

Killing for the Dharma: An Analysis of the Shugden Deity and Violence in
Tibetan Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

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Violence is a problem endemic to organized religion. What this thesis will examine is a particular manifestation of violence in Tibetan Buddhism with the controversy surrounding the deity Shugden. In order to understand and contextualize this conflict, I examine the roots of how a supposedly pacifist religion can sanction bloodshed. This requires an analysis of Tibet's slow and ongoing conversion to Buddhism and how this process occurred as a navigation of political, economic, and social transformations. This materialist basis for conflict is essential in understanding of the contemporary Shugden phenomenon, which has attracted the attention of Western media and several national governments who all have certain political objectives regarding the worship of Shugden. What this paper will therefore argue is that this violence is not a result of abstract theological debate, but rather due to changing demographics, economic pressures, claims to legitimacy, cultural adaptations, and control of resources. In this way, Shugden is best understood as a metaphor representing the interests of certain groups making claims to power.

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The Shugden Controversy

In recent years, the Tibetan community in exile has been torn by religious conflict. Dorje Shugden, a deity once regarded by the Tibetans as a Dharma-Protector alongside Mahakala, Yala and Yamantaka, has been removed from the acceptable pantheon of mainstream Tibetan Buddhists. A group of devout Buddhists claiming adherence to Shugden have threatened the physical safety of the Dalai Lama.¹ This same group has also made attempts on the life of Thupten Wangyal, the former abbot of Jangtse College, as well as other high ranking dignitaries in the Tibetan religious community. This group has even been implicated by the Indian government in murder of the director of the institute of Buddhist dialectics, Lobsang Gyatso, in Dharmasala, India.² This outbreak of violence stems from a declaration in 1995 by the Dalai Lama that the Tibetan people desist from their worship of Shugden. The Dalai Lama has recently stated that he considered the deity “an evil spirit”, and “a malevolent force which may have been born as a result of misguided aspirations.”³ At the same time, the followers of Shugden maintain that the deity is an emanation of Manjushri, the Buddha of wisdom, who actively “helps all living beings.”⁴ As such, they claim that Shugden is indispensable for proper Buddhist practice and that the Dalai Lama’s declaration from above is tantamount to religious persecution.

¹ World Tibet Network News, “Death Threats to Dalai Lama Blamed on Rival Buddhist Sect,” http://www.tibet.ca/en/wtnarchive/2002/11/20_1.html.

² “Dorje Shugden versus Pluralism and National Unity,” *The Worship of Shugden: Documents Related to a Tibetan Controversy* Dharmasala, India: Department of Religion and Culture, Central Tibetan Administration, 12.

³ The Government of Tibet in Exile, “His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s response to media a question on Shugden at the press conference in Indianapolis on August 16, 1999,” <http://www.tibet.com/dholgyal/hhdl.html>.

⁴ The International Kadampa Buddhist Union, “The Dharma Protector Dorje Shugden,” http://www.kadampa.org/english/tradition/dorje_shugden.php.

Such acts of violence within a community that professes a religion of peace brings up many questions about the nature of social and religious conflict. In this paper, which is based in part upon field research conducted in Dharmasala in the summer of 2006, I shall investigate these tensions within Tibetan society. I shall proceed by tracing the sources of conflict starting from the initial conversion of Tibet to Buddhism and then examine the historical development of the Shugden cult. My objective is to seek a deeper explanation of this controversy by probing the causes of the sociopolitical transformations that have led to the contemporary struggle in the Tibetan Buddhist community. This will require a set of theoretical guidelines that help to explain both the behavior and beliefs of individuals, but also the dynamics of cultural and social change through time. Thus, this paper will attempt also to outline a historical materialist understanding of social and cultural change and apply these theoretical positions to the development of the Shugden cult in order to elucidate the Shugden phenomenon and the forces which led to its creation.

The first point that needs to be made in understanding the Shugden controversy is the reality of the contemporary Shugden phenomenon and its context. This struggle is not occurring in an ideological, material, or cultural vacuum, but is rather completely integrated into a broader system of interactions, exchanges and power relationships. For example, we can speak of the Tibetan government in exile in Dharmasala, India, but that also needs to be understood in relationship to the Cold War politics of Nehru and Mao, as well as the economic, geographical and cultural ties of Tibet to India. At the same time, we also need to see the followers of Shugden in the same light. The New Kadampa Tradition, which centers upon the worship of Shugden, was founded in Britain in 1991.

This movement now claims to have links to over 1,000 communities worldwide.⁵ From its broad and diverse base, this group is spearheading the Shugden cause at the international level.

As a result of this connection to broader political, economic, social, and ideological structures, the controversy regarding Shugden cannot be treated as a localized and geographically isolated phenomenon explicable only in terms of local conditions, but rather must be construed as a part of a larger network of power relations, social interactions, and ideological maneuverings. Rather than through the ideographic lens of Orientalism, I will treat the Shugden phenomenon as a struggle between different nodes of power enmeshed in the global system.⁶

The Historical Context

The roots of the Shugden phenomenon lie deep within several different transformations in Tibetan society. Therefore, an in depth analysis of the historical background, which I shall undertake here, is essential in clarifying aspects of the contemporary controversy regarding Shugden. Until the 6th century, Tibet was primarily a location sparsely populated by nomads with some agricultural production. As a result of this economic structure, there was little need for large complex states or overarching ideologies that could unify beyond locally-based social organizations. This can be seen when we examine Bön, the original religion of Tibet. This collection of beliefs regarding

⁵ The International Kadampa Buddhist Union, “A Global Spiritual Community,” http://kadampa.com/english/tradition/buddhist_sangha.php.

⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein *Introduction to World Systems Analysis* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004) 10.

the world and the supernatural served as ideology which had its roots in the material and social relations of Tibetan society. According to Dargyay, the original deities of Tibet reflected the forces that Tibetans encountered in their hostile environment; mountains, weather, fertility, plants, and animals were considered to either be such forces of nature or beings which controlled such powers. Because they were seen as the arbiters of power over matters of life and death, these original beings were designed for the function of maintaining life and material prosperity through the aspiration of humanity controlling uncontrollable forces. Religious practice was thus focused on propitiating and manipulating these forces to ensure individual and group survival.⁷ This underscores the reality that ancient Tibetans had a keen sense of the fragility of life and civilization vis-à-vis the forces of nature outside of human control. As materialist would emphasize, however, the resulting ideology was a product of the economic and ecological conditions of the Tibetan people.⁸

This ideological superstructure also reflected the political and social power dynamics of the ancient Tibetan society. The secular leadership of the decentralized Tibetan principalities was based on the premise that the rulers had legitimacy conferred upon them by the deities that personified spiritual and natural forces. Because they were intercessors between humans and the supernatural beings which served as metaphors for human needs, the rulers were in an important sense answerable for the material well-

⁷ Eva K. Dargyay "Buddhism in Adaptation: Ancestor Gods and Their Tantric Counterparts in the Religious Life of Zanskar," *History of Religions*, Vol. 28, No. 2. (Nov., 1988), 125

⁸ Richard Comstock, "The Marxist Critique of Religion: A Persisting Ambiguity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 no. 2 (June 1976) 331-333.

being of their subjects. It made sense to refer to claimants to such powers and responsibilities in semi-divine terms using titles such as “Sons of the Gods.”⁹

Alongside the political rulers, however, there was also a class of religious specialists who served as intermediaries between the people and the powerful outside forces. Helmut Hoffman describes this class of intermediaries as decentralized priesthood focused upon modest shrines. These priests, whom Hoffman argues are similar in many respects to shamans, complemented the political elite and performed the key rituals regarding life, marriage, death, fertility, and control over the environment.¹⁰

The Tibetan cultural and social system changed as a result of the expansion of the Silk Road trade between the 6th-8th centuries.¹¹ The increasing commerce led local rulers in the Tibetan Plateau to seek increased regulation and control of lucrative trading routes. This process eventually led to a consolidation of power in the increasingly interconnected principalities of the region.¹² By the 7th century, Songsten-gampo, the son of a local ruler, was enthroned as the king of a unified Tibetan state. Through increasing his realm by both political and military victories, Songsten-gampo was in position to be one of the main power brokers in Central Asia.¹³ Seeking to consolidate this power, Songsten-gampo instated a vast array of reforms over his new territory, including the creation of a written Tibetan language and a royal bureaucracy to manage the affairs of the new state.¹⁴

⁹ Per Kavaerne, “Aspects of the Origin of the Buddhist Tradition in Tibet,” *Numen* 19 no. 1 (April 1972) 258.

¹⁰ Helmut Hoffman *The Religions of Tibet*, London: Simson Shand Ltd. 1956, 23-26.

¹¹ Åshild Kolås “Tibetan Nationalism: The Politics of Religion” *Journal of Peace Research* 33 no. 1 (Feb, 1996) 53.

¹² Ibid 54.

¹³ A. Tom Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet*, London: Zed Books Ltd. 1987, 32.

¹⁴ Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 57.

With this increasingly centralized state, however, also came increased interaction with the outside world. Perhaps the culmination of this cultural opening in Songsten-gampo's reign was his marriage to a Tang Dynasty princess, Wen Chang. Having been a fervent adherent of the Buddhism en vogue at the Chinese court of the time, Wen Chang pushed for a presence of Buddhism in Tibet. Regardless of her personal influence on her husband as a practitioner of Buddhism, Songsten-gampo's policy of tolerance towards Buddhist missionaries contributed a great deal to the conversion of Tibet to Buddhism. What developed as a result of this transformation, however, was a conflict between the Bön clergy and sections of the nobility and the new power of the Buddhist monasteries and intelligentsia. This ultimately led to the centralization of religious authority during the reign of Trisong Detsen in the 8th century, who first made Buddhism the official religion of Tibet and serving the function of a unifying ideology.¹⁵ After a brief resurgence of Bön hegemony under the reign of Langdarma in the mid 9th century, the Tibetan empire collapsed into a multiplicity of warring principalities.¹⁶

At the same time as these political and economic changes were unfolding, Tibetans wrestled with new ideological themes that would influence their further cultural development. Because Bön functioned to explain and guide key elements of social reproduction for the Tibetans, there was a deep psychological resistance to the direct rejection of traditional religion. Bön was not simply an ideology of control by the elite; rituals were linked in the consciousness of the people with material well-being and social

¹⁵ A. Tom Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet*, 33-34.

¹⁶ Ibid 35.

preservation.¹⁷ As a result, scholastic Buddhism became attractive to only a minority and the tradition of Bön maintained much of its prestige.¹⁸

Having recognized this failure to convert the Tibetan kingdom to a scriptural version of Buddhism, Buddhist monks and sections of the ruling class invited Padmashambhava, or Guru Rinpoche to Tibet in the 7th century. His solution to the problem was “pacifying” the indigenous spirits and deities.¹⁹ By this process, the deities were not denied existence or vilified as in the case of the Roman gods upon the conversion of the empire to Christianity, but rather transformed into the protectors legitimizing Buddhism. The quasi-mythical figure of Padmashambhava is extremely important for the eventual acceptance of Buddhism in Tibet, because my story proved a much more effective way of altering people’s belief than forced conversion from sections of the elite. In the Guru Rinpoche narrative, he is represented as a mighty sorcerer who overpowers the external forces and bends them to his will to a greater extent than the traditional Bön priests. This undermined the prestige of the Bön clergy, who struggled unsuccessfully to outdo the Buddhists in magical prowess.²⁰ This led to the general acceptance of “Buddhism” in some form or another among most sectors of Tibetan society in the following centuries.

Following the acceptance of Buddhism, however, key tensions about the nature and function of religious ideology continued in Tibetan culture and practice. The major point of friction was religion as an ideology reflecting social and material needs of the

¹⁷ Helmut Hoffman, *The Religions of Tibet*, 17.

¹⁸ A. Tom Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet*, 35.

¹⁹ Eva K. Dargay “Buddhism in Adaptation: Ancestor Gods and Their Tantric Counterparts in the Religious Life of Zanskar,” 124.

²⁰ Helmut Hoffman speaks of a competition between Naro Bön-Chung, a Bönpo magician and the 11th century Buddhist saint Milarepa in being the first to fly to the summit of the sacred Mount Tisé (Kailas). In this way, prestige was conferred to Milarepa, who was most able to manipulate natural and spiritual forces by reaching the summit first. Hoffman, *The Religions of Tibet*, page 25.

group versus the individualistic means for some sort of “salvation”. This precipitated the creation of a “people’s religion”, *Mi chos* alongside the “orthodox” *Lha Chos*, or the religion which corresponded to the drive for Nirvana. The former focused upon the earthly needs of the kinship group and dealt with localized deities or forces, whereas the latter was more closely linked to scholastic Buddhism.²¹ Straddling this tension between diverging religious functions, traditions, and emphases emerged the concepts related to two classes of paranormal beings, dharma protectors and mundane protectors. Mundane protectors are considered by Tibetans to be forces which were close to earthly life. As a result, they exhibit earthly passions and human-like emotions. Because of their closeness to the earthly realm, they are seen as being extremely potent in manipulating the material world. At the same time, however, because of their lack of Enlightenment they could become harmful and even potentially evil.²² Alongside mundane protectors, there are also spirits and deities that have become enlightened. Although more distant from earthly affairs, these entities are considered to always act for the benefit of all sentient beings.²³ Because of their lofty positions, however, these beings are seen as removed from mundane and material concerns of everyday life.

A concrete difference in supra-mundane (i.e. dharma) protectors and mundane protectors is the nature of violence they can sanction. A supra-mundane protector can sanction violence against an “enemy of Buddhism” only with the impartial and compassionate goal of benefiting the target of such violence. The violence sanctioned by

²¹ J. Russell Kirkland “The Spirit of the Mountain: Myth and State in Pre-Buddhist Tibet,” *history of Religions* 21 no. 3 (Feb. 1982) 260.

²² Georges Dreyfus, “The Shuk-den Affair: The Origins of a Controversy,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21 no. 2 (1998) 270.

²³ The International Kadampa Buddhist Union, “The Dharma Protector Dorje Shugden,” http://www.kadampa.org/english/tradition/dorje_shugden.php

a mundane protector is different because it involves human-like emotions that can injure its victim not for the victim's benefit but for the sake of the in-group which takes the protector as its own.²⁴

The development of these two distinct categories, however, was not a process that was systematic or uncontested. The slow development of religious ideology with Bön and Buddhist influence continued as Tibetan society entered into new transformation. Despite the breakdown of the original Tibetan empire into smaller principalities, Kapstein points out that this was a crucial period in the formation of contemporary Tibetan culture.²⁵ With the loss of centralized state power followed by an economic recovery in the 10th century (fueled by the robust Silk Road trade), Tibetan society found itself with a significant economic surplus. Whereas during the empire this surplus had gone towards the maintenance of a royal bureaucracy, army, and luxuries for the elite, now more of this surplus could be given to new local power elites. What emerged as a powerful force into this relative vacuum were Buddhist monasteries. These institutions were directly connected with the merchant class, for monasteries served the function of converting the wealth gained from trade into symbolic and religious merit for pious rich donors. As a result, the monasteries became increasingly important in their control of land, serfs, as well as political power.²⁶ Local rulers took this into account in their need for legitimacy; emergent religious orders and the nobility created mutually supportive alliances to maintain unity between those that controlled the economy as well as ideology to maintain a mutually beneficial stability.²⁷

²⁴ Georges Dreyfus, "The Shuk-den Affair: The Origins of a Controversy," 268.

²⁵ Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 86.

²⁶ Ibid 87-88.

²⁷ Ibid 101.

The next stage of Tibetan history began with the emergence of the Mongol Empire. In 1252, when Mongke Khan sacked Tibet, local elites and religious orders were forced to come to terms with their new overlords. As a result, the different orders sought to court the Mongol rulers for favor in establishing their own legitimacy. Beginning with the visit of Sakya Pandita to the Mongol court, the Sakya monastic order began a period of hegemony politically and culturally for its hierarchs, leading to a renaissance of Buddhist culture during the period. In the 14th century, Sakya rule was overthrown by the Pakmodrupas, a subsect of the Kaygu School. Despite this setback, the Sakyas maintained their ideological dominance for a time.²⁸ This competition for patronage both outside Tibet as well as control inside the territory was a reflection of the need of monastic institutions to find a social surplus significant enough to support a growing class of monks, scholars, and hierarchs.²⁹ This pressure for surplus to finance the increasing non-working section of the population led to intense rivalries between orders over control of land and resources.

An important figure during this time was the religious reformer Tsongkhapa Lozang Drakpa. Seeing himself as a reformer whose aim was going back to the roots of Tibetan religious tradition, he dubbed his movement as a “New Kadampa”. This was later known as Gelug, which had eventually become a patron of the ruling Pakmodrupas. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into the complex interactions of ideological and political rivalries, it suffices to note that the factional contest continued into the 17th century and evolved to the confrontation between the ascendant tribes of Tsang in Western Tibet associated with the Karma Kaygu School and the now powerful

²⁸ Ibid 119.

²⁹ Ibid 131.

Gelug School and its Mongol patrons. After a time of repression faced by Gelugpas and then open conflict, the coalition of forces aligned with the 5th Dalai Lama Lobsang Gyatso (1617-1682) his Gelug order eventually gained control over a united Tibet.³⁰

The Appearance of Shugden

The original use of “Shugden” seems to have been associated with a certain pond in southern Tibet, Dol (hence an alternative early name for the spirit is Dol-Gyel). This spirit, as a red-spirit of a religious person, was supposed to derive from a religious person who failed in his or her vows before dying or who died under troubling circumstances. This accumulation of negative karma through unethical actions or the experience of death in a moment of anger was said to transform the person into a being which embodied hatred or anguish. Red-spirits were able to cause nuisance but were relatively minor in power and therefore had little importance beyond occasional propitiation rituals by locals.³¹ The practice of Shugden was also linked to certain monasteries in southern Tibetan, notably the Sam-ye monastery, which was affiliated with the Sakya order.

At the same time, another important strand in the creation of the Shugden cult is the historical figure of Tulku Drakba Gyeltsen. Gyeltsen was a high-ranking seventeenth-century Gelug lama whose position in the Shugden story is best understood in relation to the 5th Dalai Lama. When they were born, both were both considered to be important tulkus, or reincarnate lamas. After it was determined that Gyatso was the Dalai Lama, Gyeltsen was given the title of the third Penchen Sonam Drakba, which was another

³⁰ Ibid 135.

³¹ Georges Dreyfus, “The Shuk-den Affair: The Origins of a Controversy,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21 no. 2 (1998) 247.

leading position in the Gelug hierarchy.³² As the Gelug order consolidated power, however, there arose a rivalry between the Dalai Lama and the Pen-chen Son-am Drak-ba. This rivalry ended when the later died young under what his followers considered to be suspicious circumstances.

Given the fact that the victory of the Dalai Lama meant the ascendancy of the Gelug order, there would seem to be a natural alliance with the office of the Dalai Lama and other Gelug hierarchs.³³ Tension between Dalai Lama and other Gelug hierarchs arose, however, in their conflicting interests as in relation to the unified Tibetan state. The Dalai Lama, as a secular ruler, sought to maintain his power as the monarch of Tibet. This at times required a pragmatic policy towards other orders in order to maintain unity and stave off another civil war. Many Gelug lamas resented this conciliatory policy and advocated a state based upon Gelug supremacy as a way to bolster their own power. This tension was also played out on an ideological level as well. As Gramsci has pointed out, a crucial element in the success of a ruling class is its ability of the ruling class to control social norms, legal systems, and ideological apparatuses such that those in power are able to rule by consent and whose positions are held as “common sense”.³⁴ What this meant for the Dalai Lama’s reign was a largely successful attempt to identify himself as the symbol of Tibet. For example, one aspect of this legitimacy was the Dalai Lama’s claim to be an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara, which was undoubtedly a claim that would manufacture the consent of those who were politically subordinated.³⁵ This claim,

³² Ibid. 229.

³³ Ibid. 230.

³⁴ Carol Boggs, *The Two Revolutions: Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism* Boston: South End Press, 1984, 159.

³⁵ Åshild Kolås “Tibetan Nationalism: The Politics of Religion” *Journal of Peace Research* 33 no. 1 (Feb, 1996) 52.

however, also subjected the Gelug hierarchs to the Dalai Lama in a way that had not been so previously. Now their ruler was a divinity; they were no longer colleagues within a monastic tradition, but rather subjects to their king.

Using this logic of consolidation under the rule of a god-king, the 5th Dalai Lama refused to allow any other hierarchies that could rival his political power. This was particularly true regarding the Nyingma sect, which was fiercely suppressed as an institution. To maintain the hegemony of the Dalai Lama, however, this suppression was also coupled with the adoption of many Nyingma beliefs and practices and co-opting some of the ritual while eliminating rivals to power.³⁶

We can see that as a result of this eclecticism as well as the erosion of their power vis-à-vis the Dalai Lama, many Gelug hierarchs came into conflict with the Dalai Lama. Unable to directly challenge the Avalokiteshvara narrative, they voiced their opposition using the discourse of sectarianism. Asserting that their school had won the civil war, many Gelugs asserted a monopoly on political and economic power as well as prestige. The 5th Dalai Lama, as a pragmatic statesman, saw that this was not a policy that would create stability and unify the Tibetan people under one government. To maintain stability, he began a policy of tolerance towards other sects regarding matters of belief and ritual. This was a necessary political concession but also a point of contention among Gelug hardliners.

It was in this context that the opposition figure of Drak-ba Gyeltsen became identified with Shugden. What Dreyfus argues is that it originally was not an association made by Gyeltsen's followers, but rather one made by his enemies to describe the

³⁶ Helmut Hoffman, *The Religions of Tibet*, 174-175.

circumstances of his death.³⁷ This was because to be associated with a red-spirit was a reflection of the moral shortcomings of the person so transformed. Gyeltsen's followers would not want have wanted their leader being associated with such a minor, petty, and negative deity.³⁸ Rejecting this, they felt the need to have some sort of narrative which explained Gyeltsen's death. The reason for this was the fact that the death of a high lama in Tibet was seen as a national disaster that would result in many bad omens. Because Gyeltsen's successor or reincarnation was not sought out for reasons of political stability (an unusual practice among high lamas), the situation necessitated a myth to explain exactly where the deceased lama went. At the time of his death there were several narratives among his followers, including the explanation that he had become reincarnated as the Emperor of China, and was not associated at all with the protector Shugden. Dreyfus argues that the combining of Shugden and Gyeltsen coherently happened later, when a new generation of Gelug opposition to the Dalai Lama sought a symbol to articulate their concerns.³⁹

Dreyfus sees the figure of Pa-Bong-Ka (1878-1941) as the key person in bridging 17th century Shugden practice and the contemporary Shugden movement. Pa-Bong-Ka is an interesting figure in Tibetan religious history because he was accorded a great deal of prestige.⁴⁰ This was not because he was a high-ranking lama or other important official, but because of his acclaimed wisdom and charisma. Through his renown, he was able to influence a whole generation of important Gelug thinkers; one of his disciples even

³⁷ Georges Dreyfus, "The Shuk-den Affair: Origins of a Controversy," 250.

³⁸ Åshild Kolås, "Tibetan Nationalism: The Politics of Religion," 253.

³⁹ Georges Dreyfus, "The Shuk-den Affair: Origins of a Controversy," 252.

⁴⁰ Ibid 255.

became the 14th Dalai Lama's tutor.⁴¹ In terms of his thought, Pa-Bong-Ka was a ~~sort of~~ revivalist figure in the Gelug tradition. Claiming to interpret Tsongkapa's teachings in their original form and therefore representing Gelug orthodoxy, he introduced several innovations to Gelug practice. One of these is the focus on Vajrayogini as the main meditational deity, a practice historically tied to the Sakya School. Pa-Bong-Ka's innovation most pertinent to this paper, however, was his reconfiguration of the Gelug pantheon. Traditionally, Gelugs considered the Dharma-king, another fierce spirit whose anger was turned to a righteous cause, to be the main deity and protector of the tradition.⁴² Pa-bong-ka substituted this deity with Shugden, making the latter the main protector of the Gelug order (particularly Pa-bong-ka's revivalist movement).⁴³ In order to explain this change, the partisans of Shugden used a narrative whereby the Dharma-king supposedly left for the pure land of Tushita and gave the responsibility of being a protector to Shugden.⁴⁴

Unlike the previous partisans of the Pen-chen so-nam Drak-ba, Pa-Bong-ka sought to wed Shugden and Drak-ba Gyel-tsen together. The reason for this connection was that whereas in previous times only the partisans against Drak-ba Gyel-tsen wanted him associated with a minor and dangerous deity, now Pa-bong-ka used such connections to legitimize Shugden not as a minor deity, but as a powerful and fierce dharma

⁴¹ Ibid. 254.

⁴² According to the tradition, the Dharma-king was made into a protector by Tsongkapa through an oath to the latter, reflecting the original Guru Rinpoche myth of a powerful mystic harnessing the power and allegiance of the gods through the spiritual power gained by high levels of piety.

⁴³ In an interesting note, Pa-Bong-ka was originally eclectic, but he became seriously ill and attributed his sickness to the wrath of Shugden for violating orthodoxy. Dreyfus, "The Shuk-den Affair: Origins of a Controversy," 255.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 257.

protector.⁴⁵ This was an entirely political strategy that served to legitimize the Gelug faction vying to maintain exclusive control of the Tibetan state. Pa-bong-ka's innovations were also a critical change in the function of Shugden because the Shugden practice undeniably had its roots in Sakya practice. By linking the deity explicitly to an anti-eclectic, pro-Gelug martyr, he made it unquestionably a Gelug symbol, which allowed the deity to fulfill its task as a fierce Gelug partisan.⁴⁶

The appearance of Pa-bong-ka as a champion of Gelug supremacy during the first half of the 20th century is best understood in context with other trends within Tibetan society and religious life during the same period. The institution of the Dalai Lama, despite the relative eclecticism of the 5th Dalai lama, had become in the 18th and 19th centuries became more conservative and partisan in its championing of the Gelug School. In the late 1800's, however, there was once again a growing movement towards eclecticism, notably in the success of the non-sectarian movement (which included the other now smaller schools against Gelug ascendancy). This tendency also influenced several Gelug hierarchs, re-igniting the debate within the Gelug order between ecumenical and sectarian tendencies. In this way, Pa-Bong-Ka could certainly relate to the situation faced by Drak-ba Gyel-tsen.⁴⁷

Beyond the context of continued infighting between different sects and patronage systems for wealth, power and prestige, an added factor for Tibet in this period was its increasing contact with the outside world. Caught in a strategic location between the expansionist tendencies of the British, Russian, and Chinese, Tibet was often a pawn in

⁴⁵ Pa-Bong-Ka taught that violent means, or "adamantine force" as used by Shugden was necessary to protect the integrity of the Gelug tradition. Dreyfus, "The Shuk-den Affair: Origins of a Controversy," 242.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 263.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 264.

regional geopolitics. This can be seen in the various invasions of Tibet during the reign of the 13th Dalai Lama, by the British in 1904 and by the Chinese in 1910.⁴⁸ After the Chinese revolution of 1912, there was a period of relative autonomy for Tibet, but that only lasted because the West was preoccupied with the two world wars and the Chinese state remained weak.

If the first half of the 20th century was a slow march towards integration with the modern world system for Tibet, the Chinese invasion in 1951 increased that pace to a sprint. With the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Tibet was occupied by the People's Army for a period of uneasy peace between the Tibetan elite and their new Chinese rulers. In 1956, a rebellion against the Chinese began which ultimately led the Dalai Lama, many Tibetan dignitaries as well as other high-ranking lamas to flee into India. Thousands of Tibetans who sought to flee Chinese violence and religious repression followed them.⁴⁹ The political crisis in Tibet escalated in the late 1960's as China shifted to a more radical social policy during the Cultural Revolution. This dramatic upheaval included the destruction of most Tibetan temples, monasteries and other parts of the country's cultural heritage. On an ideological level this included the "re-education" of what remained of the aristocracy, and the secularization of the educational system.⁵⁰ Despite the end of this extreme upheaval in 1976, the Chinese government has continued its policy of hostility both towards the Dalai Lama, who is rightly seen as a competitor with the CCP for the power as the legitimate ruler of the Tibetan people.

⁴⁸ Helmut Hoffman, *The Religions of Tibet*, 181.

⁴⁹ Matthew t. Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 286-288.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 289-290.

Forced to live (at least partially) in exile, the Tibetan people have faced the pressures of greater integration into the world system. The Dalai Lama has found himself as a stateless head of state, struggling within the exile community to maintain legitimacy as a symbol and spokesperson of the Tibetans. Despite his lack of coercive political power, the Dalai Lama still maintains a degree of ideological hegemony over the Tibetan people. A key component of this is the Dalai Lama's continued assertion to be an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara, a claim that accords him significant authority and prestige.⁵¹ Another key aspect of this continued power (within the exile community) is the control of Tibetan education. Currently, 84% of Tibetan refugees in India attend Tibetan classes, which teach them about their cultural traditions as well as reinforce the legitimacy and centrality of the government-in-exile. This is a feat that will be harder to maintain as time passes and Tibetans learn new languages and are exposed to a multitude of other perspectives. Thus, there is an increasing desperation regarding the preservation of unity for the exile community, particularly as some Tibetans gain citizenship in other countries, acquire Western education, and face pressures of assimilation.⁵² Another concern is the possibility of uniting the Tibetan community after the death of the current Dalai Lama. Without a leader to serve as a spokesman for the Tibetan cause, many fear that the physical and cultural dispersion of Tibetans will accelerate.

⁵¹ Åshild Kolås "Tibetan Nationalism: The Politics of Religion" *Journal of Peace Research* 33 no. 1 (Feb, 1996) 53.

⁵² Ibid. 58.

The Contemporary Controversy

It is within this historical context that the contemporary Shugden controversy sprang forth. What began the current Shugden affair was the publication in 1975 of the “Yellow Book” by Dze-may Rinpoche, a disciple of Tri-jang.⁵³ This book included a list of Gelug lamas whose lives were shortened and how this was a result of Shugden’s anger at their eclecticism (Nying-ma teachings). For the first time, there was an actual threat based upon “facts” of bodily harm and violence to any Gelug practitioner who dared to stray from what was declared as orthodox. The Dalai Lama immediately denounced this book in closed teachings, refusing the long life offerings at new years in 1976. This is a ritual that is done yearly to renew the pledge of the Dalai Lama as an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara to help and serve the people of Tibet rather than return back to the paradise befitting high-ranking bodhisattvas. Interpreted as a moral message, this event commemorates the benign ruler/deity’s sacrifice in condescending to help mortals. As a political ritual, this is a ceremony which reinforces the ideology of legitimacy for the ruler and the dependence of his subjects upon him. Because of the continued legitimacy of the ideology of Dalai Lama as ruler-god, the possibility of his abandonment of the Tibetan people caused severe anguish among the devout. After a frenzied round of rituals and pleading by the faithful, the Dalai Lama accepted the long life offerings. On top of this symbolic reprisal, the Dalai Lama publicly berated Dze-may for his book, ordered

⁵³ Tri-Jang, who was Pa-Bong-Ka’s disciple became very notable around mid 20th century. He became the main tutor and expounder of Gelug thought in exile- he was able to attain such a hegemony because many of the more eclectic-minded high lamas remained in Tibet and did not flee. Tri-Jang also introduced his own innovations to Shugden theology, arguing that the protector was actually a fully enlightened Buddha but only appeared to be a mundane deity. See Dreyfus, “The Shuk-den Affair: Origins of a Controversy,” 246.

the propitiation of the deity stopped in several monasteries and had had several statues of Shugden removed.⁵⁴

Because of the increasingly diffuse geographical placement of Tibetans in the exile, this set of actions reverberated throughout the Western world, particularly in Europe. At the same time of the publication of the “Yellow Book”, Lama Thubten Yeshe along with his disciple, Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, founded the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) in 1975. This group, firmly aligned with the Gelug sect, maintained the practice of propitiating Shugden in Italy and Britain, with Lama Yeshe gaining notoriety as the student of Tri-jang Rinpoche.⁵⁵ In 1976, Lama Yeshe requested Trijang Rinpoche to invite Geshe Kelsang Gyatso to teach in the center. With ties to Thomas Merton, Tri-jang Rinpoche as well as other important figures in the religious world, Gyatso was a rising star in the Gelug hierarchy.⁵⁶ As a charismatic teacher, Kelsang Gyatso continued his teachings and generated a broad group of followers. By the early 1980’s tension grew about control and leadership between Lama Yeshe and Kelsang Gyatso, requiring the Dalai Lama to intervene in February of 1984 to maintain peace.⁵⁷ Despite this uneasy truce, Kelsang Gyatso’s popular following continued to grow. By the time he returned from a three-year retreat in 1990, he led fifteen different Buddhist centers. Following a tour of North America in the same year, he laid the groundwork for a broader network in the US, Canada, and Mexico. In 1991, he officially split his organization from the FPMT to form the New Kadampa Tradition

⁵⁴ Georges Dreyfus, “The Shuk-den Affair: The Origins of a Controversy,” 260.

⁵⁵ “Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Shugden,” <http://www.fpmt.org/organization/announcements/shugden/ILTKtalk-Thirdedit.pdf>.

⁵⁶ James Belithier, “Modern Day Kadampas: The History and Development of the New Kadampa Tradition,” http://www.meditateinireland.com/html_pages/Modern%20Day%20Kadampas.htm.

⁵⁷ David N. Kay: *Tibetan and Zen Buddhism in Britain: Transplantation, Development and Adaptation*, London and New York, 61-64.

(NKT).⁵⁸ Since its existence as a separate organization, the NKT has grown dramatically, currently boasting 1000 centers in 40 different countries.⁵⁹

Despite this increased tension, the Dalai Lama was able to smooth over these difficulties within the Tibetan community through the 1980's and early 1990's. The prestige that enabled such cohesiveness eroded quickly, however, when the Dalai Lama publicly denounced Shugden 1995. The main element in this condemnation included the new admonition that all followers of the Dalai Lama either abandon Shugden worship or be no longer eligible to hear the Dalai Lama's teaching. This was in many ways a risk taken by the Dalai Lama, because this move had the potential of dividing the Gelugs along modernist and traditionalist lines. Before making his declaration, however, the Dalai Lama succeeded in gaining allies among powerful Gelug lamas, most notably the the Ganden Lama, head of the Gelug sect.⁶⁰ There have also been other sectors of the Gelug establishment that have sided with the Dalai Lama, including FPMT.⁶¹

Despite some measure of unity, not all of the influential Gelugs embraced the Dalai Lama's mandate. Shortly after the announcement, the NKT formed a new interest group in London called the Shugden Supporters Community (SSC) in early spring 1996. The SSC staged a series of protests at the Tibet office in Britain and gave press releases to large media outlets about the Dalai Lama's "religious persecution". This was a strategic manipulation of Western liberal discourse and was of particular interest to

⁵⁸ The choice of this name is important, because it recalls the original teachings of Tibetan Buddhism from the Kadampas. From its origin, the Gelug sect saw itself as a renewal of the pure teachings, and was also known as the "New Kadampa School". What this means, therefore, is that the goal of the NKT is to return to the roots of Gelug (and therefore original) teachings and contrast this new movement of purity with the tarnished ecumenism of the Dalai Lama.

⁵⁹ The International Kadampa Buddhist Union, "Kadampa Buddhist Centers," <http://www.kadampa.org/english/centers/index.php>.

⁶⁰ Deepak Thapa, "It's Dalai Lama vs. Shugden," <http://www.south-asia.com/himal/September/dorje.htm>.

⁶¹ "Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Shugden," <http://www.fpmt.org/organization/announcements/shugden/ILTKtalk-Thirdedit.pdf>

Western media outlets because the SSC challenged the image the Dalai Lama attempted to cultivate as a leader of religious freedom. This protest and the accompanying media attention was particularly turbulent for the Tibetan exile community, for Indian newspapers soon picked up on the event (India continues to have the greatest concentration of Tibetan exiles).⁶²

In another event on November of the same year Dr. Lobsang Thubten, the leader of the India-based Dorje Shugden Devotees Religious and Charitable society was attacked by several masked men speaking Tibetan. They threatened him to stop his advocacy of Shugden or that his whole family would be exterminated.⁶³ The violence continued to escalate further on February 4, 1997 when Lobsang Gyatso, head of the Sarah Institute in Dharmasala and a prominent anti-Shugden Gelug spokesman, was murdered along with two of his students in the middle of the night after being stabbed multiple times.⁶⁴ Following the assassinations, fourteen other high ranking Gelug lamas were threatened for their agreement with the Dalai Lama's line. At the same time, activists in the Dorje Shugden Devotees Charitable and Religious Society argued that the Government in Exile required Tibetan refugees to sign papers that they will not propitiate Shugden. Those who refused were threatened with the withdrawal of aid, access to jobs and education. There were incidences of property also being damaged or threatened.⁶⁵

These fault lines among Tibetan Buddhists were not limited to Britain and India, for in May of 1998, a group of activists affiliated with the Dorje Shugden International Coalition (whose parent organization is the NKT) protested the Dalai Lama's visit in

⁶² Deepak Thapa, "It's Dalai Lama vs. Shugden," <http://www.south-asia.com/himal/September/dorje.htm>.

⁶³ James Burns, "The Gelug Tradition Threatened," <http://www.well.com/~willard/shugden.html>.

⁶⁴ The Tibetan Government in Exile, "Dha" <http://www.tibet.com/dholgyal/CTA-book/chapter-5-1.html>

⁶⁵ Ibid.

New York, claiming that he denied their religious freedom.⁶⁶ Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the veracity of these claims or incidents, it is clear that there has been a high level of confrontation between practitioners of Shugden and those siding with the Dalai Lama.

In order to understand the basis of this conflict, we need to find the engine behind such social conflicts and change. According to Marvin Harris, a general approach to a materialist understanding of these processes would focus upon the primacy of demographics, environment, technology, and organization of production as interrelated forces which work to drive change.⁶⁷ This would mean that the main forces behind the current controversy are the massive population shifts in the number and distribution of Tibetans around the globe, the exposure to foreign commodities and quick international travel, as well as Tibetan culture and society's interaction with a global economic structures based upon markets and mass consumption. These changes in the base of society lead to competing interests contending for wealth and power and serve as the spark which ignites conflict.

One of the weaknesses of this approach, however, is that it can lead to the conclusion that culture, ideology and other factors placed under "superstructure" are seen as being narrowly determined by the material base.⁶⁸ Marvin Harris argues against this simplistic "economism", arguing instead that there is a complex relationship between

⁶⁶ "Dalai Lama Greeted by Protestors in Manhattan,"

http://www.newkadampa.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=33.

⁶⁷ Marvin Harris, "Monistic Determinism: Anti-Service," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 42 no. 3 (Autumn 1986) 366.

⁶⁸ Marx famously said in *The Communist Manifesto* "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class." Page number date

base and superstructure; the reproduction of social and individual life is best understood as the “ultimate” element in history rather than the only one.⁶⁹

Gramsci also noted that another potential problem with the strictly materialist theoretical position is the inability to describe power outside of raw coercion and violence. What Gramsci sought to uncover were the systems of domination that do not have their basis upon violence but rather focus on achieving power without force.⁷⁰ This requires an examination of the institutions in society that are responsible for the production of ideology and knowledge through books, the internet, mass media, as well as control of the intelligentsia and educational system. It is through these means that ideologies are presented, either to legitimize or criticize current power relations and teach the population to either accept or reject them. Thus, as we begin to look at the different actors and interests, we will need to keep in mind both the material basis for conflict as well as the struggle for legitimacy at the level of ideology.

One important interested party in this conflict is the Chinese Government. China’s policy objective is to maintain political and economic control over Tibet. Although the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution has receded, the CCP still makes a connection between certain elements of Tibetan culture and claims for political independence, such as the continued prestige of the Dalai Lama among the people of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. As a result, China’s agenda in the controversy is to use it as an opportunity to embarrass, undermine, and de-legitimize the authority of the exile government and the Dalai Lama. China sees this as a priority, because the primary power of the Dalai Lama presently is through international prestige and the political capital he

⁶⁹ Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, New York: Colombia, 1968. 244-245.

⁷⁰ Thomas R. Bates, “Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 no. 2 (April-June 1975) 351-352.

receives from maintaining his image as a tolerant, pacifist leader. This struggle for image can be seen in a recent press release on the official website of the government of China describing the destruction of shrines to Shugden by monks following the 1995 declaration not to continue Shugden worship. The CCP describes the event as follows:

At face value it is an internal affair within a monastery but on a fundamental level it was provoked by the Dalai clique whose purpose is to stir up conflict between different sects of Tibetan Buddhism and thus sabotage the unity of Tibet.⁷¹

In undermining the Dalai Lama, the Chinese government does not hesitate to use Western liberal ideas such as religious freedom to condemn the actions of anti-Shugden activists in Tibet as well as India.⁷² This is done to discredit the Dalai Lama among the international community and position itself ideologically as a defender of human rights, while describing the Dalai Lama as an isolated reactionary. According to Dreyfus, the CCP has also worked more actively to exploit this disunity within the Tibetan people with the goal of undermining their support for the Dalai Lama, funding a renovation of a Shugden temple in Lhasa and cooperating with the exile Shugden movement.⁷³

Another set of actors involved are Westerners who have converted to Tibetan Buddhism. Deepak Thapa argues that the Westernized context is necessary to understand the nature and course of the controversy. He argues that the “protestantizing” of Buddhist religious teaching has led to a different understanding of religious truth as conditional

⁷¹ China Through a Lens, “Dalai Lama Accused of Provoking Religious Conflict,” <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2006/May/167796.htm>

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Georges Dreyfus, “The Shuk-den Affair: The Origins of a Controversy,” 226.

and related to the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness. Rather, with a Western literalist understanding, non-Tibetans have given the sectarian split a Western character, using confrontational language and protest as in a traditional Western political movement. At the same time, Thapa argues that the financing of by western donors has also changed the nature of Tibetan Buddhism.⁷⁴ Whether it is a publication by the Dalai Lama or Kelsang Gyatso, there is an increasing tendency for Tibetan Buddhism to manufacture books or religious materials as commodities. Without political control of a given territory, both Dharmasala and the NKT are forced to finance their organizations by other means. An increasing amount of this revenue is from Western-language books marketed to religious consumers in the developed world. What this means is that now there is an increased competition between the NKT and other Tibetan Buddhist groups in attracting converts and their material support. This changes the function of religion from being an important social glue of a traditional society to an enterprise which seeks to compete with others at the level of public relations (or force) for a greater share of the religious tourist market.

Another factor regarding the unique role of Westerners is the geographical dispersion of Tibetan religious figures. The physical separation of many parts of the Tibetan Diaspora has led to a position whereby lamas and other teachers can act in a power vacuum. Finding themselves in a culture that does not understand the intricacies of Tibetan sectarianism or Tibetan politics, these leaders can attain unprecedented privilege and authority in the absence of traditional institutional checks and balances.

Thus, Kelsang Gyatso in Britain can safely claim that Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet and India are dead and that he will be the future leader of Tibetan Buddhism without the

⁷⁴ “Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Shugden,” <http://www.fpmt.org/organization/announcements/shugden/ILTKtalk-Thirdedit.pdf>

same risk that he would encounter if he confronted the Dalai Lama in Dharmasala.⁷⁵

When the Other is located around the world in a culture that has little basis for understanding exotic societies, people can claim a level of legitimacy and authority that would be impossible in their own cultural setting. Westerners can play into this because they can easily be made partisans of either the Dalai Lama, unaware of the existence of Shugden, or members of the NKT as rejecting the Dalai Lama without any contextualization of the situation.

The other protagonists in this conflict are the Dalai Lama and members of his government in Dharmasala. We have already spoken about the desire of the Dalai Lama to work towards preserving Tibetan culture and people in exile. Related to this need for preservation, however, is also a desire to preserve the institution of the Dalai Lama itself. Forced to confront the political system of liberal democracy while in exile, the role of the Dalai Lama as the head of state has been changing. In order to keep the community together and maintain his authority among a new generation of Western-educated Tibetans in India, the Dalai Lama began in the 1970's to move towards positioning himself as a proponent of democracy and religious tolerance. This meant that he moved away from the more strictly Gelug practice of his earlier life and came to mimic more closely the political and cultural goals and practices of the 5th Dalai Lama. In attempting to gain legitimacy for re-creating a united and centralized Tibetan kingdom, the 5th Dalai Lama sought to use symbols and practices which were associated with the first Tibetan Empire.

⁷⁵ “Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Shugden,”
<http://www.fpmt.org/organization/announcements/shugden/ILTKtalk-Thirdedit.pdf>

In religious terms, this meant a central role for Guru Rinpoche, who converted Tibet to Buddhism and founded the Nying-ma School, as well as the association of deity Ne-chung constituting “red protector” of the Dalai Lama institution.⁷⁶ This increased devotion to Guru Rinpoche and Ne-chung encouraged by the 5th Dalai Lama which was alien to the Gelug tradition and was met with hostility both when it was proposed in the 17th century and again in the 20th by the now-ecumenical 14th Dalai Lama.⁷⁷

This attempt to unite the Tibetan community behind his authority in a manner transcending sectarian lines culminated in the Dalai Lama’s call for large collective worship of Guru Rinpoche in October 1975. This event was poorly attended and was widely considered to be a failure. Given this failure occurring at the same time as the publishing of the “Yellow Book”, the Dalai Lama could not help but conclude that Shugden symbolized a sectarianism that undermined his own authority as leader of the Tibetan people. This recognition led to the Dalai Lama’s changing attitude towards Shugden. Although his tutors had been Shugden adherents (although Trijang Rinpoche was the only tutor that was directly involved in Shugden practice), the Dalai Lama now sought to de-legitimize the figure. Now, the Government in Exile claims that Shugden is nothing more than a spirit that has little to do with the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.⁷⁸

At the same time, Dharmasala is also producing information to substantiate the claim that there has been a history of rejection of Shugden, particularly by the 13th Dalai Lama, along with the assertion that partisans of Shugden constitute a “tiny minority”.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ne-Chung was one of the deities that was originally converted by Guru Rinpoche.

⁷⁷ Georges Dreyfus, “The Shuk-den Affair: The Origins of a Controversy,” 260.

⁷⁸ “Dorje Shugden versus Pluralism and National Unity,” *The Worship of Shugden: Documents Related to a Tibetan Controversy*, Dharmasala, India: Department of Religion and Culture, Central Tibetan Administration, 6.

⁷⁹ Tibetan Studies Press Office, “Dalai Lama ‘supporters’ try violently to oppress Buddhist monks in Mundgod, India,” <http://www.tibet-internal.com/>.

As in the case of the Chinese government, there is a fierce ideological battle by the Government in Exile to dismiss opposition as an insignificant minority. By describing Shugden as a minor and unimportant deity, the Dalai Lama and his government are hoping to relegate the troublesome deity to oblivion

Other key actors are the NKT and other groups that describe themselves as adherents of Shugden. For them, the main issue ostensibly is the preservation of their religious practice and beliefs. Shugden followers blamed the Dalai Lama and the chairperson of the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies for creating a division in the monastic community, calling them "Islamists" and claiming that their motivation is the assertion of "worldly" political power.⁸⁰ According to this image, it is the power politics and cynical maneuverings of Dharmasala that has caused the conflict, not the devotees of Shugden. However explicitly religious these claims may be, however, there are also specific assertions of secular power made by Shugden adherents.

The followers of Shugden have ascribed the occurrences of many deaths and political leaders to apostasy.⁸¹ At the same time, Shugden's wrath is also said to influence the dreams of other sectarians, such as the Nyingma or Kaygu, or in commoners who stray from Gelug orthodoxy.⁸²

Although the devout follower of Shugden may explain these claims of violence and control as neutral facts, we need to maintain the ability to distinguish between emic understandings of social or spiritual relationships and an etic understanding of objective

⁸⁰ Georges Dreyfus, "The Shuk-den Affair: The Origins of a Controversy," 243.

⁸¹ "Dorje Shugden versus Pluralism and National Unity," *The Worship of Shugden: Documents Related to a Tibetan Controversy*, 7.

⁸² Ibid. 233.

social relations independent of man's will or perception.⁸³ For these believers, any threat to the Gelug order through syncretism or banning Shugden practice will invoke the deity's wrath. From an etic perspective, however, Shugden's anger serves as a symbol regarding the threat to that group's prestige and power. This argument is favored by Gareth Sparham, who states that the debate is ultimately regarding two different visions of the future Tibetan society: "fundamentalist" and sectarian or secularist. The goals of the Shugden followers are the creation of a Tibetan society where monks and monastic powers are central and non-Gelug traditions are considered to be heterodox.

Conclusion

What we can see in the Shugden controversy is the struggle for power between rival groups played out metaphorically on the level of supernatural beings. With the NKT, China and the Government in exile all having conflicting political goals, the result is conflict. What has allowed this conflict to evolve along such lines is the physical dispersion of Tibetans across the world, their contact with Western liberal democratic culture, modern technology and media techniques as well as economic incorporation into the world capitalist system. These dynamics altered the distribution of social power and led to the political and institutional struggles between rival groups that have emerged in this new configuration.

It is important to remember that although part of this struggle manifests itself on the physical level with acts of intimidation, violence and even murder, much of the

⁸³ Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, New York: Colombia, 1968. 232.

struggle is also fought on the level of ideology. At this level, different groups compete for control of the production of knowledge that creates the legitimacy for their own power claims. What this means is that the Shugden controversy is one to be solved by a dispute among learned theologians or reasoned debate sitting down together and figuring out the “correct” knowledge about the historical and ethical nature of Shugden. This question will be solved with the victory of one group over another through either violence and outright suppression, or, more likely, the imposition of a complete monopoly on the ability to produce knowledge regarding Shugden. Until this occurs, partisans both for and against Shugden will continue to confront each other ideologically (and occasionally physically) until a given position regarding Shugden becomes hegemonic.

