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Analysis of Development of the Tibetan Tulku System in Western Culture

ABSTRACT

With the development of Tibetan Buddhism in Europe and America, from the second half of the twentieth century, the phenomenon of recognising a person as a reincarnation of Buddhist teachers appeared in this part of the world. Tibetan masters expected that the identified person will serve important social and religious functions for Buddhist communities. However, after several decades since the first recognitions, the Western tulkus do not play the same important role in the development of Buddhism, as tulkus in China, and the Tibetan communities in exile. The article analyses the cultural and social causes of the different functioning of tulku institution in Western societies. The article shows that a different understanding of identity, power and hierarchy mean that tulkus do not play significant roles in the development of Buddhism in this part of the world.

KEY WORDS

religious studies, Tibetan Buddhism, tulku, West

INTRODUCTION

Tulku (Tib. *sprul sku*) is a person in Tibetan Buddhism tradition who is recognised as a reincarnation of a famous Buddhist master. The tradition originated in the 13th century in the Kagyu (Tib. *bka' brgyud*) sect when students of the Dusum Khyenpa (Tib. *duš gsum mkhyen pa*), after his death, found a boy and

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recognised him as a reincarnation of their master¹. In a few centuries, this tradition had become one of the most important elements of Tibetan culture, politics and religious life.

After the Chinese invasion of Tibet and intense emigration of Tibetans to India, Nepal and subsequently to the West, the first tulku were found in America and Europe. Buddhist teachers expected that tulkus in the West would also play the same important role as in Tibet, but after a few decades of the development of this religion in the West, we can observe significant changes in the tulku system in this part of the world.

The aim of the article is to analyse research on the issue that people in the West who are recognised as a tulku experience a conflict of identity due to the difference between contemporary culture and the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. As a consequence, they are not able to fulfil the role ascribed to them by this tradition. In this article, I will try to identify the main differences between Tibetan Buddhist tradition and modern culture in the West and analyse the most important factors affecting the different understanding of tulkus in the West than in Tibet.

WESTERN WORLD AND TIBETAN TRADITION

We can distinguish two types of society, which will be useful in the further analysis:

1. traditional – agricultural society characterized by a low degree of complexity and a small degree of adaptability. Tradition sanctioned norms and values. The Tibetan culture belongs to this category (till mid 20th century) as, for hundreds of years, it has been based on standards and values resulting from the Buddhist religion. This tradition developed structures that allowed for the preservation of the system for many generations.
2. modern – industrial societies, characterized by a high degree of complexity with many equally important systems of standards and values, with overriding rules based on rationality, guaranteeing social cohesion. These societies are highly adaptable to changing conditions and allow for a great pluralism of views. Such societies are in the West, where Tibetan Buddhism began to rapidly develop during the second half of the twentieth century.

Let us now look at how the West sees the function and objectives of tulkus, what methods they use to carry out their plans and problems encountered

¹ T. Laird, *Opowieść o Tybecie*, tłum. J. Grabiak, A. Zdziemborska, Poznań 2008, p. 120.

by the institution. To better understand the development of the tulku system in this part of the world, I will also try to provide some understanding of the religion, spirituality, and the approach to the tradition, authority and identity in the West.

Tibetan Buddhism came to Europe and the Americas from a place subordinated to tradition where Buddhism was the dominant religion. It began to develop in a world where the understanding of the tradition and religion is different and where cultural and religious pluralism prevails. Cultural processes that took place in this part of the world over the last hundred years (the Reformation, Renaissance, Industrial Revolution, communism, the two world wars) modelled European society in a unique manner². The Industrial Revolution triggered a wave of migration from the countryside to the cities, the shift from an agricultural economy to the industrial one, development of the media (television, internet, etc.), and widespread education. It broke down traditional social forms and began to shape a global society in which there is a plurality of religions, beliefs, traditions and identities. Many sociologists use the term 'postmodernism' to describe the culture of the modern Western world. Zygmunt Bauman, explaining what postmodernism is, states that its most important feature is the lack of social structures that can set out a framework in which it is possible to build one's identity³. It means that there is no clearly defined identity in the post-modern world; it is not imposed by tradition and everybody can change or develop their identities. The characteristics that define postmodernism are: volatility, temporality, inconsistency and incoherence. Therefore, no religion is dominant; no religion can claim the right to be the one and only. The same author suggests that in traditional cultures the social model was like a pilgrim with a goal (in the case of Tibetan Buddhism, the goal being liberation). The post-modern world has lost this pattern and the dominant approach to life is to focus on the moment only, on an experience that exhausts itself and leads nowhere. Maybe this lack of social goals makes it possible for Buddhism to develop in the West. People converting to Buddhism in this part of the world found that the ultimate goal is enlightenment.

Buddhists who arrived in the West in the 20th century found a very good ground for the development of their beliefs and practices but none of them probably expected that this development would entail great changes within Buddhism itself. The context of the recognition of tulkus in the West has

² A. Flis, *Chrześcijaństwo i Europa: studia z dziejów cywilizacji Zachodu*, Kraków 2001, p. 223–253.

³ Z. Bauman, *Dwa szkice o moralności ponowoczesnej*, Warszawa 1994, p. 16.

differed from traditional procedures in Tibet since the very beginning. Tulkus have been recognised by important teachers of Tibetan Buddhism but the masters could not ensure a traditional Buddhist education for them and could not transfer the property that belonged to their predecessors. Recognitions did not always take place in Buddhist families; in many cases, only one of the parents considered himself a Buddhist and the other parent was often an atheist or a Christian. Also, parents were usually not sure of the consequences of such recognition. For many tulkus, a conflict arose in the case of parents who were not quite sure whether they were Buddhists and even more if they wanted their child to play the role of tulku. Osel Hita Torres⁴ may be an example: his parents could not agree whether he should go for a traditional Buddhist education which at that time could only take place in the East (India or Nepal). Eventually, it was decided that he would be educated in the monastery. Osel had doubts about his identity and the role assigned to him, and finally left the monastery after a few years of study. He decided not to prepare for the role of a Buddhist teacher. He chose Western education and became an artist⁵. It was easier to accept the recognition in families where at least one parent was a Tibetan (Gesar Mukpo⁶, Yeshe Silvano⁷) but identity issues arose for many of them. In postmodern culture, identity is not predetermined and the emphasis is on freedom of choice, individuality and diversity. In this context, it was hard to accept the identity of a tulku only because a Buddhist teacher and tradition expected that. Not all such recognitions were hard to accept, for example, parents of Trinley Tulku entrusted their child to the care of several important Kagyu teachers to undergo traditional education in the East⁸. He has never distanced himself from the role and identity assigned to him. He has been teaching Buddhism for many years and, in interviews, has emphasised

⁴ In 1986, the 14th Dalai Lama announced that a boy from Spain – Osel Hita Torres (born 1985) is a reincarnation of a Tibetan lama Thubten Yeshe. *Talks and Interviews with Ösel*, [online] <http://fpmt.org/osel-news/talks-with-osel/> [8.04.2014].

⁵ *Tenzin Ösel Hita*, [online] <http://fpmt.org/fpmt/osel/> [3.04.2014].

⁶ At the beginning of the 1970s in the USA famous Buddhist master Chogyam Trungpa recognised his son Gesar Mukpo as a tulku. J.-P. Flintoff, *Did I know you in a past life?*, [online] <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/apr/14/western-tulku-buddhist-film-festival> [9.04.2014].

⁷ In 1973 the head of the Sakya (Tib. *sa skya*) sect recognised a small child Yeshe Silvano (the son of a famous dzogchen master – Namkhai Norbu) in Italy as an incarnation of an abbot of a few monasteries of the Sakya sect. *Khyentse Yeshe*, [online] <http://www.tashigarnorte.org/eng/khyentse.html> [9.04.2014].

⁸ P. G. White, *East is West*, [online] <http://www.tricycle.com/feature/east-west> [4.09.2014].

that he was happy with the recognition⁹. The situation is sometimes different in the case of people recognised not in their childhood but as adults. For example, Tsultrim Allione has been practicing Tibetan Buddhism for many years and was appointed as a Buddhist teacher. She has been teaching Buddhism for many years so the recognition improved her authority as a Buddhist teacher¹⁰. Ahkon Lhamo¹¹ has been a spiritual teacher for many years. Having met Pema Norbu, who recognised her as a tulku, she converted to Tibetan Buddhism. Some of her students did not agree with the change while others were very happy with their teacher being an important figure in Tibetan Buddhism. In most cases, there was a lack of acceptance for the traditional consequences of the recognition or, sometimes, an attempt to isolate from this identity. However, tulkus rarely cut themselves off completely from Buddhism.

The postmodern world has changed attitudes to the authority. The respect for elders (people who know and preserve tradition) disappearing in Western societies as people gain knowledge from a variety of sources today such as the media, television and the Internet. But knowledge available from these sources is changeable and disorderly, everyone has the right to add something and everything is variable and depends on the context. The multiplicity of views and the lack of hierarchy are the reason why everyone has the right to criticise and express their opinion. In such a world, the authority of tulkus cannot be based on recognition only and the position of tulkus can be challenged. There are people who can see the organization of Buddhist communities differently than in the traditional pattern and their views must be taken into account in the pluralist context. In the world of the Tibetan theocracy where people did not question the leadership of the priests, social order was imposed by religion and tradition while in the democracy-dominated West it is common to improve and adapt social life and its patterns. In a democratic country, the community chooses its leaders not for a lifetime but rather for a few years only and such patterns of thought pervade Tibetan Buddhism in the West. Buddhists want to decide who their teacher will be and under what conditions. According to this way of thinking, it is very easy to challenge the power and authority of tulkus, in particular, as many Western Buddhists belong to that religion not by birth

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ *Lama Tsultrim Allione*, [online] <http://taramandala.org/about/lama-tsultrim/> [5.04.2014].

¹¹ Pema Norbu (the head of the Nyingma (Tib. *rnying ma*) sect) in 1987 recognised woman from the USA, Alyce Zeoli (born 1949) as a reincarnation of Ahkon Lhamo. *Kunzang Palyul Choling. Biography*, [online] <http://www.tara.org/jetsunma-ahkon-lhamo/biography/> [9.04.2014].

but by choice and know that there are many different possibilities. Therefore, Western Buddhists seek conditions that correspond to their expectations. Of course, those new ones did not greatly influence its structure in the beginning but they come with the Western way of thinking and change the model of Western Buddhism over time.

The greatest change took place in the Kagyu sect as the dominant role in the development of the school in this part of the world belongs to a Dane Ole Nydhal - who founded the majority of the centres. Other schools have developed in the West primarily through the work of Tibetans and their changes occur at a slower rate. However, it is a problem for many Tibetan teachers to find a way of adapting the traditional teaching to the circumstances of the Western world. Some Tibetan lamas are not satisfied with the processes that take place in Buddhism in Europe and the Americas. However, there is no strict hierarchy in Tibetan Buddhism. This is both the strength and the weakness of this religion in this part of the world. On the one hand, teachers can easily set up Buddhist centres and organise religious life while, on the other hand, it is easier to change the doctrines and hierarchy of Tibetan Buddhism. Some Tibetan masters try to apply the traditional style of teaching and keep the old rules but, due to different social conditions, they do not have many students nor support.

The way in which the science and practice of Buddhism are organised in the West does not fit the concept of the tulku system very well. This institution assumes that someone recognised as a tulku is a part of the social structure based on the education, authority and power. Buddhist education thrives in the West but, in this part of the world dominated by the notion of equal rights for everyone, education should equate all. In this way, many practitioners cannot agree with the system in which a special education and role is given to the tulkus just because they are unique from birth. The Buddhist community in the West recognises that not everyone has the same spiritual abilities but the community can question a system that searches for special children to educate them as Buddhist teachers. The Western world prefers a different type of teachers, not those exceptional because of the title or birth but rather those who, through their own work and practice, gain knowledge and skills so they can help others realise their aspirations. Another problem is that the traditional education of a tulku was based primarily on the mastering of Buddhist texts but practitioners, most of whom are educated in Western schools, put more emphasis on the practical experience rather than erudition. As a result, Westerners prefer teachers who have spent many years practicing and can share their own experience. Tulkus in Tibet were often specialists in rituals and

ceremonies but this skill is of a lesser importance in the West. It is possible to educate tulkus differently, putting less emphasis on texts and rituals and more on the practice of meditation but, for now, most tulkus recognised in the West and educated in the East were educated according to the traditional style, which to a large extent may not match the aspirations of people in the West.

To reflect on the concept of power in the West, we can refer to the concepts of Max Weber who identified three types of domination: traditional, rational and charismatic. The rational type of authority is based on the belief in the legality of established orders and instructions made by people appointed to rule. The traditional type is based on the belief in the sanctity of the tradition and the legitimacy of its authority. The charismatic rule is based on the dedication to a person recognised as holy¹². The power of tulkus in Tibet was primarily based on tradition and additionally also related to their sanctity and uniqueness. At the beginning of the development of Buddhism in the West, Buddhist teachers organised their communities in a charismatic style but the high rationality of people in this part of the world adapts this pattern to the first model, i.e. the rational one.

THE MODERN TULKU SYSTEM

In the patriarchal world of Tibetan Buddhism most tulkus were men. There are only a few stories about such women. In that patriarchal and conservative world, great stress was put on hierarchy and authority. The tulku system worked well in Tibet because tulkus had great knowledge (intensive education) and were respected by the community (authority). As a consequence, they had political and spiritual authority over others. Tulkus enjoyed social support, were often treated as gods and people approached them with great humility. The recognition of a child was a great honour for the family. Families often told amazing stories about their children hoping that it would increase their social significance. With these three aspects (education, authority and power) combined, tulkus had a significant impact on the development of Buddhism.

Tulkus recognised in Europe and America are mostly male but the equality of men and women in the West is boosting the importance of women in Tibetan Buddhism. Additionally, more and more women occupy leadership positions in Buddhist communities. For example, Tenzin Palmo (born in England)

¹² M. Weber, *Gospodarka i społeczeństwo*, tłum. D. Lachowska, Warszawa 2002, p. 158–192.

enjoys authority on both Western and Eastern Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism is gaining popularity in new countries, it is well developed in the USA and France but there are many countries (for example in South America) where this religion is only starting to create stable organisational structures. Some countries have developed centres of monastic or secular education but, in general, the possibility to educate future teachers is much less in the West than in Tibetan education centres in India, Nepal, and Bhutan. This is one of the reasons why Western tulkus do not undergo such an intense education as in the East. They also have less authority because the West is more critical and puts a lesser emphasis on listening or obedience to superiors. The fact that they are less exotic and mysterious (fewer people associate them with secret knowledge and power) than Tibetan masters can make it easier for people to judge and criticise them. Greater individualism in this region of the world means that tulkus enjoy less respect. Young tulkus have support in Buddhist communities but Christian or secular circles treat them like ordinary people; they may even encounter suspicion and criticism. Many tulkus are treated as deities in the East while the West does not have such a cultural pattern; the mentality of the people in this part of the world does not contain the idea of man as a deity (apart from the Christian understanding of Christ but this pattern applies only to Christ). Examples include Khyentse Norbu (born in Bhutan) who, in the documentary film „The words of my perfect teacher”, states that he can act freely in the West but, in Bhutan, many followers consider him a god. For many tulkus, the problem is how to find their own identity between two worlds: ancient Tibet and the modern world. Such issues are mentioned by children of Tibetan lamas: Gesar Mukpo and Yeshe Silvano. They are respected in Buddhist circles but their friends and non-Buddhists approach them differently. The family often feels honoured by the recognition but hides the information about their child from the public.

It is difficult for Tibetan Buddhism to maintain its traditional form in the modern world. In order to develop in the East and West, it must adapt to other cultures. It's easier to retain traditional systems in Tibetan communities in exile, for example in Nepal, India and Bhutan where there are many institutions, monasteries and traditions resembling the patterns of ancient Tibet. However, we can also find effects of globalisation there. Buddhist communities in the West live in quite a different context, the majority of people being non-Tibetans who grew up in different cultures with, different patterns of thought and behaviour. Traditional Tibetan institutions undergo changes there so in turn the tulku system is also changing. Buddhist teacher Sakya Trizin (Tib. *sa skya khri 'dzin*) suggests that a tulku outside of the monastery system cannot fully per-

form his function to propagate Buddhism¹³. This is traditional thinking, not accepted by many Western Buddhists. Western tulkus try to distinguish between the system (the organisation of the religious) and humanist ideas that it brings (such as kindness, compassion, self-realisation, search for truth). Gesar Mukpo explained in an interview that the most difficult aspect of being a tulku in the West arises from the expectations of people connected with this tradition. Life in the West and the social situation there do not fit the traditional system. However, he emphasised that people should distinguish the implementation of traditionally defined functions from self-realisation (in the Buddhist meaning, especially in the dzogchen (Tib. *rdzogs chen*) philosophy). Many tulkus and Buddhist teachers say that they develop through traditional activities: organising retreats, publishing books and developing a variety of institutions. But it is often the case that the developed system imposes specific functions on tulkus and not all of them feel comfortable in these roles.

A particular strength of Tibetan Buddhism in the West is that it only recently developed in this part of the world and is still building appropriate structures and institutions. It is easier to find one's place in religion under such circumstances as there is more space for new initiatives to adapt the teachings and practices to the needs of the people. It seems to be a universal law that the beginning of the development of a tradition is the most dynamic. Then, it slows down gradually, forms institutions, positions, functions and offers less and less possibilities for individual initiatives and more and more people who are part of the tradition are crammed into its operating mechanisms. After some time, life circumstances change and the system responds more slowly to the needs of the people and, as a rule, the process ultimately leads to the collapse of the tradition. The collapse often does not involve a complete disappearance but rather entails dramatic changes that give rise to a new tradition. At this point, we can recall the concept of Hegel who postulated that systems vary according to the following pattern: thesis - antithesis - synthesis. This example simplifies the mechanisms of change but it illustrates the sequence of processes well. In the case of the European culture that underwent many dynamic changes, we can take advantage of the periodification used in the history of art: medieval religion was opposite to the humanism of the Renaissance and, later, Baroque, Enlightenment, Romanticism, modernity and postmodernity. The period of the materialistic ideology and secularism of many communities in the West created a spiritual void which spiritual traditions of the East could easily enter.

¹³ D. Barlocher, *Testimonies of Tibetan Tulkus: A research among Reincarnate Buddhist Masters in exile*, Zurich 1982, p. 134.

However, Tibet that has remained relatively stable culturally for many centuries underwent dramatic changes due to the attack from Communist China. The tulku system appeared in Tibet in the 13th century in response to the needs of people of that period; afterwards, it developed dynamically as it turned out to be a good tool for attaining the objectives of the Tibetan Buddhists. However, the system acquired its own life in time and had to act in line with mechanisms that had been created. The world is changing constantly and systems such as the tulku institution also change but stabilised structures quite often change more slowly than social conditions. This was the case with the tulku system in Tibet, particularly in the last two centuries; the system became more and more corrupt and no longer related to the realities of life¹⁴. In a broader context, this applies to the entire Tibetan culture. There were many reasons underlying the dramatic events that occurred in the mid-twentieth century in Tibet: one of the main reasons includes the ossification of Tibetan social structures that no longer corresponded to the political conditions in Asia of the 20th century.

In the second half of the 20th century, Buddhism developed in the West and emphasized inner growth: the development of positive values such as kindness and compassion or reducing anger and pride. However, with the development of organised institutions, the establishment of Buddhist centres, organisational structures, position and function, needs are also increasing along with the money and tasks necessary to maintain the integrity and development of the Buddhist community. As a result of this process, more and more people are involved with the organisational aspect of Buddhism. This is a common phenomenon that occurs not only in this part of the world but also in other places and other religions. When a religion grows it needs more activities for its own maintenance at the expense of inner reflection and philosophy. An attempt to balance these elements - work for yourself and work for others – appears in various religions. Buddhism stresses that change in the world can only be made as a result of changes within an individual. Western tulkus are faced with a difficult choice: whether to devote their lives to the development of Buddhism or focus on their inner development (understood psychologically as the development of their personality or spirituality). Certain tulkus recognise that they can pursue their dreams and aspirations through the tulku position while others find out that the role of tulku does not meet their own desires. A third possibility is that when a person accepts recognition as a tulku, wants to work for the development of Buddhism but his or her idea of a tulku is different

¹⁴ D. Barlocher, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

than the traditional one. In the first situation, the tulku accepts tradition, in the second one, he rejects it and, in the third one, he tries to change it. All three types of reactions can be found among the Western tulkus: Trinley Tulku is an example of the first attitude; Adrien Reuben exemplifies the second one while Yeshe Silvano is an example of the third variant. As a result of dynamic changes taking place in Buddhism in the West, the last attitude is most common.

CASE STUDY

I shall now analyse the two stories of the tulku. Antoni Ogiński born in 2000 in Poland and Senge Wangyal born in 2006 in the United States. These two stories occur in two different social and cultural contexts. In the case of Mr. and Mrs. Ogiński, both are Polish; Mrs. Ogińska has been practicing Tibetan Buddhism for several years while Mr. Ogiński is a Catholic. Tenzin Wangyal is a Tibetan born in India and a teacher of Bon; Tsering Wangmo is also Tibetan born in India and the sister of another Bon teacher: Khemsar Rinpoche. They both lived in the U.S. where they got married and their son was born¹⁵.

TULKU ANTONI OGIŃSKI

Antoni Ogiński was born in 2000 in Poland, the son of Piotr and Julitta Ogiński. He was recognised at the age of several months by an important teacher from Khordong (Tib. *khor dong*) lineage (Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism) - Chime Rigzin. Mrs. Ogińska used to participate in retreats with Chime Rigzin regularly (while he visited Poland) before his death in 2002. Julitta Ogińska treated Chime Rigzin as her main teacher of Buddhism and established a close relationship with him. When she was pregnant, she informed Chime Rigzin on the phone that she was expecting a baby. When Chime Rigzin came to Poland she took her few months old son to the retreat. During that course, Chime Rigzin announced officially that he identified her son as the tulku of his teacher from Tibet – Chokyi Gyaltsen. It was a big shock for the whole family as well as the Polish Buddhist community be-

¹⁵ Julitta and Piotr Ogiński agreed to talk with me in April 2011 – the information contained herein comes from that interview and websites of Khordong. I met Tenzin Wangyal a few times. The information contained here is derived from personal conversation, an interview which they gave in April 2011 for the online newspaper “Voice of Clear Light” and from websites of the Ligmincha Institute.

cause it was the first tulku (and the only one so far) in Poland. Mrs. Ogińska received the information from her teacher concerned with what she should do after the recognition. The family went to India in 2001 where Antoni was enthroned in the monastery of the Nyingma school. In 2005, Mrs. Ogińska and her son went to Tibet where Antoni was enthroned in a Khordong monastery in the Kham region. Additionally, Julitta Ogińska exposed her son to the teachings of other Nyingma teachers. Antoni received special tutoring and instruction from different teachers. After the death of Chime Rigzin, Taklung Tsetrul has taken care of the Polish group of Khordong lineage and Mrs. Ogińska has consulted her decisions concerned with the education of her son with this teacher. Geshe Rabten has been living with the Ogińscy family in their house for the last four years. He teaches the Tibetan language, Buddhist rituals and practices.

Poles are only just getting used to the presence of Eastern religions and their ideas. Mrs. Ogińska states that she has not met with any discrimination but rather with the curiosity of other people. This tulku is currently 11 years old, attends school and receives teachings from the Tibetan teacher in the afternoons. Antoni says that he feels good at school, has no problems with teachers and other pupils but just feels sometimes that he is different than the rest of the children. The Ogińscy do not hide the information about their son's recognition from Buddhist communities but try to avoid contact with the media. The Buddhist community of the Nyingma sect expects that Antoni will be a Buddhist teacher of the Khordong lineage. Taklung Tsetrul suggested that, since the age of 13, Antoni should lead the annual ritual of the lighting of 111 111 butter lamps at the centre in Darnków. Mrs. Ogińska mentions the following difficulties stemming from the recognition: how to provide a full religious education for her son in Poland and skillfully combine a Buddhist education with life in Polish society. As a Buddhist, Mrs. Ogińska is more interested in the Buddhist education of her son than Mr. Ogiński who is Catholic and expresses more doubts and worries related to his son being educated in the Tibetan religious system.

The boy is still too young to make decisions concerned with his life. In the future, we will see whether he will accept the role of tulku or choose another path in life. Until now, the tulku role of Antoni has been accepted in the Buddhist community in Poland, but the boy does not perform any important functions in the Buddhist organisation. Based on the analysis presented in this paper, we can conclude that if the Tibetan Buddhist community in Poland wants to have Antoni as Buddhist teacher, they should define the concept and role of a tulku in Polish Buddhism.

TULKU SENGE WANGYAL

In March 2011, Senge Wangyal, the 5 years' old son of Tenzin Wangyal and Tsering Wangmo living in the United States, was recognised as the reincarnation of the 15th abbot of the Menri (tyb. *sman ri*) Monastery. The father of the child is a Buddhist teacher. Tenzin was educated in a Bon monastery in India. In 1988, he went to Italy to teach in one of the centres of the Buddhist master Namkhai Norbu and, afterwards, started to teach in Western countries. More and more students gathered each year and began to create Buddhist centres (called Ligmincha) with the main centre in the United States. In 2004, Tenzin Wangyal married Tsering Wangmo, the sister of another Bon teacher Khemsar Rinpoche. Senge Wangyal was born in 2006. In December 2010, his community in Mexico consecrated a new chorten (Tib. *mchod rten*, Sanskrit *stūpa*)¹⁶ on the initiative of Tenzin Wangyal and many important Bon teachers came to the ceremony. Tenzin Namdak who is one of the most important figures in the Bon tradition said during the ceremony that Senge was the reincarnation of an important teacher and traditional tests should answer whose reincarnation the boy was. Tenzin Wangyal was not surprised to learn that as he (at the age of ten) was also recognised by another important Bon teacher, Sangye Tenzin, as a tulku. The boy's parents said in an interview for the "Voice of Clear Light"¹⁷ newspaper associated with the Ligmincha Institute in the U.S.A. in April 2011 that they could see their son's special relationship with Buddhism even when he was very young and suspected that he could be a tulku. For example, Senge Wangyal sometimes got up in the morning to say prayers for 5 to 30 minutes before doing anything else or, on several occasions, he skilfully used ritual instruments. The boy's parents did not mention any particular dreams that often accompany the birth of a tulku.

According to the guidelines of Tenzin Namdak communicated during the stay in India and Nepal in February and March 2011, Tenzin Wangyal organised special prayers and rituals in two main Bon monasteries outside Tibet. Among others, monks from Triten Norbutse performed a special ritual related to the most important deity of the bon religion – Sipa Gyalmo (Tib. *sid pa rgyal mo*). After a few days, i.e. on February 18, Tenzin Namdak announced that Sen-

¹⁶ Chorten is a sacred building, which represents the state of enlightenment. Chorten is often used as a tomb, and sometimes large ones are used as temples.

¹⁷ *Enthronement in Nepal. Senghe Wangyal Rinpoche Recognized as Reincarnation of 15th Menri Abbot*, [online] <http://voiceofclearlight.org/component/content/article/154/263-enthronement-in-nepal> [10.04.2014].

ge Wangyal was a tulku of the 15th abbot of Menri. The official enthronement took place on March 8 in Nepal. Tenzin Wangyal and Tsering Wangmo said that they were very happy with the recognition. Tenzin Namdak did not impose any specific obligations on the boy and his parents. Probably it was partly because of the fact that the boy's father Tenzin Wangyal is a respected teacher and will be able to make own decisions about the future religious education of his son. Parents say that Senge will continue his school education in the United States and they plan to move to India in the future so that he can receive a full education according to the Bon tradition. They expect that their son, through this recognition and education, will become an important Bon teacher.

CONCLUSIONS

I wish to sum up the facts set out in this paper. Tulkus in the East help integrate Buddhist communities; they play an important role in the dissemination of Buddhism and organisation of Buddhist communities. Tulkus in the West teach the Buddhist doctrine, conduct ceremonies, teach meditation practices and write books. They also build and direct meditation centres. However, as a result of its development in a different cultural context, Tibetan Buddhism is changing and its institutions are transforming; this also applies to the tulku system. Buddhism is changing in the West. Tulkus do not occupy important political positions in any countries of Europe or the Americas. The Western separation of religion and politics makes it possible for the ‚recognition’ to be of importance for the Buddhist communities but not in political spheres. We can also observe changes in the social and cultural context of the functioning of tulkus. The authority, power, education system, identity, understanding of tradition and approach to religion in the West is different than the traditional one in Tibet. As a consequence, the role of tulkus in the development of Buddhism in the West is smaller than in the East. Tulkus found in that part of the world have identity problems, experience friction between individual ambitions and community expectations, a difference between the ancient tradition and conditions of the modern world. Due to other social, economic and cultural aspects, some institutions will disappear and some will be adapted to new circumstances. These changes occur slowly and cause friction in many aspects between people thinking in the traditional way and those who want to reform Buddhism.

The issue for tulkus in the West is that the tulku system emerged in the traditional Tibetan society and those born in the West are raised in entirely dif-

ferent cultural conditions. They find themselves within the framework of the tulku system that, in many areas, is in conflict with the modern way of life. If Buddhists redefine the tulku system in Western societies, maybe they will be able to avoid the conflict but, up till now, few Tibetan teachers have decided to break away from the traditional way of thinking. Western teachers have a different approach to Buddhism but Tibetan masters still play a dominant role in Western Buddhism. Over time, the role of Western teachers will grow but, as long as people with a different approach have a decisive voice, the traditional tulku system will not be adapted to the realities of the modern world. Another aspect discussed in this work is the role of the tulku in modern Buddhism. At this moment, the system does not play such an important role in the development of Buddhism in the West as in the development of religion in Tibet. The different cultural context and changes in Tibetan Buddhism suggest that the importance of the tulku in the West will be low. Despite the great changes in Buddhist societies, areas in which the tulku system is accepted still exist. The conclusion arising from these considerations is that the tulku system will not disappear completely but it will rather play a marginal role in the development of Buddhism in the West.

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