

BRIEF COMMUNATION:

Freedom, Servitude and the “Servant-serf” Nyima: a re-rejoinder to Miller

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DR. Miller has continued the Goldstein/Miller debate in a recent issue of *The Tibet Journal* (13 (3): 63-66, 1988).¹ However, at the same time she suggests that people are probably weary of this dialogue. I agree—especially since I think her latest comments muddle rather than clarify the discussion. But be that as it may, I am willing, as she indicates she is, to agree to disagree over the heuristic value of applying the term “serfdom” to Tibet. Thus, I shall not respond point by point to her rejoinder.

Instead I shall take this opportunity to refocus attention from “terminology” (“serf” versus “subject” versus “miser”) back to the real issue underlying our debate – the nature of the peasantry in Tibet before the Chinese assumed control in 1959. In general, I must confess that I am concerned that enthusiasm for the “Tibetan Cause” vis-a-vis China may be fostering a “revisionist” approach to Tibetan social structure that downplays the existence of massive servitude – implying, for example, that Tibetan peasants were not really bound to estates and lords because they were likely to succeed if they ran away to another area. Running away was certainly possible in Tibet, but it was an illegal option of last resort. Runaways also paid a steep price: leaving ones home village and family forever, and losing security, friends and support networks. Moreover, lords sometimes caught and punished runaway serfs – as was clearly their legal right. The presence of runaways, therefore, does not alter the jural essence of the traditional system any more than the fact that slaves in 19th century America ran away to Canada would change the structural and legal essence of the Southern plantation/slave system. Arguments that try to emphasize a high degree of mobility in Tibet based on the fact that desperate serfs could run away from their lords place the traditional system in a deceptively positive light and trivialize the oppressive and exploitive aspects of that system.

Foundational aspects of the nature of servitude in Tibet are aptly illustrated by its converse – opportunities for manumission. As I have demonstrated in earlier papers, the various categories of serf (or *miser*) differed substantially in terms of inherited obligations (and rights). I cite below a retranslation⁷ of a partial manumission (“human lease”) document of one type of *miser* – a *nang gzan*. *Nang gzan* were a servant type of *miser*. They generally had no arable land and had to provide lifelong service to their lords, receiving food and clothes but no wages.⁸ Both aristocratic families and religious corporations (*labrang* and monasteries) had such *nang gzan*. The document in question was issued in 1946 by a Tibetan monastic lord to one of its *miser* – Nyima, a Tibetan refugee whom I met in 1965 while conducting a two year field study in Bylakuppe, a refugee camp in India. It states:

ཚེ་མཚོ་གསེང་སླ་བྱང་གི་མཚོན་གཞིས་མི་ཅུ་གཞིས་འོག་ཁྲལ་ཁོངས་རྒྱུ་ཁག་
 མི་ཅུ་ཁྱོ་ཉི་མ་ཟེར་བ་དེ་ལྷོན་ནས་སླ་བྱང་ནང་གཟན་ཁོངས་གསོལ་ཐབ་ [sic] ཞབས་ཞུ་ཞུ་
 ལུས་དེ་ལྟར་ཡང་། དེ་བཞེས་བསྟན་ལྷོག་དུགས་པོ་སླ་གཉེར་དུ་ཕེབས་སྐབས་ཞབས་ཞུ་
 སླ་བྱང་དུ་དགོངས་ཞུས་དོན་སློན་སོན་ཏེ་སླ་གཉེར་འཕྲོ་མཚམས་སྤུ་གཞིས་ལས་ [sic]
 འཁྲུང་དུ་བཞག་པར་ད་ཆ་མི་ཁྱོ་ལོ་ཕུ་གཞིས་འཕྲོ་མཚམས་སླ་བྱང་དུ་ཞབས་ཞུ་བར་
 དགོས་བཀའ་ཁྲལ་གནང་བར་དོན་སློང་ཁོ་ [sic] པ་ཉི་མ་རོ་བྱག་འཕྲེང་གཞིས་སྤུ་རྒྱུང་། རང་
 ཁོངས་ནང་པ་ས་ནག་པ་སོགས་ནས་བྱན་བཞེས་ [sic] རིགས་པས་མ་འདུམ་པ་བྱུང་ཏེ་རྒྱ་
 དངོས་སྤུན་བུ་ཡོད་པ་ནམས་བྱན་བདག་ཁག་ནས་རི་རོ་ལྷུངས་བསྐྱེལ་གྱི་ཀྱང་པོ་རྒྱ་ག་
 འཁྲུང་རང་ལ་སོང་འདུག་ན་ཡང་རང་ཉོས་ཏེ་པོའི་དཔེ་ལྟར་མི་བོགས་གཏོང་བའི་མེད་
 ཡང་། རང་ཁོངས་སླ་དཔོན་མཚོན་ཡོན་ལ་དགོངས་མི་སེར་སྐྱོངས་འོས་ལ་བདེན་ཉམས་
 ཐག་ལ་དགོངས་བཞེས་སླ་མེད་གྱི་སྤྱི་འབྲེལ་མི་བོགས་ལོ་རེ་སྤང་བཅོ་ལྔ་རེ་ལྟ་མཚོན་
 མཚུན་འབྲེལ་ལམ་སློང་མེད་ལྷུ་ཕྱིན་སླད་ཁྲལ་འབྲེལ། རང་གཟན་སོགས་ལ་ [sic] གཏོང་
 འོས་མ་མཚེས་པ་དང་། འདི་གའི་སླ་བྱང་གི་མཚོན་ཆེན་ཕྱོགས་འགྲོ་སོགས་ལ་དགོས་
 གནས་ཤར་ཆེ་འདི་ནས་བཀའ་བཀའ་ཁྲལ་བྱང་མཚམས་མཐུན་བྱང་ཕྱིན་མཚོན་ལས་
 རིམས་འབྱོར་སྤུས་ཀྱང་བསྟན་གཅེར་མི་ཚོག་པའི་ལག་ཁྱེར་དུ་ཚེ་མཚོ་གསེང་ཕུག་ཁང་
 ལྷན་སྐྱེང་ནས་མི་ཕག་ལྷོ་ ༡༣ ཚེས་ ༧ ལ།

⁷“This man named Nyima, from the taxpaying serf [*mi rtsa*] family of *Dzingkhag*, on one of *Tsechogling labrang’s* estates, formerly was a

nang gzan working in the kitchen of the *labrang*. [Tenchog] requested and obtained permission [for Nyima] to be relieved [temporarily] from his duties as kitchen-worker in order to serve him during his term of office as *Lhanyer* of *Tagpo*. When *Tenchog* was transferred, *Nyima* returned and was sent by the *labrang* to take charge of [a minor estate called] *Phuzhi*. In the year of the Fire-Dog [1946], he was transferred from *Phuzhi* and ordered back to resume his duties [as *nang gzan*] in the *labrang*. The essence of the issue is that *Nyima* accumulated large debts from *Dodrag* monastery, *Trengzhi dodzong* and [families] belonging to us such as *Nangpa Sanagpa* and has no means of repaying them, being already stripped by creditors of what few belongings he had, having become like a Gypsy-beggar. But that is not a good excuse for granting "human-lease" status [*mi bogs*] for like buying a bad horse, [you have to take care of it – i.e., it is your own fault]. However, even though he is not worthy of being granted "human lease" status [*mi bogs*], viewing the relationship between a serf and master as equivalent to that of lama and patron, and in consideration of *Nyima's* pitiful situation and the fact that we should help our serfs [*mi rtsa*], his request is granted. Henceforth he shall pay fifteen *srang* to the [Tsechogling] *labrang* before the twenty-fifth of the tenth month each year without excuse. If he does this, he is relieved of all taxation [in kind] and corvee labor obligations. However, if the *labrang* needs him for special occasions (ceremonies) and for traveling, the *labrang* will send a notice and he should come as soon as the notice arrives. If this is fulfilled, then the officers and managers of the *labrang* whoever comes [in the future] are not permitted to abuse (bother him). Fire-Pig year (1949), twelfth month, seventh day." SEAL

The document does not say how *Nyima* came to be a *nang gzan* of Tsechogling, one of Tibet's most famous religious institutions (*labrang*), but normally this came about because one of the periodic obligations of agricultural *miser* families was provision of *nang gzan* servants for their lords. The document reviews the circumstances of *Nyima's* service and how Tsechogling came to grant him "human lease," a status which conveyed a specific type of partial manumission, i.e., exemption from daily servitude – from having to serve his lord (Tsechogling) in whatever capacity the lord saw fit. However, receiving human lease status made him only partially free. It was conceived in Tibet only as "leasing" (*bogs ma gtong*) one's daily freedom from service to the lord/estate, not as severing the hereditary link between serf and lord. In *Nyima's* case, a relatively steep annual fee had to be paid and, in addition, *Nyima* was liable for two types of temporary services whenever the lord requested it. There was no limit on the number of times the lord could summon him for these, or on the length of time he had to work on each occasion; and there was, of course, no payment. Moreover, *Nyima* was requested to drop everything and come at once to serve the lord. This residual service and payment was

Nyima's obligation as a "human lease" serf, a status that was difficult to obtain and highly sought after despite the continuing service obligations.

But not only did Nyima still belong to his lord after receiving "human lease" status, that status was hereditary. Nyima's sons would have also belonged to Tsechogling. The link of a serf to his lord passed through parallel lines of descent, i.e. from father to son and mother to daughter, so when Nyima's sons reached about 13 years of age, they would have been liable to be summoned to serve as servants (*nang gzan*) for Tsechogling. If Nyima were fortunate, he would have been able to arrange for his sons to receive "human lease" status when they came of age, but they would not have escaped from the hereditary binds that forced them to provide services and money to their lord even though they held no land.

Nyima and his document are real. Whatever we choose to call Nyima – miser, serf, subject, peasant – he was clearly not free in any sense that we understand the term, nor was his servitude his own choice. He belonged to Tsechogling because his father did, and before that, his father.

As I indicated earlier, although much has been made of the notion of "running away" from one's lord and estate, "running away" was neither desirable nor a casually undertaken decision. Take, for example, Nyima's response to my attempt to buy his "human lease" document. He initially was reluctant because he said he needed it. Since this was India in 1965, I was puzzled by this answer and pressed him to explain why he still needed it. He explained that if Tibet regained its independence and he returned without the actual document, he could again be liable for daily service to Tsechogling as a *nang gzan*, something he did not at all relish. This was not a trivial matter for Nyima who did not see the illegal act of "running away" as the alternative to holding the legal status of "human lease," even though the latter meant a sizable annual monetary payment. I ultimately obtained the document only because I promised I would return it to him should Tibet gain its independence and Nyima somehow need it.

In conclusion, it is because of characteristics such as this that I have argued that the concept serfdom is an appropriate designation for traditional Tibet. Some, such as Dr. Miller, may disagree with this, but whatever terminology we use, I think we owe future generations an account of the traditional Tibetan social, political and economic system that is as objective as possible based on the best documentation available. That was my aim twenty years ago, and still is today.

Notes

1. This was her response to my rejoinder to her rejoinder to my original article titled: *Reexamining Choice, Dependency and Command in the Tibetan Social System: "Tax appendages" and other Landless serfs.* (*The Tibet Journal*, 9 (4): 1986, 79-112.)
2. Original published in: *Serfdom and Mobility: An examination of the institution of 'Human Lease' in traditional Tibetan society.* *Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol. XXX, No.3, pp.521-34, 1971a.
For other examinations of the peasantry see also my: *An Anthropological Analysis of the Tibetan Political System.* University Microfilms, 1968; and *Taxation and the structure of a Tibetan village.* *Central Asiatic Journal*. Vol. XV, No. 1, pp. 1-27, 1971b.
3. The Status *nang gzan*, in turn, is sub-divided into status such as *thab gyog*.
4. See Goldstein 1971a for a duscussion of the reason behind the grant.

Communication on this issue is now closed.

—Editor.☉