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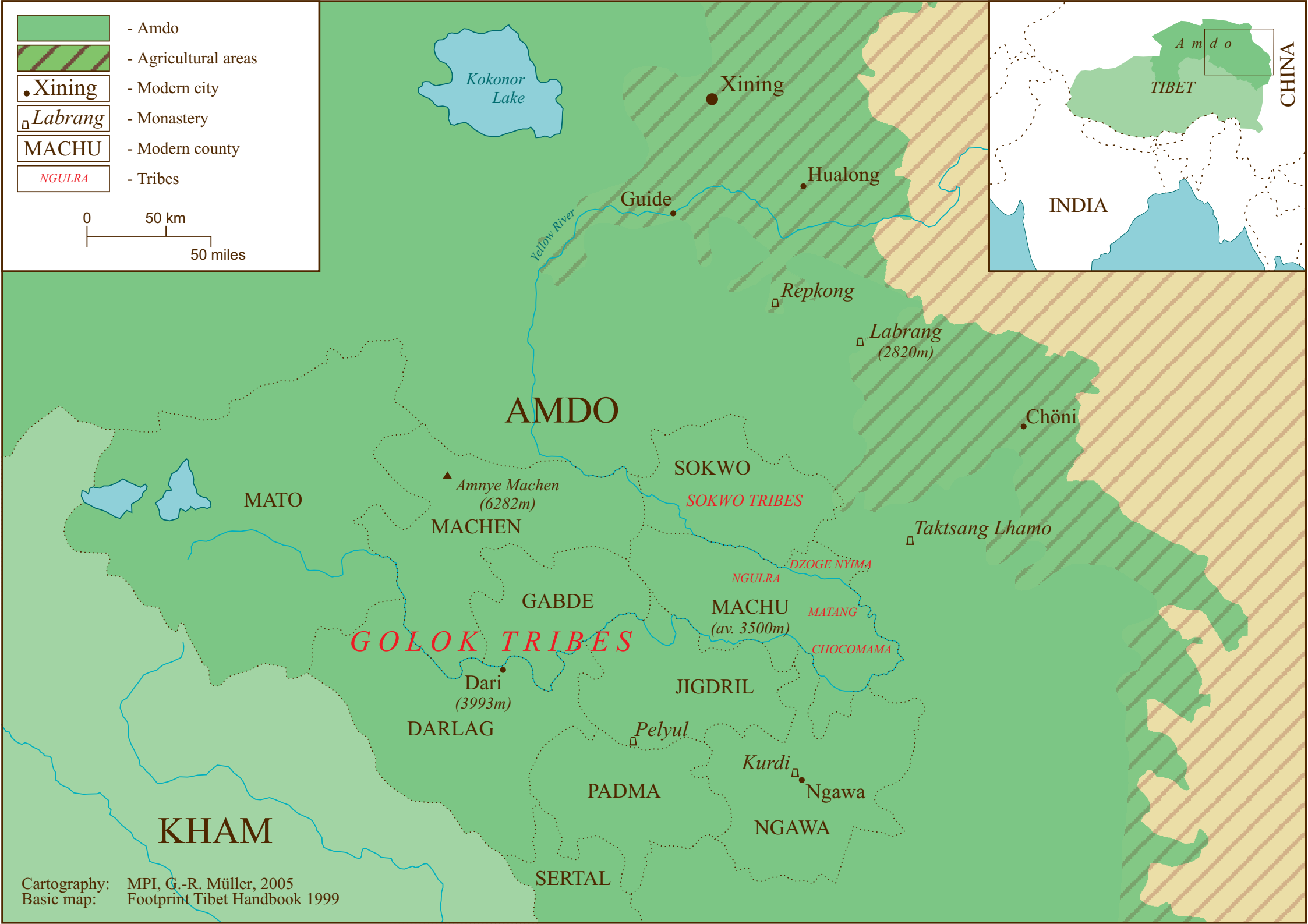
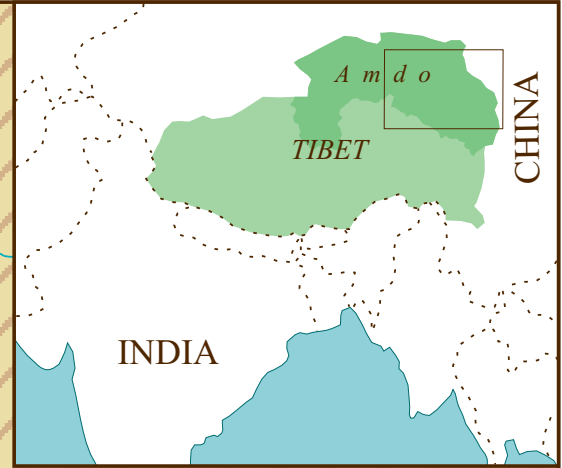
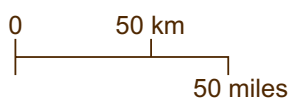
**FERNANDA PIRIE**

**FEUDING,  
MEDIATION AND  
THE  
NEGOTIATION OF  
AUTHORITY  
AMONG THE  
NOMADS OF  
EASTERN TIBET**

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- Amdo
- Agricultural areas
- Xining - Modern city
- Labrang - Monastery
- MACHU - Modern county
- NGULRA - Tribes



Cartography: MPI, G.-R. Müller, 2005  
 Basic map: Footprint Tibet Handbook 1999

# Feuding, Mediation and the Negotiation of Authority among the Nomads of Eastern Tibet<sup>1</sup>

*Fernanda Pirie*<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Before their occupation by China's Maoist forces in 1958, the nomads of Amdo formed segmentary tribal groups, whose relations were characterised by warfare, feuding and elaborate processes of mediation. In the 1980s, following a period of collectivisation, reforms allowed them substantially to re-create their tribal groups under new leadership. Investigating the relationship between these groups and the Chinese state, this paper describes how the nomads resist centralised control by continuing to feud until proper mediation has been conducted, on their terms. Nevertheless, their leaders, concerned with the maintenance of order, turn to government agents in order to complement their own authority. Comparing examples of tribe and state relations from East Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, it is argued that the tribal forms of the Amdo nomads were based on the organising ideas of group loyalty, revenge, defiance towards authority and the reluctant submission to processes of conciliation. These continue to be organising ideas in the contemporary period, giving rise to new dynamics in the relations between tribes and state.

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## Introduction

Accounts by travellers to northeastern Tibet from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries tell of warfare, tribal feuding and violent raids amongst the pastoralists of Amdo (Rockhill 1891; D'Ollone 1912; Teichmann 1922; Rock 1956). Some also describe systems of mediation, during which conflict was settled by tribal chiefs and senior Buddhist monks with the payment of compensation and blood money (Ekvall 1954, 1964). In 1958 the region was incorporated into the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC)<sup>3</sup> and the first two decades of Chinese rule involved the collectivisation of pastoral practices, the break up of local systems of tribal organisation and leadership, the closure of the monasteries and a ban on all religious activities. Although there was a considerable relaxation in the early 1980s, the Chinese government still exercises significant control over the Tibetan peoples of Amdo. It builds roads, establishes markets, taxes, educates and limits their numbers through population control. It restricts religious activities and contact with the outside world, censoring critical political engagement.

Since the 1980s, however, patterns of feuding and mediation have reemerged among the nomadic tribes, which the authorities' system of criminal law cannot completely control. If there is a killing the police still become involved and they imprison, or even execute, offenders but this does not resolve the conflict for the nomads,<sup>4</sup> which has to be settled with the payment of appropriate compensation or blood money. Tribal chiefs and Buddhist *lamas* (*bla ma*)<sup>5</sup> are again being called upon to act as mediators in such cases. Through their practices of feuding and processes of mediation the nomads thus submit themselves to a form of double punishment but also refuse to recognise the legitimacy of the official system of criminal law.

The nomadic group with whom I stayed in Machu, southern Amdo was involved in a boundary dispute with a neighbouring group and soon after I arrived the headman, the *gowa* ('*go ba*'), called upon all the men to attend a meeting with what were described to me as the 'chief *gowa*' in the area. They were going to ask these senior figures to determine the boundary, to try to pre-empt violence between the two groups, they told me. Rather than being chiefs of a larger nomadic group, however, these *gowa* turned out to be the government authorities in the local town. This immediately raised two questions. Why, when the nomads

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<sup>3</sup> This is the date when, according to the local population, the Chinese 'came' to the region.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term, 'nomad' when referring to the pastoralists, because this is the term used by the few English speakers among them. The Tibetan *drokwa* ('*brog pa*') means 'people of the pastures'.

<sup>5</sup> The Amdo language is a variant of Tibetan. I transcribe words according to local pronunciation but add the Wylie (1959) transcription in brackets to indicate the Tibetan spelling.

have reinstated their own forms of mediation, apparently in defiance of the Chinese system, should they turn to the government's officials, not their own mediators, in such a case? And why were they referring to these officials with their indigenous term of *gowa*? Given their resolute refusal to recognise Chinese authority in other cases, surely they would want at least to distinguish their own mediators and leaders from their alien rulers. By using the term *gowa* they seem to be attributing them with the same authority as their own leaders.

The apparent paradox within these attitudes to the settlement of disputes highlights important complexities in the social organisation of the Amdo nomads. My argument is that before their incorporation into the PRC the nomads formed a segmentary tribal system, albeit not one based on a lineage model, and that this is still apparent within the modern administration. Such a system is underpinned by the norms and associated practices of individual aggression and group retaliation. Historically, these socially destructive practices were counterbalanced by norms of reconciliation and restraint, which were sometimes enforced by the coercive power of local leaders, sometimes mediated by the persuasive authority of external mediators or Buddhist monks. It is this interplay of norms, coercive power and persuasive authority, that is finding new forms within the Chinese administration.

In this paper I describe the current practices of the Amdo nomads amongst whom I undertook fieldwork.<sup>6</sup> First, however, I review the history of relations between the pastoral groups and centres of power and authority. The relationship between tribes and states has been one of the classic issues debated amongst anthropologists of the Middle East (Khoury and Kostiner 1990) and, as Tapper (1990: 56) suggests, the nature of that relationship must be sought in a close historical examination of the social and political basis of tribal systems.

### **Amdo: history**

The term 'Amdo' is a fairly recent invention, the region never having had much more than linguistic unity (Yeh 2003: 508; Makley 1999: 94). It is now used by Tibetans to refer to the northeastern part of the Tibetan plateau, an area roughly the size of France. The valleys of the northern and eastern borderlands are home to farmers who have long mingled with the neighbouring Han Chinese and Hui Muslim populations. However, the Amdo heartlands, which extend west into largely uninhabited desert and southwards to the valleys of Kham, is mostly rolling pastureland inhabited by nomadic pastoralists who depend for subsistence on

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<sup>6</sup> I carried out nine months of fieldwork in Amdo between 2003 and 2004. The majority of this time was spent in the Machu area, but I also stayed for brief periods in Hualong, Repkong and Golok. My informants were almost exclusively Tibetans. I, therefore, present a nomad's-eye view and do not engage with the anthropological debates or literature on the nature of the state in China (eg. Pieke 2004).

their large herds of yaks and sheep. Formerly the nomads undertook long journeys in order to trade their animals for barley, tea, domestic and religious goods in the markets, which were usually found at monastic centres. The establishment of roads and towns has now brought market centres into the grasslands but the production and trade of livestock remains the backbone of the pastoralists' economy.

The empire of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan ruler, Songsten Gampo, incorporated the whole of Amdo (Shakabpa 1984: 27) but following its collapse in 842 the population dissolved into smaller units and from the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century the whole region fell under the influence of powerful Mongol leaders, most notably Khubilai Khan. Their domination lasted throughout the Yüan period (Cambridge History of China (CHC), vol 6: Chs 2 & 5). Even after the rise of the Ming dynasty in China in the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Tibetans continued their engagement with the Mongols, until their power was finally eroded in 1724. Tibetan Buddhist leaders, most notably the Sakyapa Phagspa lama in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and other Gelukpa lamas in the 16<sup>th</sup>, were responsible for converting the Mongol's leaders to Buddhism (CHC, vol 6: 460-62; CHC, vol 8: 245) and Altan Khan, in turn, helped to establish the political dominance of the Gelukpa sect in central Tibet in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, under the Fifth Dalai Lama. Although it was Tsongkapa, a monk from Amdo, who had founded the Gelukpa sect in central Tibet in around 1372, the Dalai Lamas never succeeded in establishing political, military or fiscal control over Amdo. The subsequent centuries saw trading and religious links and, occasionally, the presence of Tibetan troops in Amdo (CHC, vol 10: 94-100), but the area was never drawn into the central Tibetan state. Nevertheless, Jamyang Zhepa, a monk from Amdo, who was recognised as an important Buddhist incarnation by the Fifth Dalai Lama returned to found the major monastery of Labrang there in 1709. This monastery soon came to dominate a large area and the Gelukpa sect pushed the Nyingma, Jonangpa and Bon sects to the margins of Amdo.

By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century the Manchu Qing dynasty had become a powerful force in China and, after suppressing a revolt by the Qoshot Mongols in 1724, established Xining as the administrative centre of Qinghai, which roughly corresponded to the Tibetan area of Amdo (CHC, vol 9: 226-27; Petech 1950: 85). Their Amban exercised more of a supervisory than an administrative role, however, and even this was resisted by the Golok tribes to the south (CHC, vol 10: 36-37, 94). As Fairbank summarises it, in Inner Asia, 'Chinese authority was an overlay from above the emperor's subjects,' (CHC, vol 10: 105). The Gelukpa monasteries of Labrang, Repkong, Kurdi and Taktsang Lhamo retained considerable power over the Tibetan populations of the surrounding areas. Robert Ekvall, who lived in Amdo in the 1930s and 40s, states (1939: 68-69) that in some areas the monastery acted as an autocratic ruler

over an entire group of tribes.<sup>7</sup> Typically, this involved appointing headmen to the local tribes. My informants in Labrang agreed that before the Chinese came the monastery controlled ‘everything’. It was the *jösa* (*rgyai sa*) (seat of the king). A number of secular leaders also established spheres of influence, sometimes amounting to small kingdoms. Chöni in the southeast obtained authority over 48 tribes (Ekvall 1939: 6; Carrasco 1959: 156), Ngawa to the south was allied to Kurdi monastery and Sokwo, southwest of Labrang, was originally a tribe of Mongols with their own king, who settled in the region and became thoroughly Tibetanised. At the same time, certain nomadic tribes in the centre and west of the region remained substantially independent of such forms of centralised control. As both Ekvall (1939: 67-70) and Hermanns (1949: 231) describe, some tribes were headed by an elder man, selected for his ability. In others a group of elders exercised authority, while others had hereditary rulers, although their power could be balanced by that of the council of elders. Golok, the largest tribal confederacy, became famed for the ferocity and independence of its people, who were a constant source of fear for the surrounding populations (D’Ollone 1912; Rock 1956).

After the Chinese revolution of 1911 the Hui Muslims, under their leaders Ma Qi and Ma Bufang, came to exercise considerable influence over the northern part of Amdo, largely populated by the agricultural communities who had fallen more closely under Mongol control. My informants in Hualong, an agricultural area near Xining, described the harsh taxes and even harsher rule of the ‘thousand rulers’, local leaders (often Tibetan) appointed by Ma.<sup>8</sup> They pushed south to challenge the authority of the Golok tribal chiefs, but never succeeded in dominating these areas (Clarke 1989). These tribes, along with the areas under the control of Labrang, Repkong and other major rulers, remained largely independent of their influence. Carrasco (1959: 221), drawing on a large number of early sources from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, states that:

“These remote pastoral areas have been more loosely integrated into the political structures of the various states than the agricultural centres. (...) Feuding and arbitration, that is, direct action of the people concerned, are instead the main legal mechanisms. When trade routes go through these areas, the danger of robbers is ever present. The authority of Tibetan or Chinese state officials is at times enforced, usually through local chiefs, but at other times these areas relapse into complete independence. These areas form, then, Tibet’s ‘land of insolence’, regions always ready to fight for independence, which only occasionally are brought under the authority of the state.”

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<sup>7</sup> It is clear from his other writings (in particular 1981) that he was familiar with at least Taktsang Lhamo and Labrang. The later writings are all based on this earlier research. Some are fictional, but the majority are anthropological.

<sup>8</sup> This appears to be an adoption of the Mongols’ policy of classifying the Tibetan tribes into groups of ten, one hundred and one thousand (Clarke 1989). The origins of the Hui are not at all clear and the nature of their ethnic identity is also a complex one (Gladney 1991).

Immediately before the Chinese occupation in 1958, therefore, a number of political configurations had emerged in Amdo. To the north, the Ma clan exercised an oppressive rule over the Tibetan populations (Hunsberger 1978). Further south, successive Mongol, Manchu and Muslim rulers had allowed Labrang, Repkong and other powerful monasteries and kings to exercise relative autonomy, appointing headmen to the tribes in their areas. On the edges of these areas were small tribes with independent hereditary rulers, a number of whom achieved the status of kings, while the Golok tribes formed a powerful confederacy. The impression given by Ekvall's fictional account (1981), although it may over-dramatise the political manoeuvring, is that the Sokwo king and other tribal leaders were powerful players, able to mobilise the economic and military resources of large groups and Samuel (1993: 96) suggests that power in the region was exercised through a series of alliances and overlapping spheres of military power, religious and political influence.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Labrang and Golok*

My primary fieldwork was conducted in the modern administrative county of Machu, which consists of eight tribes, of which two, Ngulra and Dzoge Nyima, were formerly under Labrang's influence and others beyond it. Further data is also drawn from Golok. Despite the basic similarity in tribal organisation in these areas there were historically important differences between the authority exercised by Labrang and that of the Golok chiefs.

Ekvall does not specify the exact way in which the monasteries' power was exercised over the local tribes, but he states that taxes were not levied (1939: 70) and in numerous other writings he refers to the monks being called upon to settle disputes (1952, 1954, 1964, 1968).<sup>10</sup> My own informants confirmed that headmen, *gowa* were appointed by Labrang monastery to all the *dewa* (*sde ba*), the tribes of the surrounding area, into which the nomads were organised. They were monks, who held office for a term of three years, rotating between the different *dewa* and arrived with a retinue of servants, including one monk whose duty it was to perform religious services. The *gowa*, himself, approved the appointment of the headmen of smaller groups and was primarily responsible for settling the 'problems' in the area. Intractable conflict, which the respective *gowa* were not able to solve themselves, was

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<sup>9</sup> Labrang, the largest monastery in Amdo, certainly built up a series of alliances: with the king of Sokwo, who had a seat in Labrang; with the Ngawa chiefs and also with the Golok tribes, through the marriage of a sister of Khongtang, one of its senior reincarnate *lamas*. Conversely, the family of Jamyang Zhepa's incarnation, recognised in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was already powerful in Kham and were able to increase their own influence with the neighbouring Chinese and Muslim forces through this connection.

<sup>10</sup> Rock (1956: 34, 38-39) also refers to the administrative control exercised by Labrang and its role in conflict resolution.



referred to the monastery,<sup>11</sup> but in serious cases Jamyang Zhepa (in successive incarnations) or another senior *lama* would act as mediator. Informants from Labrang said that these *lamas* were also called in by tribes outside the area in which the monastery appointed *gowa* and gave the impression that Labrang regarded its religious and judicial jurisdiction as extending throughout Amdo. The other major monasteries, such as Repkong, continued to exercise influence in their own areas, however, and the Golok tribes are and were more directly affiliated with the Nyingma monastery of Pelyul, turning to these *lamas* for mediation, instead.

The Golok tribes formed what could be called a confederacy, and kept themselves substantially independent of external influence (Horlemann 2002: 245-7). Lineage ideas are prevalent here (Levine nd., Gelek 1998) and my own informants told me how the Golok tribes were originally ruled by three brothers, descendants of the mythical King Gesar,<sup>12</sup> who founded the three overarching tribes of the region. A further sub-division, between the Khang-gan and Khang-sar sub-tribes of the A-chung tribe in Jigdril, for example, was traced, by another informant, to different brothers within the ruling family seven generations previously. Before 1958 there were, therefore, powerful hereditary ruling families in the region and their representatives still express a sense of pride in their origins. There is also a history of fighting between the tribal groups in Golok. One notorious feud raged for many years between the Khang-gan and Khang-sar tribes in Jigdril, having its origins before 1958. Violence re-emerged in the 1980s and was only settled by the intervention of Khongtrang *lama*, who was called upon because of his family connection. Primary loyalty appears, therefore, to have been with the smaller tribal group. Nevertheless, there is also a sense of some unity amongst the Golok tribes, who still firmly refer to themselves as *Golokwa*.

Within both Golok's and Labrang's spheres of influence, therefore, the nomads were divided into tribes, but ruled by hereditary families and monastic appointees, respectively. The Golok tribes formed a powerful confederacy, with a history of resistance to control by Mongolian, Chinese and central Tibetan forces, while the Labrang tribes were only unified through their allegiance to the monastery. Nevertheless, the tribal rulers appear to have carried out similar functions, determining pastoral movements and settling conflict, and in both cases the *lamas* of the relevant monasteries were called upon to mediate serious feuds.

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<sup>11</sup> There was a small prison here but solutions and punishments normally took the form of the payment of blood money, fines or expulsion from the tribe.

<sup>12</sup> Gesar was a war-like leader, famed for his support of Buddhism, and the epic of his life is strong in Amdo, particularly so in Golok (Samuel 1994).

## The Chinese State

These administrative and religious systems were overthrown by the arrival of the Chinese in the late 1950s. The monasteries were spared the wholesale destruction that was wrought in central Tibet, but they were all closed and the monks were either imprisoned or sent to work elsewhere, often being forced to take wives. Secular leaders lost all their authority as the nomads were reorganised into groups for collective herding, all the animals being taken into state ownership.<sup>13</sup> Horlemann (2002) and Manderscheid (2002), outlining the official policies on social and economic development, describe a succession of subsequent changes: collectivisation, in the 1960s, gave way to a greater orientation towards the market economy, in the late 1970s, and was effectively reversed by re-privatisation, in the early 1980s, under the policy of the ‘household responsibility system’ (see also Banks 2001). This policy was introduced to try to promote economic development, which had singularly failed to occur under the collective system (Goldstein 1994: 98-99). The animals were returned to the private ownership of nomad families, being distributed according to family size, and along with this went infrastructure developments and land reforms in the 1990s. The redistribution of livestock has done much to balance out what were previously great disparities in wealth in Machu, where some families, without livestock, worked as servants for the rich.<sup>14</sup> Initially, at least, every family had enough animals for subsistence, although imbalances are now reappearing. After a few years all restrictions on the sale and disposal of animals were removed and the nomads became almost fully autonomous again in their pastoral activities. In Machu the nomads told me that they have largely regrouped themselves into the *dewa* that had existed before 1958. The monasteries were also allowed to re-open and among those released from gaol was Khongtang *lama*, second in seniority only to Jamyang Zhepa.<sup>15</sup> The latter had maintained friendly relations with the Chinese and taken a Chinese wife, but remains the most senior and revered Gelukpa *lama* in Amdo.

Significant material changes introduced by the government have been the establishment of new towns and the construction of a network of roads, a programme which has received new impetus with Jiang Zemin’s policy of ‘Develop the West’ in 1999. These have resulted in major material improvements in nomadic life, as they bring trading points and markets for food and household goods within easy reach of most families. Most nomadic movements can

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<sup>13</sup> Makley (2005: 46-49) describes the campaigns that affected the Tibetans during this period and the ‘socialist education’ sessions in which they had to participate.

<sup>14</sup> This form of property redistribution, therefore, differs markedly from the postsocialist land privatisation of Eastern Europe in which land was to be returned to the former owners (Verdery 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Labrang, formerly the home of 3,500 monks, only saw 500 return, although that figure has now increased to around 2,000.

now be conducted by truck, which has significantly eased this labourious process. Schools, health care, post offices and telephones are readily available in the towns and the headman of the group I stayed with described his plans to improve the educational possibilities for the children by asking the local authorities for assistance with accommodation in town. Many educated nomads are able to get salaried employment there, within government offices and the police force.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, many of the local government officials are now Tibetans, although the higher level regional administrators are still predominantly Han Chinese.

The authorities still exercise strict control in many areas of nomad life, however. As well as levying animal taxes, they oblige the nomads to vaccinate their animals, they enforce a population control policy, requiring women to undergo sterilisation after their third child and, most controversially, they are implementing a policy of fencing the pastureland, which is much resented by the nomads who complain that they can no longer 'go anywhere' with their animals. Boundaries mean possession of land and scope for disputes between neighbouring groups. This policy is part of the official regulation of pastoral practices, designed to promote ecological sustainability through private land ownership (Goldstein 1996: 12 and cf. Sneath 2000: 130-31 on Inner Mongolia), although the view of educated informants in Machu is that it is part of the government's attempts to pin down and control the mobile and elusive nomads. There has also been some reorganisation of nomadic groups as families were moved around during the collective period. A defunct horse-breeding station immediately to the south of Ngulra, for example, has evolved into a new *dewa* of nomadic families, named Matang, who have come into conflict over pastureland with Ngulra, as described in the introduction to this paper.<sup>17</sup>

The new boundaries and fencing policies have not, therefore, allowed the nomads to revert fully to their formerly flexible land tenure arrangements. Yeh (2003) argues that there has been a significant increase in conflict amongst the Amdo nomads since the area's incorporation into the PRC, which can be traced to these territorial policies. They contradict old forms of socio-territorial identity, she says, precipitating boundary conflicts and giving rise to new forms of domination and resistance. She also highlights a number of apparent contradictions in the nomads' social practices: their conduct of feuds appears to run counter to their interests in creating a pan-Tibetan identity; they respect the Buddhist *lamas* as high authorities, yet disregard the most basic religious norms when they pursue their conflicts.

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<sup>16</sup> Such Tibetans still firmly refer to themselves as *drokwa* (nomads), as long as they still have a family tent in the pastureland, while those in the grasslands still talk as if all government officers were part of an entirely alien organisation. The positions of these Tibetans is, therefore, complex and raises issues for future research.

<sup>17</sup> It is in the large urban centres, mostly on the northeastern fringes of Amdo, that new economic developments have led to the most radical changes for the Tibetans, who often find themselves competing for education and jobs with the dominant Hui and Han populations. This leads to tensions and raises identity issues (Fischer 2004).

Moreover, their attitudes to the government authorities are paradoxical: the nomads complain about the authorities' lack of intervention in conflict resolution but resent their fencing policies and prefer the authority of their Buddhist leaders.

My own argument is that the violence Yeh refers to is largely a continuation of former practices, rather than a response to new territorial arrangements, although the latter have changed the nature of such violence in certain important ways. Moreover, the paradoxes she highlights can largely be explained by reference to the nature of the nomads' tribal organisation and the history of their relations with centres of power and authority.

### **Tribes and States**

The use of the term 'tribe' has, itself, been much contested, with debates over the centrality, or not, of elements such as lineage ideology, mode of production, ethnic and linguistic unity and political autonomy (Khoury and Kostiner 1990, Tapper 1983). It is generally agreed that no precise definition is useful and Tapper (1990: 68) suggests that both tribe and state are best thought of as two opposed models of thought or social organisation: 'tribe, I suggest, is rather a state of mind, a construction of reality, a model for organisation and action' (ibid.: 56). I suggest, following these authors, that the Amdo nomads formed tribes in the sense of distinct groups, *dewa*, with relatively egalitarian relations within them and leaders who are more like chiefs than heads of a state. However, it is their forms of segmentary opposition, which are ideas as much as structural relations, that distinguish them most clearly from the organisation of the state. The papers in Khoury and Kostiner's (1990) volume describe a constant engagement between tribes and states in the Middle East. As Tapper says (1990: 58-67), despite the inherent opposition between the two systems, 'tribes and states have created and maintained each other in a single system, though one of inherent instability.'

The most comprehensive accounts of the nomadic groups in Amdo before the Chinese occupation, given by Ekvall (1939, 1952, 1954, 1964, 1968, 1981) and Hermanns (1949, 1959), indicate a large degree of congruence between the patterns of feuding and mediation they found in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and those evident today. Now, as previously, the nomads maintain an idea of loyalty to the *dewa* and the smaller group within it, they pursue norms of aggression and revenge and submit to the authority of leaders and mediators on a very selective basis. It is these features that distinguish their social organisation from the governmental structures the modern state is trying to impose. Moreover, I would suggest that it is their underlying ideas about tribal organisation that determine the ways in which they are

interacting with those government authorities, continuing their practices of feuding, on the one hand, but complaining that the authorities should intervene to restore peace, on the other.

### **Contemporary Tribal Organisation**

The eight *dewa* in Machu now consist of several hundred tents each. These include both the tribes formerly governed by Labrang and those, further south, which had hereditary leaders. The *dewa* are divided into encampments or villages, known as *repkor* (*ru skor*) (also noted by Ekvall 1968: 28) which now consist of around 40 tents, roughly 200 people.<sup>18</sup> Because of the richness of the pastures most tents of one village camp together, only moving three times a year, with journeys that took less than two days, even in the days before motor transport. Unity could, therefore, be maintained through physical proximity. By the same token tribes, although covering a much larger geographical area, tend to have relatively clear boundaries. Relations between individual tents are relatively egalitarian. In the past there were significant distinctions between rich and poor (servant) families but despite the presence of hereditary rulers there was never an entrenched class structure. Informants from both Machu and Golok stressed that if the son of the ruling family was incompetent he would be passed over for leadership.<sup>19</sup> Each *repkor* in Machu is now under the charge of one or more headmen, the *gowa*, who are selected by the people. They told me that their duties are to coordinate pastoral movements, allocate summer grazing land, negotiate with the local authorities, organise ritual events, resolve local disputes and take part in the meetings of the *dewa gowa*. There are around 40 *repkor* in the *dewa* of Ngulra (*ngul rwa*) in which I primarily stayed, and it is the meeting of all their headmen that now takes charge of affairs in the *dewa*, in place of the *gowa* formerly appointed by Labrang. Their meetings are held several times a year as and when needed, for example to coordinate arrangements for a *lama*'s visit, but also to resolve 'the problems of stealing, fighting and killing.'

The concept of lineage does not even nominally define the *dewa*. The tents that form a *repkor*, although many are, in fact, kin are rather united on the basis of sharing the same territory and combining their pastoral movements under one *gowa*. The territorial spirits also provide a sense of unity within the *dewa*. All the villages come together to venerate one powerful territorial deity, who offers protection to the whole tribe from a shrine on the top of the largest mountain in the area.

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<sup>18</sup> Formerly they were said to have been smaller and Gelek (1998) reports five to ten tents being the norm in Serthar in southern Golok.

<sup>19</sup> This is also noted by Ekvall (1939: 67-70) and Hermanns (1949: 231).

Nancy Levine (nd.) suggests that the way in which the Golok nomads understand their social structures resembles the models of segmentary lineage systems found among the pastoral populations of the Middle East. Whilst many parallels can be drawn between the two, I also contend that there is a fundamental difference between the lineage ideology prevalent in the Middle East and East Africa<sup>20</sup> and the segmentary structures of the Amdo nomads, which are rooted more in territorial and political unity than in a descent ideology. This has certain implications for the exercise of leadership and maintenance of group loyalty. Hermanns (1959: 301) describes the Amdo nomads' tribes as having common ancestors. Ekvall (1968: 28-29) also describes the nomads as being divided into *tsowa* (*tsho ba*) or *shokwa* (*phyogs ba*), in which the people were, 'presumably related to a common ancestor.' However, the *tsowa* was, 'somewhat like a clan in the process of decay,' (ibid.) and these remnants of lineages were already dispersed between different tribes. I found that the notion of *tsowa* is still common in Golok, where it refers to the groups formerly headed by one of the ruling families, but the ideas of lineage and descent do not form the basis of tribal affiliation among the ordinary people. Smaller groups often changed their allegiance from one tribe to another or moved for ecological reasons. One powerful *tsowa* was described to me as having been 'like a tiger's spots', incorporating different groups from all over the place. Informants in Machu referred to *tsowa* in the context of the monasteries' notional authority<sup>21</sup> but they explained them as being ancient groups, no longer of any practical significance. They told me that a person's *rü* (*rus*, literally 'bone') name indicated one's ancestors' place of origin and, theoretically, one's wider kin relations, but these are now widely scattered. The term *dewa*, which is found much more commonly, is simply a general Tibetan word meaning section or group within society.<sup>22</sup>

The notion of group loyalty is, nevertheless, important and the tribes are 'segmentary', combining and dividing in cases of violence between them. When there is conflict between two villages all the men of each must combine to take revenge and it is the same in the case of fighting between *dewa*. The straying of animals onto a neighbouring village's land is also seen as a likely and legitimate cause of anger and when there is a serious encroachment by members of one *dewa* onto the land of another the whole tribe 'has' to fight. There is a long-running dispute over some pasture land between Ngulra and the neighbouring Sokwo, for

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<sup>20</sup> This ideology is widespread (Khoury and Kostiner 1990: 5). The classic accounts of the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940) and the Berbers (Gellner 1969) have given rise to heated debates about the relevance of such a model to actual social practices (of which Kraus 1998 and Schlee 2002: 260-62 give excellent reviews).

<sup>21</sup> Each major monastery or king had its nominal tribes: Labrang's *shokwa jet* (*phyogs ba brgyad*) (eight), Repkong's *shokwa chig nyi* (*phyogs ba bcu gnyis*) (twelve), Kurdi's *wa dra jet* (*ba khra brgyad*) (eight), Kumbum's *tsowa truk* (*tsho ba drug*) (six) and Sokwo's *da chuk chig* (*mda' bcu gcig*) (eleven).

<sup>22</sup> The richness of the grasslands, which allows villages to camp and move together, as I describe in the next section, could provide one reason for this emphasis on territory rather than lineage identity.

example, and the *gowa* periodically send round messages asking for one man from each tent to join the battle. This had last happened in the late 1990s when at least 18 nomads were killed in the space of 18 months (Shinjilt forthcoming). As Ekvall (1968: 79) puts it, in such cases, the individual turns the power of initiative over to the whole group and the identity of the enemy merges into that of the whole community. This is at the heart of the basic principle of segmentation (Dresch 1986, 1988).<sup>23</sup>

### *Violence*

The nomads talk frequently and readily about both actual and potential violence and the men display considerable machismo in their daily lives: most carry knives and the lead weighted ropes that they use to round up the animals are also potentially lethal weapons. They talk as if their neighbours are always just about to attack or steal from them and everyone could tell me stories of fighting and killings that had occurred within their families or villages within the last few years. One fight, for example, had recently occurred between two men, one from Ngulra and one from the neighbouring *dewa* of Chocomama. The Chocomama man had been killed and men from his *dewa* came almost immediately to take revenge on two men of the killer's *repkor*. The *gowa* told me that they had come right into the encampment to attack the people and this had made the men of Ngulra 'angry' and determined, as a body, to retaliate. They explained that they 'have' to get angry if a member of their family has been killed and take revenge on a member of the murderer's family. Anger is always a prelude to fighting, more a performative than an emotional term. In the event of a serious theft of livestock it is also expected that the men of the victim's tent will get angry. Although they may be restrained from initiating a fight, if they happen to meet a member of the thief's family, they would 'have' to get angry and fight him.

On the other hand, violence is not readily apparent on a daily basis within the village and they strongly disapprove of serious internal fights, those that involve the use of weapons or result in injuries that draw blood. A murder within the village would lead to the permanent expulsion of the killer's family and very rarely happens, they told me. While I was in Ngulra, some young men were caught stealing yaks from other tents within the village. People expressed outrage at their insubordination. They were caught and severely beaten by the *gowa* and elder male relatives. The *gowa* also called a village meeting to make new rules. It was

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<sup>23</sup> Gellner (1988) gives a convincing functional explanation for the development of segmentary tribes and patterns of aggression and retaliation among groups of pastoralists, whose property is mobile and, hence, prone to theft. The maintenance of their way of life is only possible if livestock can be protected and the way they do this is by combining into groups and displaying the willingness and ability to avenge theft or violence with counter violence. Such a system requires group loyalty, which is generally based on kinship, or fictive kinship, in the Middle East. The mobility and insecurity of property are similar in Amdo.

agreed that such instances would always merit beatings. Moreover, if the theft was from a neighbouring village, the families would have to pay back the livestock twice over. This was because fighting within the village ‘looked very bad’ to others and they needed to maintain good relations with their neighbours, they explained. Violence is, therefore, subject to strict normative control, only justified as retaliation. It is also apparent that the local *gowa*, along with the village meeting, has considerable power to enforce norms of peaceful behaviour within his immediate group.

Hermanns (1959: 161) suggests that raiding parties were often undertaken as a display of courage by the young nomads. However, I never encountered such sentiments on the part of the Ngulra nomads, nor does Ekvall describe anything similar. Unprovoked violence or theft, even against more distant groups, is condemned. The prevailing norm is restraint from unprovoked aggression, because of the fear of escalating violence between the *dewa*. Even in this context it is only revenge that justifies violence.

### *Mediation*

When a conflict occurs within one *dewa* or two neighbouring villages who normally maintain good relations, procedures for resolving it are relatively informal. Mediation is carried out by the *gowa* and there is considerable social pressure on the disputants to agree to a settlement. When 30 sheep were stolen from the tent in which I stayed, for example, the elder son, Jamku, went, with some friends, to identify the thief (on the basis of divination clues given by a monk). When they found him Jamku declared his intention to fight immediately, but his friends restrained him and on their return to the tent members of his family and relatives persuaded him to let the *gowa* intervene and arrange compensation payment. The whole matter was settled in this way over the course of a few weeks. Ekvall (1968: 76-79) emphasises the social pressure that is brought to bear in such cases, the ‘community consensus’ in favour of agreement and against disruption. Minor cases might involve, ‘no more than two or three respected neighbours getting together with little fuss and going about the business of mediating’ (ibid.: 79).

Although social pressure might be applied to restrain violence, however, once retaliatory killings have begun, a feud can only be resolved through more elaborate procedures of mediation. Injuries and death must always be compensated for by the payment of the value of the damage or life, *mnyö rtong* (*mi stong*). Thefts are resolved by the return of the animals, or equivalent, together with an additional apology payment, *na shakh* (*mna’ bshag*). Acceptance of this, like the *mnyö rtong*, indicates an agreement by the victim not to fight over the matter. Some years ago, some animals had strayed from the *repkor* I stayed in onto the pastures of the



neighbouring village and when one of the boys went to fetch them he was badly beaten by the neighbours. The result was a fight between men of the two villages, during which one man was killed by the boy's elder brother. Revenge killings would almost certainly have been carried out had the *gowa* of the *dewa* not intervened collectively to secure a truce. They decided that the killer's family should pay *mnyö rtong*, and should also be expelled from the area for three years, to remove them from contact with their neighbours. The *mnyö rtong* amounted to more than the family's entire wealth, but the whole *repkor* combined to raise the money. Once it was paid good relations were restored between the villages and the family has now returned from exile without any lingering animosity.

In the event of conflict between persons or groups from different *dewas*, violence can quickly involve the entire tribe and it is always much more difficult to resolve. Such conflict may easily result from a theft or drunken fight between men from the two different areas, which can potentially escalate to involve the whole *dewa*. The process of mediation, in such cases, follows a set pattern and closely mirrors the accounts given by Ekvall (1954, 1964, 1968). Outsiders, such as monks, initially intervene to establish a temporary truce so that the parties can talk. Then it is the task of the *zowa* (*gzu ba*) or *zobshad* (*gzu bshad*) to carry out the mediation. These are likely to be the *gowa* from neighbouring *dewa* or senior monks from a local monastery. A meeting is set up in a neutral place, now often the local town, with different groups in different rooms and the mediators acting as go-betweens. Their task, they told me (and this is confirmed by Ekvall 1964) is not to determine the facts or apportion blame. In minor cases where the facts are not agreed the *gowa* will take the disputants to the monastery to swear an oath, which will entail divine sanctions for a perjurer. However, by the time it gets to the larger settlement meetings, 'people do not lie,' one *gowa* told me, 'they are too proud.' The principle aim of the *zowa* is to determine the appropriate level and nature of compensation. *Mnyö rtong* is calculated after the deaths of each side have been reckoned and set off against each other and depends on the identity of the victims and the nature of the killings. It may also involve apologies, other payments and offerings of religious books. In the case of the Ngulra-Chocomama fight, for example, Ngulra would not accept the normal *mnyö rtong*, because men had been killed within their own encampment, but the case was settled by the intervention of a senior *lama*, who ordered a small, but symbolic, extra payment by way of apology. The mediators may also establish where boundaries should run, deciding on a just division of pastures depending on the local history of land use. Crucially, the mediators have to convince the parties that the proposed compensation takes into account all these relevant factors. Ekvall describes the 'argument, cajoling and implied threats the mediators bring to bear' (1968: 78). He often refers to the oratorical skills of a good mediator and my informants

often referred to the *gowa* with ‘good speech,’ as those who could easily resolve such problems.

Mediation is seen as a difficult and not always successful undertaking, however. In problematic cases, today as previously, the *lamas* are regularly appealed to. The most senior *lamas* at Labrang, Jamyang Zhepa and Khongtang (until his death in 2000), were very active since the early 1980s, travelling throughout Amdo to settle major disputes. Ekvall (1968: 79) describes how the power of such external mediators is based on their status as chiefs, their (reputed) skills of oratory and, in the ultimate case, their charismatic authority as reincarnate *lamas*. Similarly, they are now seen as able to resolve conflict that is beyond the capabilities of local mediators. The nomads would always tell the truth in front to such figures, they told me, *trang kö, den kö (drang ga, bden ga)* and the *lamas* suggest just solutions, *jömdri (rgya ‘bras)*, taking into account the history of the case. This was a very important concept and often attributed to the *lamas’* wisdom and knowledge of religious texts, history and precedent. However, the nomads always made the point to me that the *lamas* were successful, because everyone ‘believes in’ and ‘has faith in’ them, *yid ches yod, dad pa yod*. They are seen as capable of persuading reluctant and obstinate parties by appealing to their own religious authority. ‘If you believe in me, if you are my students, listen to what I say’ is a decisive phrase.

The role of religious leaders as mediators in tribal feuds is familiar from the Middle East, where the power of Islamic ‘saints’ and other religious leaders as forces for peace within tribal societies has been extensively discussed (Ibn Khaldun 1958, Gellner 1969). The leopard-skin chief among the Nuer of the Sudan is another well known example (Evans-Pritchard 1940). As Caton summarises it (1990: 95), the role of the saints is a kind of working compromise between the potential anarchy of tribal violence and the encroaching tyranny of the state. The saints’ authority is legitimated by their descent, their literacy, their erudition, their piety and, above all, their peaceful demeanour. It is a moral counterpoint to the tribal *shaykh*, whose authority is legitimated by socially aggressive behaviour enjoined by the honour code. The saint and his descendants are thus welcomed into the tribal fold in their capacity as peacekeepers.

In the same way, the *lamas* fulfill the function of peace-keepers, welcomed for their ability to persuade the angry nomads to resolve their feuds by accepting compensation, acting as a counterpoint to the *gowa* who are, themselves, required to support the norms of retaliation. The position of senior Buddhist *lamas*, as incarnations of previous monks who achieved

great status, makes them particularly suited to fulfill this function.<sup>24</sup> This status gives them a charismatic authority<sup>25</sup> distinct from that of ordinary monks and, in particular, gives them special powers of subjugation. Buddhism gained acceptance in the region by assimilating a large number of indigenous rites and deities (Tucci 1980: 163-66, 206-08, Kapstein 2000: 527) and the metaphor often used is one of subjugation, with respect to the local spirits, who were converted into protectors of the religion. These have often become important territorial deities, usually depicted in religious paintings in bellicose poses on horses, offering protection and inspiration to the war-like nomads.<sup>26</sup> The veneration of the deities associated with each *dewa* or *repkor* involves elaborate ceremonies which bring the whole tribe together (the men, that is) in a cacophony of loud imprecations to the deities and wild celebrations, important events in the creation of a sense of group unity (Karko 2001: 91-93). However, the central religious component of the ceremony is ideally conducted by a reincarnate *lama*. Thanks to their advancement along the Buddhist spiritual path, these *lamas* have superior powers to deal directly with such powerful and dangerous forces.<sup>27</sup> They are able to tame pernicious demons as well as the undisciplined thoughts and emotions of their students (Samuel 1994: 67) and as well as helping souls in the after-life.<sup>28</sup> The *lamas* thus embody a potency, which enables them to overcome the nomads' norms of violent retribution.

It is also significant that in the numerous conversations I had about conflict and the role of the *lamas* in Amdo, none of the nomads ever referred to Buddhist morality or, indeed, said that the *lamas* had argued that to be involved in a fight was morally reprehensible for the individual. Khongtang's assistant referred to his great 'knowledge' of Buddhism and its texts, but the accounts of the solutions he engineered involved *mnyö rtong*, other apology payments and division of land. The *lamas* settle the nomads' disputes according to their norms of retribution and revenge, rather than by appealing to any Buddhist moral principles.

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<sup>24</sup> The principle of reincarnation was, in fact, developed in around the 13<sup>th</sup> century and has been described as a political device developed to solve the problem of leadership succession within the increasingly powerful sects of celibate monks (Samuel 1993: 493-98, Dreyfus 1995: 125-30).

<sup>25</sup> Their power is 'charismatic' in the sense of having a spiritual element although, in Weberian terms, it has been routinised to the extent that *lamas* are recognised when very young. Nevertheless, people do attribute greater powers to particularly learned individuals. The emphasis on their 'good speech' echoes the discursive element of charisma discussed by Csordas (1997).

<sup>26</sup> Repkong *gonpa* contains a particularly fine collection of such paintings, including the powerful deity *Machen Pomra* (*rma chen spom ra*), associated with the sacred mountain, Amnye Machen, within the territory of the Golok nomads (Rock 1956: Pl. LVIII & LX).

<sup>27</sup> The reincarnate *lamas* are sacred even if they reject a monastic way of life, as the current Jamyang Zhepa has done.

<sup>28</sup> The Gelukpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism is the least 'shamanic' and most 'clerical' of the sects, to use Samuel's terminology, and its strong presence in Amdo, where it supplanted the more shamanic Bon, Nyingma and Jonangpa traditions, can only be explained as a matter of political patronage. Yet even the Gelukpa tradition incorporates narratives and ideas of subjugation and triumph over evil forces (Mills 2003: 380-81).

In Golok the monks were, and are, also called upon to act as mediators in serious disputes, and the people told me proudly of the status and powers of the senior, mostly Nyingma, *lamas* of the area. However, they were never described in terms of such reverence as the Labrang *lamas* were by my Machu informants and nor do they occupy such an exalted position, in this regard, compared to the lay mediators. When asking about *zowa* here I was generally referred to the *xhombo* (*dbon po*), men from the ruling families of the local tribes, who were particularly notable for their skills in oratory and diplomacy. The *xhombo*, themselves, took great pride in describing their achievements and oratorical skills to me, which include the use of *dam xhwe* (*gtam dpe*), riddles, which, they claimed, could baffle their counterparts elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> The relative importance of the *lamas* and *xhombo*s, I would suggest, reflects the historical balance of power between monastery and tribes in the two areas.

### **Norms, Power and Authority**

The territorial basis of group loyalty in Amdo means that families can move between groups with relative ease. Ekvall describes this as a way of dealing with or avoiding the consequences of conflict, but the family I stayed with had migrated years ago from Golok simply to seek better pastures, they told me. It was even said that the entire *dewa* of Ngulra, like that of Dzoge Nyima, to the north, had been created out of families expelled from their own tribes by Jamyang Zhepa's previous reincarnations during the settlement of conflicts. Without a sense of kin or historical relations to unite these groups, the *gowa* sometimes have to work hard to ensure tribal loyalty, particularly when there are countervailing kinship ties. In the case of Ngulra's dispute with Sokwo, for example, one of the Ngulra *gowa* complained to me that the village closest to the border was refusing to join in the hostilities on the grounds that it has many kin relations in Sokwo. This, he described, as an ongoing problem for Ngulra. 'We should all be one,' he complained to me, *tsang mö chö dög chig re* (*tshang mai skyid sdug gcig red*), literally, 'be happy and sad together'. Both Gellner (1988: 145-46) and Schlee (2002: 263-64) refer to the treachery commonly practised among tribal groups.<sup>30</sup> In Amdo the potential for mobility as well as the destructive norms of aggression and feuding create a sense of considerable instability, which the *gowa* have constantly to counteract. This is one of their most onerous responsibilities as leaders.

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<sup>29</sup> They had done so in a recent dispute with mediators from a Machu tribe, which involved a family that had emigrated from Golok and was still, therefore, protected by the Golok tribes.

<sup>30</sup> Schlee (*ibid.*: 259) also describes the instability and what could easily be termed as 'injustice' inherent in the Somali systems of conflict and compensation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that historically, the *gowa* exercised considerable power and authority within their groups. They ‘made all the decisions’, my informants told me, referring to the hereditary leaders, and everyone ‘had to do what they ordered’. It was the same with the *gowa* appointed by Labrang, who were described as issuing orders and exercising a coercive form of authority. The attitude of the nomads towards their *gowa*, therefore, was and still is (although now to a lesser extent) that of people subject to coercive power, orders which had to be obeyed. They are used to a measure of imposed order.

External mediators, by contrast, exercise a far more persuasive form of authority.<sup>31</sup> Ekvall, for instance, states (1964: 1140-41) that the mediators, ‘had to stand high in the social and power scale, according to the importance of the case,’ but not, ‘with such direct authority with respect to those between whom they were to mediate that they would be suspected of attempting coercion.’ Dresch (1984: 45-46), similarly describes the Yemeni *shaykhs* as powerful figures who were needed to impose a measure of order, but whose power could also be found irksome. The ideal was someone who could, ‘take responsibility for the safety of others without presuming on those others’ prerogatives’. It is similar in Amdo today. The power exercised by the mediators is primarily persuasive and my informants often stressed to me (echoing Ekvall 1964: 1142-47) the precariousness and difficulty of the processes of mediation.

It is possible, therefore, to draw a distinction between the coercive power of the *gowa* within the *dewa* and the persuasive power of the external mediators, including *lamas*, called in to mediate larger disputes. The mediation carried out by a *lama* or *xhombo* is at the pinnacle of the system of tribal order, a very visible and much discussed process, which is symbolic, for the nomads, of the principles of tribal conflict, feuding and mediation. The practical business of maintaining order, on the other hand, involves the delicate negotiation of several different forms of power and authority. Order within the *dewa* must be enforced by the *gowa*, who used to be monastic appointees, hereditary rulers or elected leaders, their authority in different cases legitimated by the very different principles of religious status, inheritance and election. The *zowa* can, likewise, be *lamas*, high status individuals or simply outsiders with a reputation for oratory. While the sources of these different forms of power

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<sup>31</sup> There is a distinction, here, between the external *zowa* and the mediators of small conflicts, who tend to be the *gowa* of the relevant *dewa* and are thus able to exercise a certain coercive authority over the members of their group.

are connected, in the cases of Labrang monastery and the ruling families in Golok,<sup>32</sup> there is a wider mosaic of power with different sources operating at different levels. The heterogeneity of this system makes sense, I would suggest, when the problem of order is regarded from the nomads' point of view.

Although violence may be effectively restrained on a daily basis, there is a constant fear of attack by neighbouring groups. The norms of retaliation represent a deterrent to such attack but they, themselves, require counter-measures in order to prevent the escalation of violence and maintain unity within the group.<sup>33</sup> As I have argued elsewhere (Pirie, forthcoming), the norms of feuding and revenge are commonly expressed in terms of individual anger. There is an obligation on the individual (male) nomad to get angry in the event of a theft or other injury and to take revenge without regard for the consequences for other members of the family or group.<sup>34</sup> However, for all their norms of individualism, the nomads expect to be forced, cajoled or persuaded to exercise restraint. The maintenance of order among these tribes requires that the individual norms of aggression, retaliation and revenge be constantly counter-balanced by a whole system of counter-measures: individuals must be restrained from fighting, truces have to be called, disputed boundaries have to be determined, just compensation has to be decided upon and warring parties have to be persuaded to make peace by accepting these solutions. How this is best done, in any particular instance, largely depends on the available sources of authority, the status of the local *gowa*, the availability and identity of external mediators and the involvement of high-status *lamas*.

The coercive power formerly exercised by hereditary leaders and monastic representatives was just one, but an essential part of this mosaic, accepted by the individual nomads as a part of their system of maintaining order. Now, however, the power of these strong *gowa* has been removed and replaced by the rather weaker councils of locally selected *gowa*. Chinese rule has, therefore, resulted in a certain amount of (unintended) democratisation of nomadic organisation. On the other hand, it has also removed an important source of coercive power from within the tribal structures. It is for the exercise of a similar power, I would suggest, that the nomads are now turning, albeit usually unsuccessfully, to the representatives of the modern state.

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<sup>32</sup> Although the *lamas* are revered as individuals, to an extent their authority is congruent with that of their establishments. As a major monastery with very senior reincarnate *lamas*, ostentatious religious power and wealth, Labrang had the stature that the nomads required in order to attract their loyalty and respect. It is probably significant that monks from Labrang told me that one of the reasons that Jamyang Zhepa founded Labrang was that Takhtsang Lhamo, was 'not big enough'. In Golok, too, the authority of the *khombo*, as *zowa*, is also linked to his status as member of the ruling elite.

<sup>33</sup> It is significant that such groups do not perceive themselves as being in a state of permanent feud with each other, resulting in a kind of 'balanced opposition', as Bedouin groups describe themselves to be (Peters 1967).

<sup>34</sup> Strong norms of individuality are also highlighted by both Hermanns (1949: 231-32, 1959: 302) and Ekvall (1964: 1124-25). I have considered the question of gender relations further in Pirie (forthcoming).

## Nomad Relations with the Chinese State

Following the return of their livestock in the early 1980s, the nomads quickly returned to their pre-1958 *dewa* and *repkor*, albeit with locally appointed *gowa* in place of the monastic or hereditary leaders. Initially the activities of these *gowa* were hidden from the Chinese authorities, but the latter now recognise them as representatives of their groups and rely upon them to collect the taxes they levy on both animals and pastureland. The authorities also recognise certain senior *gowa* within each *dewa* who are given primary responsibility for liaison with the government. Their authority extends to what the government names the *xiang*, groups of tents that have largely been mapped on to the nomads' *dewa*. To be appointed, these *gowa* have to become members of the Communist Party, but they are primarily the choice of the nomads, themselves. Official structures and tribal organisation have, therefore, largely been made to coincide.<sup>35</sup>

The way the nomads define their *dewa*, by reference to territory and territorial deities, more than by lineage, does not contrast strongly with the geographical delineation introduced by the government. However, the new fencing policies have restricted the freedom of their pastoral movements.<sup>36</sup> An informant from an agricultural village in Guide county told me that new fences had succeeded in resolving a long-running pasture conflict between two villages. However, between the families or *repkor* within one *dewa* in the pastoral areas the new fences are regarded as actually creating conflict and are a source of constant complaint. Yeh (2003: 501) states that fences, 'symbolize, reflect, and reproduce social divisions,' they decrease flexibility and also entrench unfair allocations of land. My informants put the problem much more simply by saying that boundaries are something that can be fought over. They also destroy the unity of the *repkor* by decreasing the need for cooperation over pastoral movements. The reorganisation of boundaries has also exacerbated or created certain disputes. The unresolved Ngulra-Sokwo dispute, which Yeh also refers to (2003: 502; TIN 1999), for

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<sup>35</sup> In Golok, on the other hand, I found that local control over the leadership of the *xiang* is much less strong and there is no reference to *repkor* (as also noted by Levine, nd.). My informants insisted that the new leaders were government appointees, rather than their own *xhombo*. Given the previously strong leadership of the larger tribal groups here the *repkor* were, in any event, probably of less significance, while members of the old ruling families were systematically persecuted and imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution. Now the *xhombo* just do the work of mediators, they told me. I talked to one *xhombo* who had been appointed as a government official and claimed that the respect the people showed his family allowed him to exercise more effective control. Other people, however, told me that this man was regarded with suspicion by other Tibetans.

<sup>36</sup> Goldstein (1996) points out that the post-reform privatisation of pastureland denies local groups the flexibility of their previous systems, under which pasture was allocated locally according to herd size. Commenting on the ecological need for flexibility in pastoral arrangements, he says that, 'the glaring absence of a mechanism for transgenerational reallocation of privatized pastureland appears a serious flaw in the program that is likely to undermine its long-term effectiveness,' (ibid.: 24). Other recent studies of pastoralism in the area have also discussed the issues of ecology, grassland management, poverty and the pastoral economy: Manderscheid (1998), Levine (1998, 1999), Goldstein (1996), Miller (1998-99, 2000, 2001) and Liu Yimin (2002).

example, originated before the 1950s but the situation was complicated when the disputed territory was placed entirely within Qinghai province, into which Sokwo falls, as opposed to Gansu, which is Ngulra's province. Both Jamyang Zhepa and Khongtang *lamas* tried to resolve this conflict without success because, Khongtang's assistant told me, they considered that the land historically belonged to Ngulra. It ought, therefore, to be divided between the two *dewa*, but they are unable to propose such a solution because of the provincial boundary lines. The smaller dispute between Ngulra and the newly-created Matang is another example.

As already mentioned, Yeh (2003: 502) argues that there has been an increase in conflict since the area's incorporation into the PRC, which she says can be traced to these new policies (see also TIN, 1999). My own informants were far less certain that there has been an increase in violence, however. A few said that there are now more disputes and several said that there are fewer, while the majority seemed to think that both the nature and the level of conflict were around the same. Yeh is right to state that the new fencing policies have done much to exacerbate violence between smaller groups but there is no hard evidence of any significant increase. The Amdo nomads have always fought each other over land. The armed conflicts between Sokwo and Ngulra and between the Golok tribes in Jigdril had their roots in pre-1958 pasture disputes. Moreover, the picture painted by Ekvall (1964, 1968, 1981) and other early travellers (Rockhill 1891; D'Ollone 1912; Teichmann 1922; Rock 1956) is of bloody wars, long-running feuds and the constant fear of violent raids. In any event, it is not my purpose to assess the actual levels of conflict. What is more significant, both for my analysis and for the nomads, themselves, is the nature of the conflict and the ways it can be counteracted and resolved. New boundaries may have created new and different conflicts, but my informants described the patterns of revenge and mediation that characterise all conflict, as if they were entirely continuous with those of the 'pre-Chinese' period. Indeed, comparing the detailed accounts of Ekvall with those given by my informants in both Machu and Golok, it is apparent that the norms of aggression and individualism, group loyalty, the principles of revenge and retribution, the status of the mediators and the procedures and principles of mediation all have historical roots.<sup>37</sup> These features are of ontological importance to the Amdo nomads. They are integral to their segmentary tribal system and largely determine the way they react to the representatives of the Chinese state.

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<sup>37</sup> I, therefore, have to disagree with Yeh's (2003: 514) suggestion of discontinuity with past forms of conflict. On the other hand, the continuity or re-emergence of older patterns must not be over-stated. Most of my informants were extremely unwilling to discuss the collective period, preferring to ignore it, like some hideous but temporary disruption to the normal flow of life, so it is very difficult to assess how this period was actually experienced by the nomads and what changes it has brought about. Of course, the full impact of collectivisation lasted little over 20 years, which makes the Tibetan's experiences very different from most populations of the former Soviet Union, for example.



In Machu the authorities implicitly acquiesce in and support the nomads' forms of dispute settlement. They are often present at the settlement meetings, are certainly aware of them and may even call upon senior *lamas* to become involved. In Golok, the *zowa* I talked to, mostly *xhombo* from the former ruling families, told me that they expect to receive invitations from the authorities to mediate in serious disputes, at meetings set up by the authorities. In a remarkable recent incident the local police in Dari accidentally shot a monk in the course of an argument, when a group of monks was demanding compensation for having been beaten during an arrest (TIN 2004). After the shooting an angry crowd demonstrated against the police until two local *lamas* intervened and negotiated a payment of substantial compensation (¥180,000, around £12,000) by the police to the victim's family. This effectively put an end to further conflict.<sup>38</sup> The police were here being forced, not just to recognise, but also themselves to comply with, the nomads' norms of mediation and compensation.

On the other hand, the government authorities now also offer an additional source of decision-making, which can be effective in problems between *dewa*. In the dispute between Ngulra and Matang the headmen of the two *dewa* had been unable to achieve a resolution between themselves so they had turned to the overarching authority of the government officials to make a decision on the boundary, hoping to solve the problem before violence erupted. The government had created the problem and so should resolve it, was their attitude. Many nomads complained to me, as they did to Yeh (2003: 520), that the authorities could, and should, do much more to prevent and control nomad violence. The nomads see them as having the power to act as effective *zowa*, to put at least a temporary halt to violence, so that their own mediators can step in, and they are resentful when they do not use their power in this way. The nomads have no difficulty in attributing authority to these outsiders, except when it is not readily and efficiently exercised. This, I would suggest, is comprehensible once it is seen that they have long been used to relying upon the order imposed on them by hereditary leaders and the *gowa* appointed by Labrang. It is not that they resent external authority, per se, as long as it is exercised in the right way, as a positive contribution to the maintenance of order within their tribal groups. It is not so surprising, therefore, that they should accept and attempt to incorporate the new government officials into their own map of authority, with the name of *gowa*.

On the other hand, the Chinese system of criminal punishment is seen by the nomads as completely inadequate for settling their disputes. 'They cannot produce just solutions (*jömdri*), they do not care about the history', people said dismissively. By treating violence

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<sup>38</sup> This incident occurred after the end of my fieldwork and I have not yet been able to discover the source of the funds or whether they were, in fact, ever paid.

and murder as crimes to be punished by the state, the police fail completely to engage with the nomads' norms of retaliation and compensation. Once fighting has erupted, the norms of retaliation rule supreme and the police, refusing to engage with these norms, have no authority to settle them. The nomads in this way deny any legitimacy to the government's system of criminal punishments.

### **Conclusion: tribe and state in comparative perspective**

The relationship between the nomads and the government authorities in Amdo cannot be characterised as one of domination and resistance, any more than it amounts to the legitimate assertion of a leader's authority. Neither Scott (1985, 1990) nor Weber (1947: Pt. 1, Ch. 3) provide the right models for this relationship. Rather than uniformly accepting or resisting the power of the government, the nomads have developed ways of using it for their own purposes. The dynamics of this relationship, I suggest, reflect the segmentary tribal forms that the nomads have recreated within the power structures of the modern Chinese state.

At the heart of the tribal structures in Amdo lie the ideas and norms of the feud, including the principles and processes of segmentation and mediation. These form a set of organising ideas which, I suggest, substantially explain contemporary relations with the central state. As Tapper (1990) suggests, considering the segmentary, egalitarian, decentralised and autonomous tribes of the Middle East, tribe and state are best thought of as two opposed models of thought or social organisation. Similarly, I would suggest, it is an attitude to social organisation, not ethnic and religious differences or ideas of descent, which distinguish the Amdo nomads, in important ways, from what they regard as an alien state, especially now that local government representatives are often Tibetans. Dresch, considering the relations between tribes and states in the Yemen (1990: 277), likewise argues that the state is an idea as much as an institution. While tribes are often egalitarian, he says, the individualism of the tribal scheme is predicated on its indefinite divisibility, while that of the nation state is predicated on an absolute moral unity (*ibid.*: 281). While the Amdo nomads' pattern of segmentation is more limited than in the Yemeni case, it is the local models of feuding and group loyalty that are crucial in the relations between tribe and state.

The relations between the Amdo nomads and the Chinese state can be compared with the experiences of the nomadic groups of Mongolia and the Inner Mongolian region of China (Barfield 1993, Humphrey and Sneath 1999: Ch. 8, Sneath 2000). Reviewing a large number of forms of tribal organisation, Barfield (1990) describes the Turco-Mongolian groups as having tended to form tribal confederacies, with hierarchical political structures, in which

powerful khans ruled over hundreds of thousands of subjects. In the relatively egalitarian, segmentary structures of many Middle Eastern tribes, by contrast, chiefs have been more mediators than autocratic leaders, and tended to produce weaker tribes. The Amdo nomads have never formed large confederacies under autocratic rulers, even the Golok tribes never achieved a scale of political organisation and social stratification comparable with the great Hsiung-nu and other Turco-Mongolian confederations. Most groups in the region much more closely resembled Barfield's Middle Eastern model and adapted themselves to the military, political and religious domination of external powers, typically the Buddhist monasteries and local kings.

The contemporary nomadic groups of Mongolia and Amdo are, however, different in more subtle ways, too, at the level of social and cultural forms. Sneath (2000: Ch. 7), describes the historically stratified social structures of the Inner Mongolian pastoralists, in which a small aristocratic class established a pattern of patronage and dependency. He relates this to an ideology of paternalism (after Weber 1947) which, he says, characterised domestic relations as well as political structures. In the post-collective period the relations of master and patron are still apparent and remain effective organising ideas. The Amdo tribes conform to a very different model of tribal organisation, in which the principle of revenge, the individual norms of aggression and the idea of loyalty to the territorial group, symbolised by the local protector deity, are the organising ideas. The relationship between individuals and leaders, in particular, is not one of patronage and dependency.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, in both cases, I would suggest, local reactions to the dramatic changes brought about by the Maoist regime, and the subsequent reforms, reflect, to a significant extent, the historical trajectory of their social organisation and cultural ideas.

The Chinese government is supremely powerful vis-à-vis the Amdo nomads, in terms of its military and economic strength and the control it exercises over territory, communications, markets, pastoral activities, education and reproduction. Nevertheless, it cannot completely control nomad violence and the power its representatives effectively wield over conflict between tribal groups is the authority selectively granted by the nomads' themselves, as and when their own patterns of feuding and mediation require it. The interplay of norms, power and authority that have long characterised their segmentary groups is taking a new form within the modern Chinese state.

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<sup>39</sup> Sneath makes no mention of any patterns of feuding in Mongolia, nor is there any evidence that the Mongolian groups ever formed a segmentary lineage system. He does not distinguish between a segmentary lineage system and one based on other principles, but his descriptions provide little evidence for either among the Mongolian pastoralists. He suggests that the existence of clans and lineages was either a product of the political activities of noble families or reflected the administrative model promoted by the Manchus.

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