

THE HORSE WITH TWO SADDLES:
TAMXHWE IN MODERN GOLOK

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ABSTRACT

Thirty-three examples of oral sayings, mainly from the Golok area, used in conflict mediation are presented and discussed in terms of their usage by mediators and how they reflect Tibetan values and life.

KEY WORDS

Proverbs, riddles, *tamxhwe*, Golok, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province

"You have to go to Golok to hear real *tamxhwe*."¹

Conflict resolution is a topic most Amdo Tibetans will readily discuss and the oratorical skills of the *zowa* (*gzu ba*) 'mediators' are always emphasized. It was in Golok that they were said to be particularly impressive. "They make displays of oratory during the early stages of the mediation process," explained one informant, a respected mediator from Machu (Rma chu). "They use proverbs and riddles that are difficult to understand. It is like jousting with words, a display of skill." He was referring to the representatives of individual parties, but the same skills are even more important for mediators. The more serious and entrenched the conflict—two Amdo tribes may fight for generations over valuable grassland—the more important it is to secure a high-status mediator, often a lama or local leader with a reputation for oratory.

The mediators' task is to persuade reluctant parties to compromise and accept compensation in lieu of taking revenge for an injury or killing; this can require a lengthy and elaborate process extending over several days. "In Golok," my informant continued, "they use *tamxhwe*; those who can make good speeches and employ it well enjoy high reputations." The *tamxhwe*, it appeared, were like proverbs or riddles and in one or two cases an informant was able to repeat one of them to me, but I was repeatedly told that I had to go to Golok to learn more. The oratorical skills of the Golok mediators obviously had a considerable reputation throughout Amdo, and in the summer of 2004 I went to this large area in southern Qinghai Province to investigate.²

¹ I transcribe oral Tibetan terms according to the local pronunciation, which varies considerably even within Amdo, and indicate the spelling according to the Wylie (1959) system: Golok (Mgo log), *tamxhwe* (*gtam dpe*). I use Wylie to transcribe the *tamxhwe*.

² I conducted almost twelve months of fieldwork in Amdo between 2003 and 2007, during which I spent a

BACKGROUND

Before being more firmly incorporated into the People's Republic of China in 1958, the region known as Amdo, the north-eastern part of the Tibetan Plateau, was not politically unified. The majority of Amdo consists of grasslands where nomadic pastoralists secure their livelihoods by herding yaks and sheep, bordered by agricultural valleys populated by Tibetan and Hui farmers to the north and east. Although some parts of the region had formed small polities or kingdoms, in most pastoral areas the nomads were organized into tribes and each used a distinct area of grassland and combined to worship a territorial deity. The tribes of Golok formed a loose confederacy under three hereditary ruling families and had a particular reputation for feuding and fighting.³ Similar patterns were found throughout Amdo. Historical accounts, particularly those of Robert Ekvall, who lived in the area from the 1920s to the 1950s, describe their elaborate processes of mediation, including the oratorical skills of the best mediators, and I found similar patterns continuing in the twenty-first century.

considerable amount of time in different parts of Golok. I am very grateful to Rigdrol, who helped with the translations, to Kevin Stuart, Susan Costello, and Angus Cargill for their assistance and advice and to the many Tibetans who supplied the information and assistance that was essential to the preparation of this article.

³ I describe this tribal organisation at greater length in Pirie (2005). I use the term 'tribe', following Khoury and Kostiner (1990), to refer to these groups, which have a distinct identity, relatively egalitarian internal relations, and leaders who are more like chiefs than heads of a state. Historical accounts of tribal relations in Amdo, including the patterns of feuding and fighting, are found in Ekvall (1939, 1954, 1964, 1968) and in Hermanns (1949, 1959).

I traveled throughout the region seeking a better understanding of these mediation processes, but it was in Golok, as my informants had promised, that I found the most elaborate traditions of oratory.

THE *TAMXHWE*

In Golok all mediators told me proudly of their oratorical skills and all confirmed the importance of *tamxhwe*. Using *tamxhwe* requires skill, sounds impressive, and demonstrates erudition, one of them told me. Another remarked on his ability to confuse opponents in a pastureland dispute by using *tamxhwe*. Several repeated examples to me. They were mostly two line proverbs, but there were also examples of longer sayings and shorter maxims, including some resembling koans (short paradoxical statements).

Seeing my interest, one informant dug out a book of *tamxhwe* entitled *Dmangs khrod kyi gnam dpe (Folk Proverbs)*, published in 1991 by the Golok Prefecture Office. This was well into China's reform period, after the government had largely reversed the previous policies of collectivization. The effect, in Amdo, was to return livestock to private ownership of individual families and, effectively, to allow the nomads to return to many of the ways of life that they had previously followed. This meant that inter-tribal relations, in the form of feuding and fighting, re-emerged and with them the need for elaborate forms of conflict resolution. The production of this book seems to have been part of a government initiative in Golok to record local history and customs. I also collected a copy of a two-volume history published at the same time, which contained genealogies of the former ruling families, records of marriages, histories of the monasteries, and descriptions of significant events. It also contained a redaction of the old

laws of Golok, which set out principles and rules relating to warfare and mediation.⁴

The book of *tamxhwe* contained several hundred of these proverbs (mostly in the two-line form), arranged in no particular order. Most related to matters of morality, personal conduct, gender, and family relations. They were clearly proverbs and dicta that would have been repeated orally as guidance for children, during discussions in the tent or on the grasslands as men (in particular) reflected on contemporary events; and they could have been used during meetings of tribal groups, as well as during mediation processes. None of them had direct religious significance, although there were oblique references, as can be seen below, to certain aspects of Buddhism. Apart from this book, *tamxhwe* appears to have been an almost exclusively oral tradition.

Unable to obtain a copy of the book, I wrote down a selection of those proverbs which seemed to have the most relevance to the nature of social order and the causes and resolution of conflict. What follows is not, therefore, an entirely representative sample, but gives a flavor of the content of the book and insight into how *tamxhwe* can be employed during practices of mediation.⁵

⁴ Contemporary relations between Tibetans' tribal organisation, practices of conflict, and conflict resolution, on the one hand, and representatives of the Chinese state and local government, on the other, are complex and the subject of other publications (Pirie 2005, forthcoming). An analysis of the Golok law code is in preparation.

⁵ For the translations I have relied upon the explanations of my assistants and informants in Golok, the dictionary of Chandra Das (1998) and that of Huadanzhaxi et al. (2000), an Amdo dictionary containing many words and phrases particular to the region. As an anthropologist I do not claim expertise in the translation of written Tibetan and have not

Among matters of general morality is this statement about honesty and accuracy:

1

¹ rtsis na grangs ka tshang dgos

² tshang na rgya kha 'dang dgos

¹ When you count you must include every number,

² When you have finished the amount must be right.⁶

Adopting a more ironic tone is this comment on the nature of work:

2

¹ za ran dus khrung khrung sngon mo'i ske bsrings 'dra

² las ran dus rje btsun sgrol ma'i sku 'dra 'dra

¹ When it is time to eat you acquire the elongated neck of a blue crane,

² When it is time to work you become like a statue (of Jetsun Drolma).⁷

Others emphasize the need for cooperation:

sought out the literal meaning of the most obscure examples. I have, rather, been relatively free in the translations, seeking to capture the gist of the words, particularly as explained by my assistants, rather than their exact meanings. Needless to say, I would be grateful if obvious translation errors were pointed out.

⁶ My assistant translated it as 'when you weigh you must be accurate', but I am unsure how *tshang* might mean 'weigh'.

⁷ Jetsun Drolma, also known by the Sanskrit name Tara, is a ubiquitous and revered Tibetan Buddhist deity.

3

¹ skud pa gcig gis ras mi nyan

² sdong bo gcig gis nags mi nyan

¹ A single thread will not make a cloth,

² A single tree does not make a forest.

and the need for discipline:

4

¹ kha tshod yod (med) kyis gnam la phu tshags

² lag tshod yod (med) kyis sa la ri mo

¹ An ill-disciplined voice whistles in the wind,

² Ill-disciplined hands (only) draw a picture on the ground.

Others reflect on the nature of wisdom, particularly the dangers of careless or thoughtless speech. This is a recurrent theme in the Tibetan cultural world, and is the subject of one of the *mi dge ba bcu*, the ten Buddhist moral prohibitions.

5

¹ zas za na pho bas zhu ni zhig

² tshig bshad na gor ra 'dus ni zhig

¹ When you eat your stomach digests (the food)

² When you talk you gather up (your words).

6

¹ gtam glen pas bshad na 'phya byed yin

² rta zha bo rgyug na dgod byed yin

¹ If you talk stupidly you will be derided,

² If you race a lame horse you will be laughed at.

7

¹ bsam blo ma btang gi skad cha

² dmigs pa ma bzung gi phad sgra

¹ Thoughtless speech (is like),

² *Pad dra* without (proper) mental attention.⁸

8

¹ gtam go go bu chas bshad rgyu min

² g.yu rig rig bu mos 'dog rgyu min

¹ A man who hears everything should not talk,

² A woman who looks at turquoise should not wear it.

This is one of several that refer to the position and roles of women, many of which are not wholly respectful.

Several of the *tamxhwe* equate careless or angry speech with the creation or exacerbation of conflict. The most serious conflicts that arise in Amdo are generally the consequence of livestock-raiding and pasture disputes. However, there are also cases of personal animosity between individuals which erupt into fighting. A serious injury or death caused by men of another tribe can lead to a full-scale conflict between two tribes. The *tamxhwe* below all highlight the role of words, rather than actions, in causing conflict.

9

¹ gri yi rma la drag rgyu yod

² tshig gi rma la drag rgyu med

⁸ *Phad sgra* is likely the Sanskrit *phat sgra*, translated by Das (1998, 819) as "a powerful and efficacious ejaculation used in mantras for the destruction and suppression of evil spirits." My assistant thought it was a prayer said over dead bodies.

¹ A knife wound will heal,

² A verbal wound will not heal.

10

¹ mi'i bar la kha

² khyi'i bar la tshil

¹ What comes between men is words,

² What comes between dogs is fat.

11

¹ 'chi bdag chon thag sne na yod

² mi kha rta rdang nang na 'khor

¹ The Lord of Death is at the end of the tent ropes

² Gossip circulates around the horse enclosure.

12

¹ nang phu nu'i bar la gyod mi mdza'

² lug rgyu ma'i bar la gri mi mdza'

¹ Conflict between brothers is not good,

² Putting a knife into a mutton sausage is not good.

Quarrels within families or small tribal groups can lead to disunity or lack of solidarity, a matter which is always taken very seriously. Indeed, the principle of group loyalty is fundamental to the tribal organization of Amdo nomads and it was often referred to by my informants, particularly in the context of conflict. One headman in Machu, for example, told me that in a long-running pastureland dispute between his tribe and one of its neighbors, one of the smaller groups that made up his tribe refused to join in the hostilities, on the basis that its members had kin links with the neighboring tribe. He shook his head several times while recounting this sad fact to me

and used a phrase which I heard elsewhere, more than once:

13

tshang ma'i skyid sdug gcig red

Our happiness and sadness is the same (should be shared).

Implicit in the processes of feuding and mediation are notions of honor and dignity.⁹ The need for revenge, although often expressed as being the result of anger, is always implicitly associated with an affront to dignity that may have occurred through a raid or injury. Equally, a feud can only be brought to an end, or prevented from arising, if compensation is paid that satisfies the injured party's honor. Although the circumstances under which revenge can and should be taken are often asserted and are even made explicit in the written law code, the dangers of an over-emphasis on dignity and honor are also recognized.

14

¹ nang phu nu'i la rgya gtong dgos

² phyi sde bar la rgya 'dzin dgos

¹ (Be prepared to) let go of your dignity within your own family,

² (But) maintain your dignity in the face of other tribes.

Also reflecting tribal dynamics and structures are *tamxhwe* that discuss the position of the Golok headman *xhombo* (*dpon po*). All tribes have a headman *gowa* (*mgo ba*), but there is and was considerable variation in their status. Some were hereditary, presiding over a single group or a whole set of tribes, achieving the status of *rgyal po*

⁹ These are generally expressed, simply, in terms of anger, but the sentiments implied are complex (Pirie 2007).

(king), as in Sokwo (Sog po) and Ngawa (Rnga ba). In certain areas the monastery exercised administrative control and sent monks to be *gowa*, although sub-tribes might continue to appoint their own headmen, who advised the monastery's representative. In Golok there were three, supposedly related, ruling families, known as *xhombo*, who traced their ancestry back to three brothers. These families were primarily responsible for coordinating pastoral movements and religious ceremonies, for organizing their tribes at times of conflict or war and, crucially, for making peace. It was among the members of these families that were, and still are, the highest status mediators in Golok; individuals with a particular reputation for oratory. A number of these were among my most informative assistants.

15

¹ dpon chen tshig la or bshad med

² ri mtho brag la phyir ltas med

¹ A great *xhombo* does not change what he says,

² If you are on the rocks of a cliff you do not look back.

The following was related to me by a Tibetan in Hualong Hui Autonomous County, a farming area in the northeast of Amdo:

16

¹ gos chen snying na lhan pa mi nyan

² dpon po lhung na g.yog po mi nyan

¹ When fine clothes are worn out they cannot be used to make patches,

² *Xhombo* who fall (morally) cannot (even) become servants.

It was particularly interesting that I should have come across this in Hualong, an area at the opposite end of Amdo to Golok. From at least the nineteenth century it was dominated by representatives of the Qing administration and, subsequently, by Hui under Ma Bufang, who seized control in the first half of the twentieth century and now form the majority of the population. Hualong Tibetan *xhombo*, therefore, had considerably less status than elsewhere in Amdo. Nevertheless, the term *xhombo* obviously has metaphorical significance in a broad swath of Amdo.

The importance of resolving problems is a recurrent theme and I recorded a number of examples dealing specifically with conflict and its resolution:

17

¹ gyod ma bshad sems kyi mdzer ma yin

² bshad dang na chu kha'i wu ba yin

¹ An unresolved conflict will (remain like) a wart in your mind,

² Once resolved it becomes (fragile) like a (bubble) in a stream.¹⁰

18

¹ spyir na gyod bshad mi shes

² de'i nang gi mo gyod mi shes

¹ (If you) do not know how to resolve conflict,

² You do not know how to arrange a divorce.

¹⁰ I have not found the term *wu ba* in any dictionary. However, my assistant translated it as 'bubble' and Chandra Das (1998, 1,962) gives *wu rdo* as 'pumice stone', a rock which appears to contain bubbles.

19

¹ gyod mkhas pas bshad na gzhug gtsang

² gri rno pos brus na shal yag

¹ A skilful speaker will resolve a problem cleanly,

² A sharp knife will cut cleanly.

This last can, however, be contrasted with a short adage in the same book that seems to say the exact opposite:

20

gyod mkhas pas mi chod gces pas chod

If a problem cannot be solved with skill, then love and care will resolve it.

Many stress the difficulty of conflict resolution:

21

¹ bo'u shugs kyis 'phang ni ra

² gyod ngar gyi bshad ni med

¹ You cannot use your strength to fire a gun,

² You cannot use anger to mediate a conflict.

22

¹ gyod kyi nang la gshob mi 'gro

² mig gi nang spu mi 'gro

¹ A lie does not work in a lawsuit,

² A hair does not go into an eye.

The taking of oaths is occasionally central to the mediation process. If there is a conflict of evidence then the parties are invited to take an oath at a monastery. It is

assumed that no Tibetan would dare lie after taking an oath, out of fear of karmic consequences. Oaths can also be taken at the end of the mediation process to indicate respect for the agreement. The following relates to the oaths of witnesses:

23

¹ mis mi za no mna' red

² khyis mi za no lcags red

¹ What a man cannot eat is an oath,

² What a dog cannot eat is iron.

Other *tamxhwe* reflect on the important role of the mediator:

24

¹ gtam mi sha can de gzu ba'i lag

² shing 'dzer ma can de shing bzo'i lag

¹ Speaking about blood money is work for the *zowa*,

² Putting nails into wood is work for the carpenter.

25

¹ mig gcig gis A ma'i ngos bltas

² mig gcig gis rtsam khug thul (la) bltas¹¹

¹ With one eye you should look towards your mother,

² With one eye you should look at the *tsampa* bag.

It was explained to me that this is a metaphor for the *zowa*, who must listen to both sides.

The Golok law code, which has now been

¹¹ As written here there are too many syllables in the last line. My guess is that the *la* is a transcription error.

reproduced as part of the region's history, provides insight into the principles, ideologies, and morality that once underlay tribal relations in the area, in particular the inherent problems of warfare and mediation. It contains two examples of *tamxhwe*. One concerns group solidarity:

26

¹ po tho gcig la rdog gtad nas

² mdung yu gcig la mchil ma 'debs

¹ Step firmly on one spot (together),

² Spit on the handle of the spear (together).

The precise meaning of this is obscure both to me and my informants and assistants in Golok, but they were certain that it advocates solidarity and the benefits of collective action, implicitly at times of conflict. It is part of the second section of the laws, those concerned with making peace. The other maxim, found in the same section, concerns the important difference between voluntarily entering into a conflict and defending your own group from attack:

27

¹ dgra phar bkal pho rog mda' khur

² tshur bkal dge 'dun spyi khur

¹ If you go (away) to engage with the enemy (you are like)
a crow carrying (your own) arrow,

² If the enemy comes to engage with you (you are like) the
monk responsible for public property.

This is also somewhat obscure and it may be that the text omits one syllable from the second line. However, the meaning seems plain enough: initiating a conflict is your own responsibility, but if your group is attacked, you must act collectively. The same idea was repeated often by my

informants as a central principle of tribal organization—initiating conflict is dangerous and group solidarity is essential in defense.

More directly relevant to the mediation process were a number of conversations I had with *xhombo* in Golok. One recited two *tamxhwe* to me, both of which reflected the importance of good and skilful speech.

28

¹ bshad shes na gtam gi rgyan¹² yin

² bshad ma shes na gtam gi 'tshang

¹ If you speak well, what you say will be beautiful (like an ornament),

² If you cannot speak well, what you say will be full of errors.

29

¹ skya mi'i lam ma zad rgyu med

² sa bsam pa thon dus zad ni yin

³ rin chen gtam ma zad rgyu med

⁴ gtam mdo rtsa bzhag na zad ni yin

¹ The grey road never comes to an end,

² But when you find (arrive at) the place you like, it ends.

³ Valuable speech never comes to an end,

⁴ But if it gets to the root (of the problem) it ends.

Other *tamxhwe* were even more directly relevant to the process of mediation. One *xhombo* described the following as examples of what he would say when trying to persuade a reluctant party to accept a compromise:

¹² He actually spelled this for me as *rkyan* but *rgyan* makes more sense.

30

¹ gyod kyi sems kha gar gyi dka'

² mar gyi sgam kha gar gyi dka'

¹ You never get what you want during a dispute,

² A butter box is never full.

31

khyams pa rta rdang nang nas bsad kyang mi sha dgos

If you kill a vagrant among (implicitly, trying to steal) the horses tied up (in your encampment), you still have to pay compensation (blood money).

The principle is that someone responsible for causing an injury must pay compensation, even if the other party is in the wrong.

The following recognizes variations in customs between areas and tribes. The Golok tribes are proud of their autonomy. One *xhombo* told me, for example, that his tribe had its own customs, but when a conflict had erupted with a tribe in Gansu, three different Golok tribes, including his own, had combined in the offensive. As he told me, these three had traditionally combined and their joint reputation was at stake.

32

¹ lung bo re la dpe re

² sle bo re la lung re

¹ Each village (valley) has its own words (customs),

² Each basket has its own rope (handle).

A striking example, capturing the difficult situation in which Tibetans now find themselves as part of China and subject to its legal system, is:

¹ myi gcig gi steng la khrimis gnyis

² rta gcig gi steng la sga gnyis

¹ One man subject to two laws,

² Is like a horse with two saddles.

In other words, being subject to both Chinese and Tibetan law is difficult. It is no answer to a claim for compensation that the perpetrator has been punished under the Chinese penal system; *khrimis* (Tibetan law) must still be followed.¹³

TAMXHWE AS PART OF SOCIAL AND LEGAL PROCESSES

We can appreciate the tight construction of form in most of the proverbs and maxims given above. Each line has an equal number of syllables and the *tamxhwe* generally use parallel phrases, often repeating the same words or expressions in two different contexts, or using a similar sounding word with two different meanings. Some of them are wryly amusing or ironic, others whimsical and almost poetic; most avoid dull preaching or blunt exhortation.

Certain *tamxhwe* were, and still are, used within the mediation process and, as such, can be regarded as precursors to the forms of written law that develop in literate societies. As a number of anthropologists and historians have remarked, in a non-literate society the precedents and principles that can be appealed to as part of the dispute resolution process must largely be oral and memorable and often take the form of short, mnemonic

¹³ The significance of these dynamics and tensions in the contemporary world are the subject of other publications (Pirie 2005, forthcoming).

rhymes, jingles, or proverbs. In such societies dispute processes are often educative, or matters of performance or ritual (Just 2001), and thus markedly different from those in which a stronger, more centralized administration or judicial system is able to use written law as an instrument in the systematic administration of justice (Cheyette 1970, 1978; Clanchy 1970; Diamond 1973; Goody 1986). Although there is a rich and ancient literary tradition among Tibetans, until recently literacy remained relatively rare among the lay population, particularly in rural areas.

The oral nature of the *tamxhwe* also made them flexible tools in the context of mediation processes. As Clanchy (1970, 172) notes, this is typical of legal proceedings in non-literate societies. An aura of custom and historicity could be given to new principles or examples by presenting them as *tamxhwe*. It would, however, be wrong to equate such oral resources too closely with written law, as pointed out by Diamond (1973) and Goody (1986, 135), among others. In Golok, the *tamxhwe* existed alongside the written law codes which, although they did contain certain statements of moral principle, including the two examples of *tamxhwe* mentioned, primarily consisted of statements of quite a different nature: directions for the conduct of war and precise, detailed statements about the amounts of compensation that should be paid in different cases. These *khirms* were more general and abstract (rather than metaphorical and poetic) statements about status, equality, and loyalty. Being written, moreover, they acquired a measure of permanence and autonomy, which made them more symbolic than practical tools for achieving justice. The *tamxhwe*, on the other hand, were flexible tools, which could be adapted by mediators to promote a solution to the particular case at hand.

As well as being clear and memorable, however, some *tamxhwe* are enigmatic, apparently deliberately obscure, and my informants remained uncertain of their

meaning. The former must, therefore, have been useful, accessible proverbs and maxims, which could guide daily life, and which must have been readily comprehensible when invoked during a mediation process. The latter were more like rhetorical devices, designed to dazzle and confuse an opponent. When used by a mediator, they might also have had the effect of impressing upon both parties the skill and care that had gone into the formulation of the proposed solution. As Ekvall remarks, the mediators needed "devices and powers of argument, persuasion, cajolery, and appeal to self-interest to bring both sides to the point of agreement" (1964, 1140). They had to "appeal to high and moral principles and cite the preachments of religion ... Lengthy and sententious speech-making" was necessary to "help some tribal leader swallow his pride and say, 'Yes'" (1964, 1145–1146). The more elaborate the process seemed, the more refined and esoteric the language and argument, the easier it must have been for the parties to feel that their dignity was being properly recognized and to assent to the proposed solution on the basis that it satisfied honor.

Using *tamxhwe*, therefore, allowed a speaker to display his knowledge and skills of oratory. The advocate could use it to confound an opponent who had the misfortune to hail from a tribe beyond the boundaries of Golok, while a mediator could select the *tamxhwe* likely to persuade the parties to accept a compromise. It also allowed the mediator a measure of creativity, as can be seen in the nicely crafted example of the horse with two saddles, which expresses, with admirable succinctness, a major tension now felt in Tibetan areas of China.

It would be wrong, however, to employ the past tense when discussing *tamxhwe* and its uses. As I have described elsewhere (Pirie 2005, 2007), mediation processes are still very much alive in contemporary Golok and the mediators I talked to pride themselves on their oratory and ability to employ these sayings and proverbs. The horse

with two saddles is a modern creature, straddling two worlds; traditional and contemporary. As is evident from the many examples of conflict and mediation now taking place in Amdo, even the distinction between traditional and modern can be misleading. The people of Golok live in a world shaped by a multitude of influences, Chinese and Tibetan, ancient and modern, urban and rural, literate and oral, religious and secular, supportive and repressive. Their innovative use of *tamxhwe*, a skill in which they continue to take pride, exemplifies the creative ways in which they are responding to the complexities of the twenty-first century.

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