

A controversy on vegetarianism*

Katia Buffetrille (EPHE, CRCAO)

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And

http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_31_09.pdf

Amdo, the northeastern part of Tibet, has seen important changes since the launch of the “Develop the West” campaign in 2000.¹ The hasty implementation of governmental programs of sedentarisation confronted pastoralists with a new lifestyle for which they are little prepared. Everywhere in Amdo, one can see numerous new settlement villages with rows of similar houses. Deprived of their herds and pastures, unable to find their place in the Chinese-dominated economy because they lack the appropriate qualifications and language abilities, most of the pastoralists are left without any means of subsistence.

But another phenomenon is taking place at the same time: a movement launched by high clerics in Eastern Tibet which is a firm desire to affirm, in what can be described as an emergent Tibetan Buddhist fundamentalism, a strong sense of Tibetaness. This movement that started some decades ago knew a new impetus after the demonstrations of 2008 that spread all over the Tibetan Plateau. The main religious figure in this movement was Khempo Jigme Phuntsok (Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, 1933-2004), the charismatic head of the monastic camp of Larung Gar (Bla rung sgar). Several articles have been written on his life and work.² But many other monastics have contributed to this movement which is based on a new set of Ten Virtues: not to butcher and sell meat 2) not to steal and rob 3) not to fight with weapons 4) not to prostitute one's body 5) not to sell guns and opium 6) not to smoke opium or cigarettes 7) not to drink alcohol 8) not to gamble 9) not to hunt and 10) not to wear skin and fur of animals. The subject has ignited the web to the point that the website Tibet Web Digest called the new Ten Virtues “the most debated topic on Tibetan

* I would like to thank Françoise Robin who brought this article to my attention, Sangye Tendar who always answered my many questions, Charlene Mackley for her useful comments on the communication I gave during the IATS, Ulan-Bator July 23, 2013 “‘Holier than thou.’ Amdo Nomads between the ‘hammer’ of sedentarisation and the ‘anvil’ of vegetarianism,” on which a part of this article is based. Last but not least, I am deeply indebted to Matthew Akester who not only corrected the English but also helped me in the translation of difficult passages of the Tibetan text.

¹ Among others, cf. Cook <http://perspectiveschinoises.revues.org/document179.html> (August 25th 2014).

² Germano 1998: 53-94; Terrone 2008: 746-779; Gayley 2011: 435-502.

blogs last year.”³ Some researchers have already started to deal with the subject and published on it.⁴

In the following pages, I would simply like to add a small piece of work dedicated to Elliot Sperling on this topic.

Elliot Sperling is, of course, well-known for his work as a historian of Tibet and Sino-Tibetan relationships, but his passion for contemporary history and his concern for the Tibetan situation are also strong, and have made him one of the few outspoken researchers on the subject, even when expressing his views has come at the cost of his personal interest. This is why he might be curious about an article published by Jamyang Kyi ('Jams dbyangs skyid) arguing against vegetarianism, which appeared on June 24th 2013 on the blog of the famous writer Sangdor. His blog having recently been shut down, this article is no longer accessible. My aim is thus to provide here a translation of this article and some comments.

Jamyang Kyi was born in Amdo Tsholho (Mtsho lho). She is a renowned singer, a writer, and was for many years a news editor and producer for Tibetan language programming at the State owned Qinghai Television. She is also an advocate of Tibetan women's rights. She was arrested on April 1st 2008 and spent 21 days in jail, a detention she later related day by day in her blog. The text was translated in English and published in Dharamsala under the title *A Diary of interrogations. A Sequence of Tortures*.⁵

Jamyang Kyi published several articles on the subject of vegetarianism and the new Ten Virtues, generally under her pen name, Mindrug (Smin drug). One of these was translated for the website High Peaks Pure Earth.⁶

In the article translated below, the author bases her argumentation against the propagation of vegetarianism in Tibet by high monastics on the fact that Tibet is a high country with little oxygen and Tibetans have been used to a meat diet for thousands of years. She put emphasis on the case of Tibetan women, who have to give birth and therefore need nutrition sufficient to breastfeed and avoid vitamins and calcium deficiency.

³ <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2014/the-impact-of-the-so-called-ten-virtues-by-jamyang-kyi/> (July 13th 2014).

⁴ On this subject, see among others Barstow 2013: 74-104; Gaerrang 2011: 31-43 and 2012; Gayley 2013: 247-284. Lafitte: <http://rukor.org/neoliberal-tibet-and-chinas-end-game/> (August 20th 2014).

⁵ N.d. The text was translated by Pema Thinley and published by the Tibetan Women's Association.

⁶ <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2014/the-impact-of-the-so-called-ten-virtues-by-jamyang-kyi/> (August 4th 2014).

One wonders to whom the author has directed this article, full of medical vocabulary with which few Tibetans can be familiar. Nevertheless, the appearance of 25 comments (two are identical) show that this article was read and not really well received, as we will see below.

Coerced vegetarianism and the welfare of Tibetans⁷

During these [last] years, there has been a lot of fuss in Tibet about a movement to stop eating meat. While vegetarianism may be appropriate for others, in a barren land of high mountains, where oxygen is scarce, conditions for livelihood are poor, and there are no vegetables, while yak and sheep meat are considered the best, this is more harmful than beneficial for the masses of Tibetan farmers and pastoralists who have to rely on their physical strength to do their work.

This is particularly so for Tibetan mothers. The reason is that once a child is conceived, the fetus stays at least nine months and ten days in the mother's womb, and then she has to give birth in great pain. Even if the mother is able to rest for one month after the birth,⁸ she has to breast-feed the child ten times a day during that time, and to clean him as often as he defecates. If unfortunately the child has a calcium (*kal*) deficiency, or if he cries a lot, the mother has even less time to rest, like a worm wriggling in the fire. Not only that, but basically, mothers must breast-feed until the child is at least one or two years old, and have their periods every month as well, while Western medical science shows that calcium levels decrease once women reach their 30s.⁹

Anyway, as a woman and a mother too, I well know from experience that during the nine months and ten days when the child is in the womb

1. for the first three months, the child is like a fierce poison

⁷ http://www.sangdhor.com/list1_c.asp?id=11861&a=menzhu (July 11th 2013).

⁸ In some nomadic areas, it is not even customary for the mother to rest after birth.

⁹ Urban Chinese women who reach this age take calcium and vitamins (*tsho rtsi*) supplements. They compensate for the deficiency without needing so much rest. This is certainly why Chinese women look younger [than Tibetans], and the fact that pleasure-seeking young Tibetan men find Chinese women attractive can hardly be unrelated.

2. in the 7th, 8th and 9th months, the body is like a heavy load to carry

3. at the time of giving birth, the pain is like having nails driven into the lower back until it is about to shatter. Then, there is all the suffering of breast-feeding, and by night the torment of being woken from peaceful sleep.

I was 38 when I gave birth to my younger daughter, and not only did I rely on an abundance of medicines and oxygen at the hospital but, terrified by the pain of delivery, I had a cesarean. During postnatal leave, I was like a carnivorous wild yak, eating and drinking everything, milk, eggs, vegetables, fruits. For a while, my husband did the shopping and I lapsed into a state of undernourishment. From the sixth or seventh month of pregnancy, my heart was not well, and because of a deficiency of oxygen I could not sleep well. Then, the caesarean operation drained my reserves, and less than a week after delivery, I ran a very high fever and, unable to recover, I fell into a coma, and went a little deaf, as had happened to my mother. Thanks to my husband, who had prepared extra food in advance, I manage to slowly recover with good nutrition (*tsho bcud*) and vitamins, and because there was no delay in medical treatment, nothing serious happened to me.¹⁰

When my mother was 40 years old, the Triple Gem gave her the only son she wanted and during most of the 9 months and 10 days [of pregnancy], she suffered as if the child was a fierce poison. Her body became very weak because of the intolerable pain of childbirth. After the birth, she was not able to eat well enough, her strength became depleted, she suffered from depression and became deaf in one ear. My mother suffered for 33 years from the humiliation of being deaf, without telling anyone. She lived and died so.

Those who advocate abstaining from meat had better take care, for there is no saying that one day someone in your family, your older sisters, younger sisters or aunts, will not become disabled.

The child in the mother's womb has even more need of varied nutrition, vitamins and calcium. Fish and pulses are especially beneficial. However, even for someone like me who has gone to school 8, 9 or 10 years, and has lived 20 years in the city, it is difficult to become accustomed to such food, never mind for Tibetan villagers [who do not eat fish]. Still, we like our own food, and our yak and mutton has a lot of nutrients.

Yak meat contains vitamin B12, which has an important capacity to replenish the body's cells. It has even more vitamin B6, which helps the body combat infectious diseases.

¹⁰ The process of giving birth to a child brings so much difficulty for the mother. After recovering from the birth of my daughter Kargyen (Dkar rgyan), my husband told me that even he could not go through it again.

Albumin (*spri dkar gyi bcud*) helps in [bodily] renewal. It also contains zinc (*ti tsha*), iron (*lcags*), calcium (*kal*), magnesium (*mag*), potassium (*pod*), and the 8 kinds of amino acid (*em gzhi skyur*) essential to the human body. Yak meat is said to be more nutritious than beef.

Sheep mutton contains most of the B vitamins, and plenty of B12, as well as albumin, zinc (*ti tsha*), folic acid (*lo ma'i skyur rgyu*), organic vitamins (*skye dngos 'tsho rtsi*) and ? (*skyur langgs 'tsho rtsi*). Mutton also has important regenerative capacities, and its antibiotic properties have been demonstrated by modern medical research.¹¹

However that may be, with the policy of exterminating cattle, the sky-high market price of meat, and the system of enriching the state while impoverishing the masses, ordinary farmers and pastoralists face all kinds of hardship in making a living. For women, especially in pregnancy, this means calcium and vitamin deficiency and, after childbirth, given the lack of both the economic resources and concerned attitude needed to make up the deficiency, treatment is not given in time and children fall sick. In our village of only sixty-odd families, there are four children of this kind. On top of that, those with power in our own community are now forcing labouring farmers and pastoralists to give up eating meat, and proudly announcing this as an achievement in learned assemblies and other public gatherings. By depriving people of nutrition, what do you achieve for Tibetans other than exhausted fathers, sick mothers and handicapped children?

The suitability of yak and sheep meat to the Tibetan diet can be seen just from the fact that if the mother does not eat meat and drink broth after childbirth, she will not produce milk. I found this out myself when my two daughters were born. If the mother has no milk, the newborn baby looks here and there [in discomfort] and her face and eyes turn yellow. [In that case] the child needs to be given medical attention in time, and putting her in the sun is also very beneficial. If we delay, the jaundice increases and there is a great danger of the child falling sick. Generally, mother's milk is much the best nutrition. Science has proven the necessity of breastfeeding for the first eight months.¹² Strangely, Chinese mothers are able to produce milk by eating rice soup and eggs and drinking milk. It is difficult to explain this other than as a result of the different eating habits of different peoples.

¹¹ If we Tibetans, who live with poor conditions of hygiene and no variety of foodstuffs, are not grateful for yak and sheep meat that make us healthy and strong, what else is there?

¹² The Tibetan medical system has shown that there is no benefit in breastfeeding a child for more than eight months, because the child loses appetite for more nutritious foods. By that time, the mother's milk is no longer really nutritious.

Nowadays, Tibetan children who come from agricultural and nomad areas [to study in urban schools] seem to be getting smaller year by year, while it is quite evident that when there is economic development and a high standard of living, as for example in Japan, young people get taller and taller. How does this come about, if not by increasing quality of life?

According to the gynaecologist Sonam Tso, rural women are increasingly suffering from high levels of salt in the body, mental anxiety and sleeplessness. This is said to be a condition caused by psychological disorders and nerves. In my view, it is because [rural Tibetan] women do heavy work, are quite anxious, have vitamin, calcium and nutritional deficiencies; because under the family planning policy, women are forcibly sterilized, which is a crime; and nowadays, most foods are adulterated with chemicals, and many of the commercial products that we eat and drink¹³ are fake and of poor quality.

Generally speaking, due to the limited variety of foodstuffs, we have become accustomed to eating yak meat and mutton for thousands of years, and if we are suddenly forced to stop, it goes without saying that Tibetans in general, and mothers in particular, will suffer protein, vitamin and calcium deficiency, which is even more damaging for the unborn child. When the child is conceived, the semen of the father and egg of the mother will be of poor quality, and then if the mother's body is undernourished, she cannot produce the nutrients necessary for the child in the womb. Once this vicious cycle is set in motion, Tibetans will surely become physically weaker and mentally duller, [biological] inheritance will be diminished and procreation tainted, and gradually we will become more susceptible to various diseases and epidemics. We shall see.

Do the advocates of vegetarianism really and truly consider animals' lives more valuable than those of humans? Or do they consider the suffering of those prevented from eating meat as a virtue or accomplishment rendered to them? Otherwise, they are simply making a fuss over following a fad inspired by Chinese Buddhists and Western vegetarians. Whatever the case may be, this wish to overcome one's given circumstances with a single step, using authority to impose one's own whims, with no consideration for the altitude and oxygen levels of the land one inhabits, and the customs and resources of one's people, is a sign of mere foolishness. It is like the proverbial 'pauper who tries to walk alongside a rich man but

¹³ Analysis show that nowadays most commercial foodstuffs contain harmful ingredients.

ends up breaking his leg’, or ‘picking up a corpse from the ground and carrying it on one’s shoulders’,¹⁴ and this should be understood by all, chiefly those among us who think they know best.

Most of the 25 comments posted in reaction to Jamyang Kyi’s article express strong disagreement with her views while four of them manifest some support or respect for her argument (comments 9-10-11-18) and four others defend the point of view of meat-eaters (comments 9-12-14-18). What is striking is the violence expressed by several of them, especially the four first. One wonders if the authors are not, in fact, the same blogger using various nicknames, since the content is quite similar. These violent comments call Jamyang Kyi “Demoness” (*dre mo*), and advice her to eat her husband’s or children’s flesh, or even her own flesh, since she likes meat. Some also allege that as the owner of a restaurant, her only motivation for taking issue with vegetarianism is to maintain a profitable business (comments 4 and 22). Although Jamyang Kyi does not refer to the monastics by name, two comments are made in defence of Khempo Tsultrim Lodrö (Mkhan po Tshul grims blo gros), the heir of Jigme Phuntsok, one of the main active figures of this movement, refuting the accusation that he forces people to become vegetarian (comments 8 and 13). In fact, it seems that often the lamas ask those in their audience to raise an arm if they agree to stop eating meat, drinking, etc. This commitment made in front of their follow Tibetans can create enormous pressure on those unable to keep their oath. Jamyang Kyi’s medical knowledge is also questioned, as is her faith in the dharma, and two bloggers insinuate that she must be Christian since eating meat is a Christian and not a Buddhist custom (comments 16 and 20). Lastly, an anonymous blogger refers to a revealed teaching of the Nyingma master Guru Chöki Wangchuk (Gu ru Chos kyi dbang phyug, 1217-1270),¹⁵ *Mahākaruṇika Who Dredges the Pit of Saṃsāra* (*Thugs rje chen po ’khor ba dong sprug*), listing the various punishments awaiting those who eat meat or drink blood (comment 17).

One day, she herself decided to answer (comments 23) just to express her view on all these comments in a very short message: “A lot of words were said. A lot of noise was made!”¹⁶

¹⁴ These proverbs mean taking on unnecessary burdens.

¹⁵ On Guru Chöki Wangchuk, see Dudjom Rinpoche, vol. I: 760-770.

¹⁶ *Skad mang po bzhag ’dug / ’ur chen po brgyab ’dug / Smin drug.*

The issue of vegetarianism has been debated for centuries among the monastic community. Some lamas such as Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen (Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292-1361) or Shabkar (Zhabs dkar Tshogs drug rang grol 1781-1851) expressed their total opposition to eating meat. Others, like Jigme Lingpa ('Jigs med gling pa, 1730-1798), had a much more moderate point of view. Although, as shown by Barstow, Jigme Lingpa “strongly critiques meat” and praise of vegetarianism, “[he] never mandates a vegetarian diet among his students” (2013: 90). Nowadays, some lamas have a much stricter position: Hungkar Rinpoche (Hūṃ dkar rin po che), a golok lama said to be the reincarnation of Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje (Mdo mkhyen brtse Ye shes rdo rje, 1800-1866), himself the reincarnation of Jigme Lingpa, has an interesting position. In contrast with his own predecessor, he defends an absolute vegetarianism as the only correct path, a path described in fundamentalist terms.

These lamas have the support of the Dalai Lama even if, affirming Jamyang Kyi's argument, he recognized, in an interview given on February 12 2013, that “The Tibetan high altitude environment is also not conducive for sustaining fresh crops, and as it is now, the Tibetans include meat in their diet as a means of survival. Many monasteries that opt for the vegetarian lifestyle take measures to import their foods to sustain their eating habits.”¹⁷ He himself tried to stop, but after repeated health problems was advised by several doctors to resume eating meat.¹⁸ Nevertheless, at a special audience during the Kālacakra held in January 2012 in Bodhgayā,¹⁹ the hierarch expressed his appreciation of “the initiatives taken by many monasteries in Tibet of advising people to give up meat, saying that it was spiritually significant and should be adopted as a gradual social move.” In the same speech, he added “that it would be better if the nomads were allowed to maintain their centuries old natural habitation and stay on the grasslands,” two positions which appear rather contradictory since the pastoralists need to sell their livestock to be able to maintain their way of life on the grassland. But for researchers such as Lafitte, the calls for Tibetans to embrace vegetarianism is « a way of mobilising Tibetans to stand strong and united, in the

¹⁷ <http://samvidbeauty.com/2013/02/a-lesson-from-the-dalai-lama-on-meat-eating/> (July 5th 2014).
<http://vegpeace.org/buddhistvegetariandalai.html>

¹⁸ Already in 2006, The Central Tibetan Administration appealed to the followers of Tibetan Buddhism to go vegetarian and stop animal slaughtering for a ceremony to be held in Bihar. [http://hillpost.in/2011/10/30/go-vegan-for-ritual-tibetan-exiles/33596/news-2/hp_news_networkGo](http://hillpost.in/2011/10/30/go-vegan-for-ritual-tibetan-exiles/33596/news-2/hp_news_networkGo%20vegan%20for%20ritual%3A%20Tibetan%20exiles)

¹⁹ <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=30631&t=1> (July 12 2014).

<http://tibetonline.tv/videos/925/his-holiness-the-14th-dalai-lama-kalop-at-32th-kalachakra,-bodhgaya> (June 6th, 2014).

face of the seductions and disappointments of China's hedonic promise of neoliberal wealth accumulation.”²⁰

The appeal to vegetarianism is associated with an anti-slaughter movement, which started in the mid-1990 when Jigme Phuntsok requested followers to stop slaughtering animals. He was inspired by Buddhist compassion towards animals, which were suffering in transportation and slaughterhouses in the context of commodification of animal lives, which is totally at odds with the traditional Tibetan treatment of cattle. According to Gaerrang (2011: 36), this movement, which “contests and compromises the capitalist development,” has now spread in all Kham, Amdo and even Central Tibet. In Hongyuan where he did his fieldwork in 2006, all the villagers of one village took an oath not to sell yaks for slaughter for at least 3 years. “The majority of households in the village were able to keep their oaths for the initial three-year period,” (2011: 36) and half of them promised “to stop slaughtering livestock for their own consumption” (2011: 38) following a teaching made by Mkhan po Tshul khriims blo gros of Gser rta”. Only a small number of herders express reluctance to continue on this path because of the reduction in income, other ways of making a living being very limited by their lack of spoken and written mandarin. Some herders decided to abide by the State resettlement project and needed cash for housing construction (2011: 38).

These lamas were followed by some of the self-immolators, who asked their fellow Tibetans to stop eating meat and slaughtering animals²¹. This religiously-inspired resistance to Chinese assimilation policies is accompanied by cultural and socio-economic resistance from the herders. The construction of Chinese-run slaughterhouses in the mid 2000s led to popular protests. Not only was such industrial slaughter contrary to the Tibetans’ animal husbandry practice and Buddhist feelings, there were also numerous accusations of theft of animals by Chinese slaughterhouse owners, and of pressure on pastoralists from the local authorities to sell their animals.²²

²⁰ <http://rukor.org/neoliberal-tibet-and-chinas-end-game/> (August 25th 2014).

²¹ http://burningtibet.blogspot.in/2013_05_01_archive.html (July 16th 2014).

Among them, Nangdröl who self-immolated on February 19th, 2012, Rikyo on May 30th 2012.

²² <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/attack-12012011141021.html> (August 14th 2014).

<http://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2006/03/29/china-fears-tibetan-slaughterhouse-detainees> (August 14th, 2014).

Meat is not the only target: smoking and drinking are also strongly opposed by monastics, and also the Dalai Lama.²³ In Golok Peyul (Dpal yul), Darthang monastery has prohibited the consumption of alcohol in the whole town and in 2011 it was impossible to find even a bottle of beer in a shop. This is because of the general advocacy of temperance by many lamas in Amdo who regularly request Tibetans to refrain from drinking –and smoking also– out of respect for Buddhist precepts, but perhaps also to avoid fights. People listen to them and the habits of drinking and smoking are gradually declining. Unfortunately, a new habit is emerging, which does not seem to be any better, but shows how difficult it is for Tibetans to follow all these new rules. Yumtsho, a Tibetan writer, explained in a blog²⁴ that a lot of people have replaced drink with a Chinese medicine²⁵ nicknamed “The Chang that doesn’t violate the Ten Virtues” which contains a lot of alcohol and is said to be very dangerous for the health.

The issue of fighting is also often raised by the lamas. Traditionally, inter-tribal and inter-village fights often arise among the northeastern Tibetan communities, and the literature is full of narratives of conflicts and mediation. The Chinese occupation did not put an end to these internal clashes and recent studies have shown that contemporary policies such as pasture-fencing, or the collection of yartsa gumbu (dbyar rtsa dgun ’bu) are contributing factors in the emergence of new conflicts.²⁶ Most recently, high clerics in Tibet made regularly appeals to lay Tibetans to stop fighting between themselves. The Dalai Lama added his voice to that of the hierarchs, following a fight over yartsa gumbu that left at least two people dead and three others wounded in Rebgong on May 30 2013.²⁷ But not a word was said about the origins of the conflict. The Dalai Lama expressed his opposition in Buddhist terms by explaining that “violence is contrary to the beliefs and conduct of all who believe in karma and in Buddhism”. Some self-immolators requested Tibetans to stop fighting in their final testaments, such as Nangdrol who self-immolated in Ngawa (Nga ba) Prefecture on February 19 2012.²⁸ Following Nangdrol’s death, some 1000-2000 people came

²³ <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=30631&t=1> (August 25th 2014).

²⁴ <http://tibetwebdigest.com/?p=541>

²⁵ “huo-xiang-zheng-qi water”

²⁶ Among others, Pirie 2005: 1-30 and 2012: 83-107; Sulek 2009: 15-44 and 2010: 9-22; Yeh 2000: 212-226 and 2013: 318-340.

²⁷ <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/fungus-06072013220245.html> (July 12th 2014).

²⁸ http://burningtibet.blogspot.in/2013_05_01_archive.html (July 26th 2014).

to his family's house and pledged before a photo of the Dalai Lama and one of Nangdrol never to engage in feuding within the community.²⁹

This movement also affects aspects of daily life other than the practice of Buddhism and the respect of the Ten Virtues. In Amdo and the Golok area, the preservation of the Tibetan language is a very sensitive issue for both the monastic and lay communities. The importance people put on language was expressed during the many demonstrations that have occurred since 2010³⁰ in Amdo. Also, several self-immolators have shouted slogans demanding respect for the language and culture of Tibet, or have left messages on the subject. In Golok Peyul, small slips of paper were left in shops in 2011 requesting Tibetans to speak a pure Tibetan.³¹ In some regions, people have reacted strongly to the issue of mixed language (*ra ma lug*, “neither goat nor sheep”). According to some informants, every time someone at Lanzhou University use a Chinese word, he is fined one yuan and when enough money is collected, teachers go for a drink together. In Tsekho (Rtse khog), those speaking *ra ma lug* are ignored and in Chigdril (Gcig sgril), people are publicly criticized.

Another subject of contention is the issue of white tents in nomad regions: in Chigdril, the lamas oppose the modern white tents used by nomads in summer, which are lighter and much easier to carry than the black ones in yak hair. Some Golok pastoralists explained to me in 2011 that from 2012 onwards, white tents would not longer be allowed because, according to the lamas, “to live in a white tent is to be sinicized, and Tibetan traditional nomad life can only exist in the usual black yak-hair tent.” The black tent is indeed a very strong symbol of Tibetan nomad (*'brog pa*) identity.

The many reactions on the web to the question of vegetarianism and the new set of Ten Virtues are not surprising if one considers that in Amdo and Golok, pastoralists and farmers are confronted with two highly demanding discourses: on one side, certain lamas, supported by the Dalai Lama and some self-immolators, request them to become pure and perfect Buddhist practitioners, totally non-violent and vegetarian, an ideal which is more

²⁹ Akester 2012: 218.

³⁰ <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2012/abolishing-tibetan-language-education-for-the-sake-of-maintaining-stability-by-woeser/> (August 16th 2014).

³¹ *Bod mi rnam pa / khyod tshos bsre skad bshad na mi rigs yar rgyas kyi ma rtsa brlag pa'i nag nyes can du gyur bas / bod skad gtsang ma re bshad rogs zhu / pha skad myur skyob tshogs pa nas /* “Tibetans! if you speak a mixed language, you are guilty of ruining the foundation of the development of your people. We request you to speak pure Tibetan- from the Association for the protection of the mother tongue.”

suitable for a religious community than for a lay one, and one which was never traditionally imposed on lay people and rarely on the clergy. On the other side, Chinese government policies emphasise economic development and assimilation, a “path” that contrasts with official state rhetoric about multi-cultural harmony. In other words, both agendas require from Tibetans a radical change of lifestyle. In both cases, Tibetans are being told that their way of life is wrong: one has assimilation of the local population into the modern, Han-dominated society as its aim; the second promotes a new Tibetan identity based on a purist interpretation of Buddhism that is incompatible with the herders’ traditional ways. In some sense, these lamas can be perceived as indirectly accomodating state efforts to sedentarise and marketize rural Tibetans, along with other activists (development NGOs and missionaries) who help the work of the modernising state. Of course, it is Tibetans, always eager to peacefully assert their collective identity and values, who are the agents of this process, with their incitement to a generalized vegetarianism and respect for the new set of Ten Virtues.

But to whom is the discourse of these clerics directed? To the Tibetans? To the Chinese or to the West? I would say to all: To Tibetans in order for them to be united and protect their culture in the present context. To the Chinese, to show them that Tibetans are not the backward people they suppose but on the contrary are very “civilized” and enlightened, “holier” than them. And also to the Western world —at least for the Dalai Lama— who, in his modernist presentation of Buddhism, wants to promote a global image of Tibet as a non-violent and highly spiritual society, respectful of nature, the environment and all sentient beings, and therefore a society able to benefit to all mankind.

Nevertheless, the vegetarian discourse of these lamas faces some opposition from the Tibetan side, as Jamyang Kyi’s article shows. She speaks as a Tibetan woman and mother, of whose predicament, she argues, these clerics have no idea and do not seem to be much concerned. Her argument based on medical considerations finds little echo in the readers’ comments, and it should be noted that, curiously, none of these comments appear to have been written by a woman.

This raises the question of gender in the debate regarding vegetarianism, a point only touched upon in this short article and one which deserves further consideration.³²

³² I plan to address more specifically this subject in the near future.

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