

CHOICES AND CHANGE IN TRIBAL AND BUDDHIST MORAL ECONOMIES

IN GOLOK, A PASTORAL TIBETAN AREA

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ABSTRACT

Culturally mediated resolutions of moral conflicts (or their lack) are windows into the structure of competing sets of moral values. This dissertation considers how Tibetans in a high-altitude grassland in the Golok region of China's Qinghai Province may choose between two sets of moral values – tribal and religious – as they pursue various activities, and how the sum of these individual decisions shapes the co-evolving culture and economy. Research is based on long-term (2000 -2003) participant-observation and interviews eliciting life stories and gossip. As pastoralists in a remote mountainous area historically suffering insecurity from both natural snow disasters that decimate herds, and frequent livestock raids from neighboring groups, the values of tribal solidarity are long standing and still dominate daily life. Buddhist values also have a strong motivational force for most Golok Tibetans, and religious activity is often the main object of discretionary spending.

The analysis draws on recent advances in cognitive anthropology's schema theory, which show that individual variation in the forms and relationships of competing beliefs affects motivation and behavior. Methodologically, I demonstrate that in lieu of the intensive discourse analysis conducted by most schema analysts, attention to context in a grounded and empathetic ethnography can also yield fruitful insights.

Ethnographically, in contrast to most studies of Tibetan culture which have been dominated topically by religion, this dissertation balances the otherworldly with the social, through the many activities and attitudes that show the fundamental value – both practical and meaning making -- of social solidarity.

I conclude with an examination of whether shifts in motivating factors brought by economic transformations such as increasing market integration and diversification of economic activities work to undermine previous standards of moral values. I find that both traditional social solidarity and religious belief, especially when mobilized by lamas, are working to mitigate negative impacts of economic reform. Examples include the continuation of traditional forms of mutual aid and redistribution of resources, recent anti-Muslim boycotts, and lamas' campaigns to encourage Buddhists to abstain from eating meat and slaughtering livestock.