement suggests that upon arrival in exile, Tibetans were members of different 'ethnic groups', but after 40 years as refugees they have come to accept the 'homogeneous culture' propagated by Tibetan politicians and other figures of power. Korom later returns to this issue by identifying 'authenticity' as the 'central problematic' of Tibetanness (1997: 7). This hints at the ongoing difficulties of reifying a diverse group of peoples as a single *ethnicity*—Korom implies that there were multiple authentic ethnic narratives in pre-1959 Tibet, and the need to distil these to a single authoritative one in the context of refugee politics does not sit well with historical experience. More effective, perhaps, would be a clear separation of *national* Tibetan identity from the diverse array of *ethnic* identities present under the larger Tibetan rubric. Pragmatically speaking, this is difficult, since there is no modern state within which to define that national identity, and instead, exile Tibetans must live within other states where they will be classified as ethnic whether that suits their purposes or not. However, actors on both the political and academic levels can become more aware of these nuances and work towards a clearer analytical distinction between these categories.

## NATIONAL TIBETANS

The lynchpin of my argument is that the history of Tibetan-ness as a dominant national identity, both pre-modern and modern, must be examined in order to expose the networks of ethnicity that may have existed in relation to that national identity at different historical moments. George Dreyfus makes the case for indigenous forms of proto-nationalism and nationalism within the Tibetan politico-cultural community in two articles that situate Tibetan nationalism within the general theoretical literature on this topic (1994; 2002). Dreyfus begins by asserting that Tibetan identity "cannot be adequately characterised in solely ethnic or religious terms", but is essentially "political as well" (1994: 205). He argues that this sense of political identity dates to the

thirteenth century at the latest, but labels the pre-1959 phase as 'proto-nationalism' (following historian Eric Hobsbawm's use of the term), upgrading it to full-fledged 'nationalism' only in the post-1959 era, because "there is no denying that nationalism and its concomitant, the nation-state, are modern phenomena" (1994: 206).

This periodisation in terms of modernity paradoxically appears to accept the fundamental premises of the Western model of nationalism which Dreyfus otherwise challenges with the Tibetan example. Despite this and other ambiguities, the Dreyfus paradigm may provide a working model for understanding contemporary Tibetan national identity, particularly since the historical links between Tibetan proto-nationalism and nationalism are made clear: "[proto-nationalism] prefigures nationalism in several ways and explains the ease with which Tibetans have stepped into nationalist modernity" (Dreyfus 2002: 39).

Dreyfus continues to suggest that Tibetan nationalism is explicitly religious in its emphasis on Buddhist identity, rather than secular, as all genuine nationalisms are presumed to be by Western literature on the topic. Tibetan forms of nationalism were developed long before Tibet had any contact with the West, and thereby constitute a fundamentally different model which contrasts with "the representation of nationalism as an exclusively modern phenomenon coming from the West" (Dreyfus 1994: 206). Collective memory forms the basis for Tibetan national identity in the pre-modern era, particularly the memory of "Tibet as a non-Buddhist country civilized by Buddhism" (Dreyfus 1994: 208), and its ensuing development by a series of great Buddhist kings. These national memories are expressed in religious 'treasures', which provide a unifying narrative for otherwise disparate groups of people.

Dreyfus' first article concludes with the interesting assertion that 'memory is also an act of forgetfulness' (1994: 215) in reference to the convenience of forgetting undesirable aspects of the national past. He gives the example of the reimagination of Songsten Gampo as a quintessentially *Buddhist* king. In fact, historical records show that although Songsten Gampo is credited with introducing Buddhist ideas to Tibet, he himself was never a Buddhist but rather practised territorial deity worship (Dreyfus 1994: 215). The intimation that a great deal of Tibet's complicated national past has been 'forgotten' in the modern construction of national memory paves the way for a recognition of other forgotten aspects of Tibet's past: recognising ethnic heterogeneity in the

borderlands and the central Tibetan elite's less than favourable approach to such ethnic others might be a next step.[12] In a manner similar to acknowledging that Songsten Gampo was in fact not a Buddhist, recognising the diverse ethnic make-up of Tibetan society would once again lay bare Tibet's identity as "an originally barbarous country civilised by Buddhism" (Dreyfus 2002: 39). Perhaps central Tibetans are in part averse to acknowledging ethnicity in this way because they are constantly struggling to overcome the hint of 'barbarity' in their own self-identity. There is no better way of doing that than to project barbarity on to the 'Others' at their borders, while claiming 'civilisation' for themselves.

## TIBETANISATION PROJECTS

Dreyfus concludes his second article by assessing the emerging dark side of Tibetan Buddhist nationalism. In his understanding, modern Tibet "is a nation-state and the loyalty toward such an entity is a form of modern nationalism, with all the potential dangers this implies" (Dreyfus 2002: 42). Although Dreyfus portrays these dangers as an unpredictable future possibility, their precedent is very clearly outlined in past histories of 'Tibetanisation' as a pre-modern Tibetan state project (cf. Samuel 1993; Goldstein 1998; Huber 1999a). Geoffrey Samuel describes this as a 'missionary orientation', explicitly articulated since at least the seventh century by the religio-political institutions of the Tibetan state to promote Tibetan Buddhist religion, language, and culture in 'tribal' border areas (1993: 148). Goldstein extends this concept to the national, and even imperial, level by suggesting that

> Tibetans considered themselves the agents of their own Buddhist civilising project with regard to the spiritual life of the Mongols and Manchus, including the Manchu emperors of China.... Religious sophistication and greatness, therefore, were at the heart of Tibetans' identity and self-image (1998: 6).

Finally, Toni Huber contributes to the Tibetanisation debate with a rumination on the tribute relationships between elite central Tibetans

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[12] This phenomenon is in no way unique to Tibet; Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) now classic edited volume *The Invention of Tradition*, as well as Trouillot's (1995) ethnohistorical work address the power of memory in constituting national consciousness elsewhere.

and borderland 'tribal' groups in Southeastern Tibet, as enacted through pilgrimage:

> One might be tempted to interpret the entire scenario that took place at Tsari as a kind of exercise in Buddhist subjugation of barbarian border-land peoples and what they represented, or even as a form of Buddhaization or Tibetanization. In my thinking, and that of my inform-ants, the relations between Tibetan and tribal populations...could not be regarded as exercises in subjugation or conversion (1999a: 158).

Nowhere in these statements is a critique of these 'civilising projects' advanced. Instead the authors seem to commend Tibetan Buddhism's efficacy as a 'civilising' agent. This may well reflect the attitudes of their central Tibetan informants, but we are left to wonder what non-dominant, or 'subaltern', to borrow a term from postcolonial studies, views of the 'Tibetanisation' process might look like. This lack of cri-tique stands in stark comparison to the literature on Sanskritisation in South Asia, for example, in which the hegemonic encroachment of structurally similar aspects of Indic culture on erstwhile 'tribal' groups has been clearly problematised from multiple anthropological perspec-tives (cf. Srinivas 1989).[13] In contrast, several key assumptions are made in the Tibetan context: First, that Tibetanisation was/is a positive experience of liberation rather than one of subjugation, and, second, that the process of Tibetanisation is essentially complete, and therefore the concept of 'Tibetan culture' as a unitary juggernaut subsuming trib-al groups in its wake can be substituted for that of ethnicity.

These assumptions are problematic for several reasons. First, although Tibetanisation may have had certain beneficial effects on the populations that experience(d) it, negative or ambivalent consequences must also be appraised. Light can only be shed on such details through historical and/or anthropological work that acknowledges the agency and subjective experiences of the subject populations of such civilising projects.[14] Second, even if several of the populations that experienced

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[13] Ramble makes the link between Sanskritisation and Tibetanisation in the context of 1990s Nepal (1997: 405-409). He uses the term 'Tibetanisation' to describe the con-temporary process by which groups living in Nepal's Himalayan borderland areas emphasise their links to 'high Tibetan culture', a process often fuelled by Western inter-ests in Buddhism and idealised images of 'Tibet'.

[14] Although Huber's work does indeed address the relationship between central Tibetans and borderland 'tribes', his ethnographic informants all belong to the former category. His information on the 'tribal' side of the relationship is almost exclusively provided by early colonial-anthropological accounts of those populations, such as those
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'Tibetanisation' at early stages now would consider themselves intrinsically 'Tibetan', we must recognise 'Tibetanisation' as an ongoing process rather than as a historical *fait accompli*. This shift in perspective opens up the field for a more nuanced anthropological understanding of the process itself and the ethnic complexity of its results, rather than presupposing the accomplished unity of 'Tibetan culture'. Third, rather than viewing Tibetanisation as a uni-directional process from barbarian 'Other' to civilised Tibetan, the multi-directional aspects of ethnic change over time must be acknowledged, just as it is now widely recognised that Tibetan Buddhism has been as much influenced by non-Buddhist shamanic practices as the other way around (cf. Samuel 1993).

Such qualifications have not yet been incorporated into most political or academic discourses on Tibetan nationalism. If we accept Dreyfus' claim that Tibetan proto-nationalism and modern nationalism are historically continuous with each other, it follows that proto-nationalist Tibetanisation projects, complete with the assumptions embedded in the accounts above, must be understood as part of the underlying framework of contemporary Tibetan nationalism. Klieger validates this supposition in his description of the 'inclusive' aspects of refugee Tibetan identity as "a process of 'Tibetanization' whereby outsiders may be incorporated within native categories" (1992: 145). As part of the Western tendency to idealise Tibetan refugees that reached its peak in the late 1980s, Klieger writes, "this high level of inclusiveness is perhaps based on the egalitarian, caste and color-blind ideals of original Buddhism" (1992: 146). Although such Buddhist ideals are unquestionably at the root of Tibetan identity narratives emanating from Dharamsala, there remains little scholarly examination of the potential disjunctures between these religious ideals and the realities of dominant Tibetan attitudes towards ethnic, religious, and cultural 'Others'.

In this respect, Tibetan Buddhist claims of benevolent inclusivity are eerily reminiscent of the 'essentially Hindu' pluralism and tolerance asserted by the Hindu nationalist movement in India (van der Veer 1994: 203).[15] Just as scholars of Hinduism have begun to interrogate the

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by von Fürer-Haimendorf. Such sources cannot be placed on equal methodological footing as the extensive interview-based ethnography which Huber conducted with those on the Tibetan side of the equation.

[15] I am grateful to P. Christiaan Klieger for highlighting the fact that the 14th Dalai Lama has been greatly influenced by Gandhian ideals of egalitarianism, suggesting that the relationship between Tibetan Buddhist ideals of inclusivity as developed in Dharamsala and Hindu pluralism in India is even closer than is immediately obvious.

relationship between ideals of pluralism and the realities of inequality
and violence in India, scholars of Buddhism and Tibetan societies must
inquire in more detail about the consequences of Tibetanisation for
those on the receiving end, both positive and negative, from a perspec-
tive that considers Tibetanisation as an ideological project containing
its own relations of power. I am not suggesting that these aspects of
Tibetan national history are unforgivable, but rather that they must be
deconstructed in a balanced manner akin to what postcolonial studies
has done for other world areas. The rhetoric of victimisation, along with
the genuine suffering that many Tibetans have experienced, has made
it very difficult to unearth such aspects of the Tibetan national past.
Ultimately, however, only through acknowledging these histories can
Tibetans lay claim to a truly modern national identity.

### CONCLUSIONS: INDIGENOUS TIBETAN ONTOLOGIES

In deconstructing Tibetan national histories, evidence for a pre-modern
Tibetan framework for ethnicity may emerge. Or perhaps we should call
this 'proto-ethnicity', since it is contemporaneous with Dreyfus' 'proto-
nationalism'. This would imply acceptance of the general formula that
ethnicity as we know it is an effect of modern nation-states. If we agree
that ethnicity and national identity are linked, and accept Dreyfus'
vision of Tibetan nationalism, then the conceptual space for a relation-
al notion of ethnicity within the rubric of Tibetan national identity will
begin to open. But just as Dreyfus' articulation of Tibetan nationalism
challenges dominant Western models, thereby calling into question the
distinction between 'proto-nationalism' and full-fledged nationalism, a
comprehensive theory of Tibetan ethnicity might challenge existing
anthropological models for ethnicity by broadening the parameters of
the presumed 'nation-state' in which ethnicity takes shape to include
non-geographically bounded entities like 'politico-cultural' Tibet.

   A few recent publications of Tibetan texts in translation have provid-
ed some empirical foundations for reading Tibetan understandings of
'otherness' in different historical periods. E. Gene Smith provides an
English introduction to a fifteenth century Tibetan encyclopedia (*bshad
mdzod*, or 'Treasury of Explanation'), which includes chapters on 'The
Tribal Structure of the World', 'The Geographical Divisions of Tibet'
and 'Classification of the Languages of the World' (2001: 218-24). The

scheme outlined in this text could be reproduced as a series of concentric circles, with 'the four original Tibetan tribes' at the centre, through to the 'tribes that have strayed' and 'the lineages that are still more errant', with the 91 types of 'barbarians' at the outmost periphery. Michael Aris reproduces a similar sort of cosmological outline from an eighteenth century Tibetan text by the well-known Buddhist teacher Jigme Lingpa that describes the inhabitants of India and other 'foreign' lands (1995: 65). Jigme Lingpa's framework was etched on the scapula bone of a sheep or goat, and includes the 'Tibetan regions' in the centre with the '36 barbarian frontier regions' to the far west; 'China', 'Nanchao', and 'Hor' (Mongolia) to the north; and 'India', 'Kashmir', and 'Persia' to the south (Aris 1995: 65). In an eclectic article, Dan Martin casts the late eighteenth century Tibetan lama Nomonhan as an indigenous anthropologist who published his observations of cultural practices in India and Assam as one of the first 'ethnographies' in the Tibetan language (1990: 127). Several other indigenous Tibetan 'ethnographers' are referenced in E. Gene Smith's work, such as the 18th century lama Situ Panchen, who described in detail the borderland groups he encountered on his way from Tibet to Kathmandu.[16]

Taken at face value, these texts do not immediately clarify the status of ethnicity in pre-modern Tibet. However, they do suggest that there is a large body of literature awaiting careful analysis. Clearly, historical texts written by members of the Buddhist elite cannot be taken as normative expressions of lay Tibetan views, but they do give some indication of the categories used for discussing otherness and 'ethnic-like' differentiation at the time they were written. Careful consideration of literature like this, along with the literature on kinship, descent, and territory, could provide the foundations for understanding historically Tibetan ontologies of 'self' and 'otherness'.

In this paper I have suggested that scholars of the Tibetan world must reevaluate current usages of terms like 'ethnicity', 'race', and 'civilisation' in order to develop theoretically consistent, clear terminology to represent and analyse social difference. In particular, I have argued that 'Tibetan' as an ethnic category and 'Tibetan' as a national category must be analytically separated and carefully defined according to the specifics of each empirical situation. Doing this requires us

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[16]   See also Franz-Karl Ehrhard's brief overview of the Sixth Zhwa dmar pa's autobiographical account of his journey to Nepal (1997).

to situate the concept of ethnicity within broader national frameworks, and look beyond the particular 'ethnically Tibetan' groups and historical moments we describe to consider the overarching web of social relations constituting ethnicity in the Tibetan context. These moves pave the way for a more thorough examination of the dynamics of power within the 'Tibetanisation process', wherever and whenever it is occurring.

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