

Some Preliminary Reflections on the Boundary between Man and Animal in Pre-Modern Tibetan Society

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Introduction

As far as we may ever look back into history and whichever region on earth we may take a closer look at, human beings always lived together with a great variety of animals in the same environment. And humans have always been aware that they not only share the same world, but that they also have a lot in common: a body which allows movement, sense organs to perceive the environment, communication, the need to eat, sexuality and reproduction, birth, age and death as well as suffering. This knowledge has been part of all cultures long before Charles Darwin explained to us the reason why humans and animals have so much in common. Sharing the same environment also meant a complex human-animal interaction, based on observation, attempts at establishing relations, fear, affinity, convenience, and even admiration and piety. In sum: Humans could hardly not relate themselves to animals in one way or the other. The attitude toward animals could be determined in very different ways: by considerations of usefulness, by aesthetic aspects, by emotions like fear or sympathy, by moral considerations, by symbolic and metaphorical perceptions of animals and animal behavior, and by the desire to dominate animals. The development of such attitudes toward animals was accompanied by social constructions and by semantics supporting them.

In Western history and culture, that is to say in the societies based on the Greek-Christian heritage, the most significant social construction in this regard was the development of the animal as a category opposed to humans in a binary schematism. In spite of the fact that animals actually comprise an incredibly great range of very different life forms, all species were grouped under one term, the term "animal", and contrasted with man as the complete Other. The social construction of such a fundamental opposition concealed for a long period of time that man is evolutionary closer to some species

than to others or other species to each other. The opposition was justified by judgmental attributions that vindicated a hierarchical relationship as well as a purposefulness of the hierarchy, i.e. the animals as the lower species lacking the quality of intelligence exist primarily for the benefit of the humans as the intelligent beings created by God as the crown of his creation. Such attributions became part of the semantics stored for re-use in different circumstances and for observing the societal environment.

On a larger scale, criticism and deconstruction of the social construction of animals in our society has only just begun. To a great extent, it is the result of the animal welfare movement and the fight for animal rights. This movement drew attention to the fact that the human-animal relationship has been largely neglected by sociology so far. The person who in Germany in particular tried to fill the gap was the late sociologist Birgit Mütherich (1959–2011). She was not only a pioneer in developing a new research field, but also a combative animal liberation activist. In her scientific work, she drew on Adorno, Horkheimer, and the Frankfurt School. She saw the human-animal dualism on the one hand as the heritage of a patriarchal culture of stock breeders and on the other hand as result of the specific image of man in the monotheistic religions that saw man as God's own likeness and made the animal "the projection screen for the evil, God-distant and anti-human."¹ Thus, she identified the human-animal dualism as the major reason for exclusion and discrimination processes in occidental history that culminated in the terrible events of the twentieth century. For her, "the animal" constitutes the deep-cultural form or prototype of the other, which has to be controlled, and at the same time serves as a model for related forms of action—from training and manipulation to deindividualization and exploitation as well as to anonymization and annihilation.²

I am not sure whether the attribution of the human-animal dualism in occidental societies exclusively to the notion of man in monotheistic religions unduly simplifies matters. However, this question shall not be the focus of my paper today. Instead, I want to make use of Mütherich's provocative theses as a backdrop against which I will briefly discuss the social construction of animals or "the animal" in Tibetan society. Two questions are put to the fore:

- a) How were animals defined in Tibetan society, i.e. in a society not coined by a monotheistic religion?

¹ Mütherich (2005: 7).

² *ibid.*: 25.

- b) Which boundary line does the Tibetan semantics draw between humans and animals?

In doing so I will not just rely on what Tibetan Buddhist scholars have written, but I will also try to find an access to unconscious beliefs which to a great extent guide people's daily behavior.

How were animals defined in Tibetan society?

The Tibetan-Buddhist cosmology also starts with a dualism. It contrasts the container world, *snod*, with the contained sentient beings, *bcud*. For sentient beings in general there are mainly two all-encompassing synonyms in use: *'gro ba* and *sems can*. They simply describe qualities all sentient beings seem to have in common: they move around and they possess a mind. The latter quality prevents notions of animals as a kind of machine, working on the base of a simple stimulus reaction scheme. By contrast, such a notion of animals developed in the later course of the occidental history. Also, quite common for denominating living beings is the term *skye bo* which refers to the quality that all living beings are born. However, this term is ambiguous because it is also used in a narrow sense to refer to "people" alone.

Then, on the next level, sentient beings are further divided into classes. Leaving the animist worldview with its three layers of beings of an upper, middle, and lower world aside, we have the classical Buddhist concept of six realms of beings presenting six principle options for rebirth. Only two realms belong to the visible world: humans and animals. Thus, at least for the visible world we have a dualism too: Humans as one single species are contrasted with the category of animals, thus ignoring that the category "animal" comprises in fact of a huge amount of easily to observe and very different varieties. While *mi*, the Tibetan word for "man, human", is apparently of very ancient origin, the standard lexeme for animals as a single category seems to be a later formation. It is a compound, composed of two verbs or two verb forms, meaning "those who move bent over" (*dud 'gro*). Obviously, the term was simply formed in contrast to man who stands and moves upright. Therefore, a clear categorical boundary was then not only applied to quadruped "who move bent over", but also to birds, insects, and all beings living in the water.

Although Tibetan language confirms that there is a clear categorical boundary between man and animals in Tibetan society, there is—unlike in Western societies—no strict ontological boundary between the two. This is on the one hand due to the animist

worldview deeply rooted in Tibetan culture, but on the other hand also due to basic Buddhist concepts which explain animals as possible one's own forms of existence in previous or future lives.

Moreover, as beings bound to the process of cycling through one rebirth after another, they are all considered as living beings to be liberated. Unlike in the Christian tradition, the program of salvation does, therefore, not address humans alone, but is in principle an offer directed to animals as well. The difference lies solely in the higher intelligence attributed to man. Animals are counted as one of the *mi khom pa brgyad*, the so-called "eight unfree states", because they are perceived as ignorant and as often living in a state of subjugation, and as such regarded as not capable of receiving and understanding the Buddhist teachings.

Thus, it seems that for Buddhist scholars the animal world was never a genuine field of interest. It mostly served as a kind of backdrop against which the ideas on man and his position in the world were developed. Symptomatic is the poor elaboration of the animal world in Buddhist works on cosmology. While the beings in the realms of the gods and the underworld are usually described in great detail, the description of the directly observable realm of animals lacks accuracy and elaborateness. Thus, for example, the Sa skya scholar 'Phags pa writes briefly in his work *Shes bya rab gsal*:

The Animals live mostly in the Outer Ocean, hidden in the depths like dregs in beer; since the big beings eat the small ones, and the small eat the big ones, they fear one another, and since they are moved about by the waves, they are without fixed dwelling-places. They exist also scattered among men and Gods. As for the length of their life, the longest is like that of the Klu Kings, which lasts for one medium Aeon; the shortest is that of flies, etc., which lasts but an instant. The size of their bodies varies.³

That's all. Striking is that the description is based primarily on canonical Indian sources and avoids referring to personal observations. Thus, it is possible that here—just as with regard to the beings in the realms of the gods and the underworld—untested statements about beings living in the depth of the ocean are put in the first place.

By contrast to the works of Buddhist scholarship, the narrative literature paid much more attention to animals. Already the classical Indian reincarnation stories, the so called *Jātakas*, acknowledge animals either as protagonists or as specific object of compassion, care or protection.

³ Hoog (1983: 28).

Well-known in Tibet is moreover the popular legend of the origin of the Tibetan people from the union of a monkey and an ogress generally interpreted by Buddhist scholars as incarnations of two prominent Bodhisattvas.⁴

Also, Tibet's oral literature includes many popular animal tales. Mostly they are about animals the Tibetans are familiar with. To some extent, the tiger could perhaps be regarded as an exception, as—to my knowledge—it only had a natural habitat in the lower-lying areas in the southwest of the Tibetan settlement areas. I assume that especially by narrating animal tales to each other, the common Tibetan people did not just have fictional figures in their mind but were referring to the social construction of real animals. Therefore, animal tales, together with proverbs and metaphors of the colloquial language, offer us specific clues to the social construction of animals as it was deeply rooted in the semantics of the Tibetan society in general.

*Which boundary line does the Tibetan semantics
draw between humans and animals?*

By taking Tibetan animal tales seriously, I am ignoring a very common objection stating that although there might be some deeper truth in such tales, in the end they all are allegories and thus can be subsumed under the term literal techniques or devices. By contrast, I assume that animal folk tales are a window on a world in which man and animals were living close together. That is to say: I am neither interested in the entertaining function of the stories nor in their literary quality. Instead, I try to learn something about how in these stories the boundary between animal and man is drawn and which animals are given a higher status.

For my analysis, I will look into animal tales, meaning tales in which animals are either the main actors or at least prominent actors. The tales which I select are orally transmitted stories and not fables in so far as they were not invented by a concrete author to convey an explicitly formulated morality but belong to the folkloristic narrative forms. Nonetheless, in terms of content, the transitions can be fluid. Although these animal tales have neither a single author, date, and place of composition nor an explicit purpose, this does of course not exclude that we have to reckon with intertextuality between oral and written literature. And indeed, topics and plot structures of oral literature in general often refer to classical written stories. And probably this also applies the other way round. However, what

⁴ See e.g. *Rgyal rabs* (1981: 49–54).

counts in our context is the circumstance that these stories were part of the Tibetan popular culture.

The corpus of texts on which I base my analysis is the result of the fieldwork of a group of once young Tibetologists I had the privilege to be part of almost 40 years ago. And I am a bit surprised to see that—perhaps except for linguistic studies—not much has been done with this rich corpus of material in the meantime. One of the observations we made was that there existed quite a few stories which seemed to be very popular, because they were known in different versions all over the Tibetan plateau. It goes without saying that in the sphere of popular oral literature we can hardly speak of “canonical” or “correct” versions of the respective story. It would not only be a hopeless but also an improper undertaking to search for a pure “origin” of orally transmitted and formed narrations. For the most part, the people who narrated the tales to us were people unable to write and to read. Thus, they had received the tales themselves solely by listening to other narrators.

Animals acting as protagonists in Tibetan orally transmitted stories are strongly typified, meaning that the described character is attributed to the entire species, not to an individual animal. Thus, the animals in the tales rarely have a personal name like pets. They are simply named as “the fox”, “the hare” or “the tiger”. This is not to be confused with speciesism, i.e. “the practice of treating members of one species as morally more important than members of other species”,⁵ but it can be a step in this direction. What is striking is that most of the interactions do not occur within the same species. Rather, the protagonists of these stories mainly interact either with animals belonging to a different species or with humans. In all relationships, communication does not appear to be a problem. It just happens. In most tales, humans and animals use a common language without this occurrence ever being explained. This, indeed, does not indicate a strict dualism. In a few stories selected humans have or gain the ability to understand the language of “the animals”, that is to say: not the language of just one species but of all species.

In most cases the topic concerns cunning, sometimes paired with a spice of malice. The fox is more intelligent than the wolf who is depicted as voracious but silly. The frog can escape a silly raven thanks to his cleverness, and so on. In general, it seems that the smaller ones are regarded as the more intelligent ones. Tigers, bears, and wolves are depicted in the stories as the most dangerous species, but Tibetan animal tales always offer solutions about how to deceive them quite easily through cleverness. Thus, the most dangerous

⁵ Duignan (2013).

animals do not at all appear as heroes who are worth to be admired just because they are strong.

By far the most frequent protagonist of the oral Tibetan animal tales is the hare. At the same time it is the figure with the most complex character. The hare more or less takes the role which in animal tales of the western part of the world is occupied by the fox. From the moral point of view, he is very ambivalent, sometimes good and helpful, but in most cases, he is just evil minded. Nevertheless, all stories express undivided admiration for him. In the entire ensemble of Tibetan animal stories, the hare is always the one whose cleverness surpasses the one of all other actors, including humans and even including lamas. He is not only clever, but also wily. For each hopeless situation, he for sure finds an intelligent solution. Thus, it is impossible to really catch him. At the end of the story it is always him who escapes, while others are either left behind badly damaged or even killed. Other actors, including humans, ask him for advice. When together with other animals, it is therefore him who becomes the leader. In a few stories, he helps others without having a personal profit, but in most cases, he harms them without any reason. He does not even shy at outsmarting his own friends. In single cases, at the beginning the motive might be revenge, but soon it becomes obvious that he just enjoys deceiving others and demonstrating his superior cleverness. As a leader, he develops a common plan of action, for example, robbing a lama. Then he lets his stupid animal friends do the job, driving them in a way that leads to their own ruin so that finally he is the only one left to reap the benefit of the evil action. In particular, those appearing strong and most dangerous, like wolves, tigers, and bears are often the chosen victims of his cunning. Thus, to the hare tales applies what otherwise has been stated about the fox tales in Western so-called "fairy tales", that is to say that the narrations are variations of one and the same topic: duping and outfoxing of the strong one through the courage and cleverness of the small one.⁶ This motive has nothing to do with moral correctness. On the contrary, it celebrates "Schadenfreude" or gloating. And it does not at all matter that the bad guy is rewarded or at least escapes without punishment.⁷ Whatever misdeeds the hare does, the listeners admire his cleverness and are happy that in these stories the weak one is always the winner and the strong and fearsome ends—due to fatuousness, arrogance and greed—as the loser we can laugh about. The listeners easily identify themselves with the hero of the story because they usually perceive themselves as the underdog in life.

⁶ Solms (1991: 201).

⁷ *ibid.*: 206.

Moreover, they are aware that the hare's bad character traits are nothing they do not recognise from their own character. Thus, the stories offer a possibility to relieve one's own guilty conscience for a while.

Although the figure of the hare can be found in the Buddhist *Jātakas*, these Indian tales about the previous existence of the Buddha are definitely not the source which inspired the character of the hare as it is prominent in Tibetan oral literature. In the *Jātakas* the hare has an entirely different character. The *Sasa Jātaka* (*Jātaka* no. 316) tells us how the image of the hare was drawn on the moon. As one of the previous existences of the Buddha, the hare appears in this story as a wise Bodhisattva. In the *Daddabha Jātaka* (*Jātaka* no. 322) we are dealing with the proverbial timid hare whose fearfulness causes a completely needless panic among the other animals. By contrast, in the orally transmitted Tibetan literature the hare is neither wise nor timid. Instead he is depicted as clever and cool.

As already mentioned above, it is striking that the plot structures of the hare tales are more or less the same as those of the fox tales in other parts of the world. The reason why is still open to speculation. I have no clue what exactly predestines the hare to take the role otherwise reserved for the fox. The fox is well-known everywhere as an animal that steals goose and chicken. But the hare is not an animal of prey but a herbivore that runs and flees. Thus, people hardly could have had any bad experience with this animal.

Leaving the most popular topic of the weak defeating or deceiving the strong one aside, there are three more types of stories in Tibetan oral literature which have animals as prominent actors. In all three cases we always deal with man-animal interaction and not with animal-animal interaction alone. The first topic is that of the helpful and grateful animals: at the beginning, a human helps some animals and then, in the course of the story, the animals pay his/her favour back exactly in the moment when help is most urgently needed. Though these stories receive a Buddhist touch in so far as well-known Buddhist concepts and virtues are included, virtues like *tshethar*, liberation of life, and repayment of the kindness received by one's parents and teacher, these stories nevertheless follow a universal pattern found in oral literature outside the Buddhist world as well.⁸

When talking about the helpful and grateful animals one should, however, not forget to mention that Tibetan oral tales also

⁸ For Tibetan examples see: Phukhang and Schwieger (1982: nos 45, 60); Kretschmar (1985: no. 43). For examples in Western oral tradition, see Woeller (1991: 146–150).

acknowledge the topic of the ungrateful animal. The plot structure of these specific stories is always the same: a dangerous animal of prey, a wolf, a tiger or a bear is liberated by someone out of compassion. Because of their great gluttony, these animals, however, are unable to keep their initial promise not to eat their saviour and to repay the good deed. Finally, it is always the hare who, thanks to his cleverness, restores the initial situation.⁹

The second type of story where we have a human-animal interaction is the topic of the animal as a bridegroom, a universal topic known in other parts of the world as well. In Tibetan tales the groom is usually a dog or a frog. In the end the animal always turns into a handsome young man from the best family background, i.e. either a god or a prince. The transformation of the animal into a human appears as a kind of redemption.¹⁰

Finally, I want to mention a third type: a man becomes the husband of a female bear. They even have a common child. In the end, the man leaves the bear. As a result, the bear tears the common child to pieces in the presence of her human husband. The moral of the story seems to be that a mixture of humans and animals is possible, but in the end does not work.¹¹

All these stories with animals as actors in one or the other way show a permeable border between humans and animals. There is no insurmountable ontological boundary line. Given that orally transmitted folk tales were still a living tradition when we recorded them, they indicate that in the common people's view man and animals had much in common and much to share. One may also say that animals act in all the stories just as a kind of people.

But how, then, do we in the end have to see the animals in these stories? Can we at all call them animals or are they just people disguised as animals? To me they are neither real animals nor humans. They are a mixture. They are characterized by typical human weaknesses such as pride, arrogance, jealousy, vulnerability, credulity, and receptiveness for flattery. On the other hand, they carry distinct traits of their respective species—in their outer appearance as well as with regard to basic qualities: the gluttonous wolf, the agile hare, the plump-looking bear, and so on. In the end, it does not matter whether the animals of the oral tales can be called "real" animals or not. By the mere fact that animals are good for holding up the mirror to the human being, the border between

⁹ Schuh (1982: no. 52); Kretschmar (1982: no. 44); Phukhang and Schwieger (1982: nos 27, 67).

¹⁰ Kretschmar (1982: no. 35); Phukhang and Schwieger (1982: no. 38); Kretschmar (1985: nos 21, 22); Causemann (1989: nos 11, 12)

¹¹ Phukhang and Schwieger (1982: no. 20).

human and animal blurs and they become like us. Therefore, to me in such stories animals and animal behaviour cannot be reduced to literal means to talk about humans.

Instead of a conclusion

Finally, I want to present one of the most incredible stories told by Tibetans about the hare. It was narrated to me by a man from Bragg yab.¹²

Once upon a time there was a man and a woman. When both had to go out to work in the field, they had no one to look after their little child. Therefore, the husband said to his wife: "Shall I search for someone who can look after our child during our absence?" "Yes," said his wife. So, the man went out to look for someone.

The first one he met was a fox. "Do you know how to look after a child?" the man asked the fox. "Yes, I know." was the answer. "How would you look after a child?" the man asked. "The best food I would eat myself and the worst food I would give the child. The best clothes I would wear myself and the worst I would put on the child." Thereupon the man said: "You do not know how to look after a child." and he went on.

Then he met a hare: "Hare! Do you know to look after a child?" "Of course, I know," the hare replied. "How would you look after a child?" the man said. "Well, I would give the best food to the child and eat the worst food myself. The best clothes I would give to the child and the worst I would wear myself." This answer satisfied the old man: "You would probably be able to take care of a child. You are the right person for this job." and he took the hare home.

Then, every day together with his wife he went to work in the field. They left the hare alone with the child. One day the hare killed the child. Out of the meat he made a meal. This he brought to the couple working on the field. It tasted excellent. "Where did you get the meat?" they asked. "The king slaughtered yaks today. I traded the meat for two bushels of wheat." the hare replied. "It tastes really good," the couple said.

After the hare had returned to their house, he put the child's head back in the cradle so that it looked as though the head was peeking out from under the blanket and the child was sleeping. Then the hare ran away. In the evening, the parents returned home. When they took the child out of the cradle, they were horrified: they only held the child's head in their hands. They became very sad. "I have to kill the hare!" said the man to his wife. "Boil a pot of water and wait for me to come back! We will cook the hare alive."

The man ran out of the house. After a while he found the hare,

¹² Schwieger (1989: 76–79).

grabbed it and put it in a sack. He tied the sack with a string and laid it on his shoulder. Because the way home was long, the man rested after some time. Exhausted, he slept a little. Then a magpie flew in and sat down on the opening of the sack, shouting: "Tshag! Tshag!" The hare said to her: "Magpie! Please, open the sack!" She released him from the sack. The hare put a piece of ice, a stone and some thorns in the sack. Then he tied it up again and ran away.

After the man woke up, he continued on his way. After a while, the stone in the sack hurt the man's back. "Do not push me with your fist! When I am at home, I will cook you." he said angrily. Again, after a while, the ice was melting. "Now, you also piss! Soon you end up in the cooking pot." scolded the old man. Again, after a while, the thorns began to sting: "What are you scratching me with your fingernails? Soon I will cook you in the pot."

When returning home, he said to his wife: "Open the pot! Here I bring the hare." When he then emptied the bag over the pot, the stone fell out and broke the bottom of the pot.

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