

The (un)Changing Karma: Pollution Beliefs, Social Stratification and Reincarnation in Bhutan

Kelzang T. Tashi

Australian National University

Email: tashikelzang27@gmail.com

Abstract

Since the abolition of slavery and serfdom in 1958, Bhutanese society has been characterised by three social strata: big, medium and small people. Purity beliefs and practices are one of the crucial factors in this reconfigured stratification, which is entwined with the hierarchy of the well-ordered pantheon in relation to vulnerability to uncleanness. The big people feel threatened by the wrath of the gods/spirits of the low-level pantheon who are more vulnerable to pollution than their high-level counterparts. Indeed, the purity/impurity beliefs are only relevant because of their roles in offending these beings, thereby revealing two types of defilement: direct and indirect pollution. The effects of pollution beliefs in class-based Buddhist Bhutan are indirect, while they are direct in caste-based Hindu India. The big status is perpetuated by purity beliefs which are, in turn, embedded in 'reincarnation'—a process of upward social mobility.

Keywords

Pollution, Reincarnation, Class/caste, Social mobility, Bhutan

Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, central Bhutanese society was characterised by a rigid system of stratification consisting of hierarchically ranked social groups. This social arrangement constituted nobilities on the top rung, taxpayers in the middle, and serfs and slaves at the bottom. The secular (*dungor dungje*¹) and religious (*chöje*) nobilities had their own serfs (*drapa*), slaves (*zapa*) and taxpayers (*khralpa*), who formed the basis of the most powerful chiefs' politico-economic control in their respective domains. In 1958, Bhutan began social reforms oriented towards providing equal rights and reducing inequalities inherent to that time. At the heart of these reforms were efforts to end slavery and serfdom, and to accord the underclass equality of status and land rights.²

Sixty years on, I was carrying out fieldwork in central Bhutan, the principal locus of the former nobilities, and observed that some of the descendants of the pre-1950s nobilities still had a residual standing in some ritual settings, albeit without any formal political powers. Today, Bhutanese distinguish themselves in terms of three main social strata: big/high (*che*), middle/medium (*ding/bar*) and small/low (*chung*) people,³ each of which is based on socioeconomic and cultural variables such as wealth and religious knowledge. However, the

¹ They became secular despite the claims of divine origin.

² See Pommaret (2010) and Penjore (2016).

³ See also Ortner (1978, 1999).

way in which these three categories of people are structured and operated is, in effect, a reconfiguration of the former system of stratification. Although serfdom and slavery were outlawed, stratification is nevertheless still seen as important by all groups. Further, there are continuities between the more rigid stratification of the past and the way people talk about social hierarchy in the present. Beyond land differentiation or wealth accumulation, one of the key factors in maintaining social stratification is the ongoing role of pollution (*dib*) beliefs and practices.

This paper is concerned with the role that pollution beliefs and practices play in reproducing social distinctions, which the state has tried to abolish. In particular, it looks at why it is only the big people who feel threatened by impurity beliefs and how the ideas about polluted states contribute to the maintenance of social distinctions. It draws upon fieldwork in central Bhutan, particularly in Bumthang, Trongsa and Zhemgang districts, between 2015 and 2017. This region is culturally and linguistically homogeneous in the sense that people not only speak mutually intelligible dialects (van Driem 1994) but there are also various former nobilities, who still attract some recognition, across the region. In the first part of this article, I will provide an overview of big, medium and small people before contrasting the three social groups and their avoidance practices in relation to uncleanness, and their specific relevance to the reproduction of existing stratification in Bhutanese society. This is followed by an explication of impurity concerns related to sex, marriage, childbirth and death against a backdrop of the purity beliefs and practices of Buddhist moral discourse in central Bhutan—where both the former nobilities (most of whose families still have a certain status) and the non-nobilities are found. I approach pollution from marriage, sex, death and childbirth as an interface within which the statuses of the big, medium and small people are forged, contested and negotiated. The article concludes by contrasting Bhutanese notions of pollution with those of Hindu India, arguing that the effects of pollution in Buddhist Bhutan are indirect, while they are direct in Hindu India.

Three Classes

In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas (1966) offered a structuralist view on how purity and impurity practices maintain their respective social orders. She showed pollution to be symbolically equivalent to ‘danger’ and ‘taboos’; it is the object of ritual activity to order relations, while purity is maintained through certain culturally variable categorisations and typologies. Dumont (1980), on the other hand, focused on the four categories of the Hindu caste system and postulated that they are embedded not only in the degree of purity and impurity but also in the principles of ‘hierarchical opposition’ and ‘encompassment’ (239–45). Purity is primarily embodied by the Brahmins, who are at the top of the social hierarchy and, consequently, are seen as the most vulnerable to pollution arising from other groups.

Purity concepts among South Asian societies continue to be explained primarily through the lens of caste-specific populations, with either childbirth or death as the most feared form of pollution (for example, Parry 1994; Pinto 2008). A number of studies have explored purity beliefs in Himalayan societies, particularly in northern India and Nepal, both of which have

significant Hindu populations living in close proximity to Buddhist populations. The most prominent is by Sherry Ortner (1973, 60) who has shown that pollution beliefs among Sherpas in Hindu Nepal are ‘symbolic developments upon an underlying tripartite structure’—spiritual, physical and demonic principles—within which purities/impurities are constructed.

In Bhutan, people believe that every individual is born with a Buddha-nature and with an equal opportunity to attain enlightenment within a single lifetime, irrespective of sex, rank and class. While non-egalitarian views are perceived as antithetical to Buddha’s doctrine, Bhutan, like other Himalayan societies,⁴ has remained both highly structured, formal and hierarchically based on the system of reincarnation. This is attested by the effects of pollution which differ from one class or one sex to another, suggesting that an egalitarian culture based on Buddhist ethics is more or less idealistic and impossible. Within Bhutanese society, there is no caste (*rig*) system per se; however, as indicated, all villages are fundamentally characterised by three classes defined by perceived wealth, power, and status and, most importantly, religious knowledge.

In general, high Buddhist masters, a handful of former nobles, that is, *chöje*, and top government officials occupy the upper–upper class of the *che* category. While this corresponds to Aziz’s ([1978] 2011) upper two social groups, hereditary masters (*ngagpa*) and aristocratic families (*gerpa*), the high Buddhist masters also constitute reincarnate masters who uphold the vows of celibacy and whose spiritual qualities are not necessarily transmitted by descent. Unless they are descended from former nobles and religious elite, most of the rich businessmen fall under the lower–upper of the *che* grouping (cf. Aziz ([1978] 2011)). The high Buddhist masters must be religiously erudite, while the former nobles, top state officials, and businessmen should be oriented towards promoting generosity, primarily by sponsoring grand Buddhist rituals so as to reaffirm their place within the big category. The high Buddhist masters are thus viewed as more dominant than others. A person descended from the religious and aristocratic families can generally pass the status on to their progeny.

The middle division is comprised of commoners (*miser*) representing the major segment of the populace, ranging from minor public functionaries to former taxpayers (see Samuel 1993) and nobles (that is, *dungje*), to ordinary monks and lay-Buddhist practitioners. Following a process of manumission, the *ding* status was rendered ambiguous, in that the former nobilities and serfs adapted to socioeconomic changes and moved into a new status—that of taxpayers. Put differently, some serfs achieved upward mobility, while some former nobles suffered a decline in status, resulting in an increased number of mainstream taxpayers. The medium people are, rather than a residual category (cf. Aziz [1978] 2011), by far the largest class found in central Bhutan.

Small people are a minority and occupy the bottom of the Bhutanese social hierarchy. They consist of people whose ancestors were slaves, serfs, fishermen or hunters, with limited access to wealth and religious knowledge. While membership of this group is still viewed as inherited, specific occupations are not subject to indexing. Akin to wider Tibetan Buddhist societies,⁵ this

⁴ See Childs (2004, 89).

⁵ See Aziz (1978 [2011]) and Samuel (1993).

group is fundamental in the Bhutanese social system. Avoidance of intimate contact with them by big people is insinuated in the notion that small people are inferior to other groups. Paradoxically, with the introduction of democracy in 2008, an emphasis on the new social distinctions has taken place, for example by politicians when addressing the public.

Pollution and the Life Cycle

While a range of polluting substances such as garlic, Sichuan pepper and turmeric are classified largely through a Buddhist lens, the common pollution concerns that continue to persist into modern times are primarily related to the life cycle. The differential effects of life cycle pollution on the big, medium and small people act to perpetuate their statuses. To illustrate the asymmetrical consequences of contamination on the different classes, I will describe how pollution from lifecycle events is viewed, and how the classes respond to pollution in relation to the severity of sanctions.

I shall start with marriage and sex, which are viewed very differently by the different social groups. Prior to the 1960s, it was primarily both the high and the ordinary/small masters and monks who considered marriage and sexual intercourse, along with the breaking of monastic vows (*dam nyam*), as highly polluting. The pollution from marriage lies in the idiom ‘bringing a bride home’ and, concomitantly, polluting the household by engaging in sexual intercourse. This notion of contamination arising from marriage seems to be influenced by the ancient Vedic tradition. Hindu society in practising hypergamy insists on the absolute virginity of the bride (Parry 2013; Dumont 1980); however, such a practice is not common in Bhutan. While virilocal marriage was practised between royals and some high-status religious persons of religious and political significance (Aris 1989), formal marriage ceremony is not practised across many uxorilocal communities in Bhutan (Barth and Wikan 2011, 56; Wikan 2012). The vast majority of Bhutanese couples simply marry by ‘going public’ with their relationship rather than through marriage ceremonies officiated by religious persons. The exchange of scarves constitutes a sort of formalised ceremony that is held mainly by big people. High Buddhist masters or monks may be present at these ceremonies, but they have held no ritual function until recently.

The ritual conducted during such marriage ceremonies that is of a purificatory nature, is oriented towards cleansing the couple, household members, and other non-human beings, thus implying that activities surrounding marriage are considered potentially polluting. One reason for this premise is that commensality is essentially located within marriage, wherein the mixing of different classes of people occurs over a sustained period of time. This is indicated by peoples’ participation in the communal feast where big, medium and small people socialise. While marriage ceremonies are rare, the notion of pollution inherent in small and medium peoples’ marriages is revealed when these rare marriages involve big people, that is, high masters. When a high Buddhist master marries a girl, the latter, unlike in ordinary marriage, becomes his spiritual wife (*khandro*). By becoming a *khandro*, she represents an embodiment of female enlightened beings (*dakini*) who, as will be elaborated later, are immune to pollution. In this sense, the bride of a high Buddhist master is elevated to the higher status of ‘*khandro*’

even if she is descended from a lower class, thus indicating that marriage involving high Buddhist masters is not deemed polluting by medium and small people.

‘Untimely’ sex is avoided by both men and women of all groups, particularly the night before any household rituals in which the mundane and supramundane divinities are invoked. While the human body, in general, is deemed as the prototype of unenlightened traits that can disrupt the cosmic order, women in central Bhutan are believed to be more polluting than men primarily because of the notions of impurity surrounding childbirth and menstruation. Bodily discharges are seen as defiling and disqualify women from entering a temple, let alone the inner sanctum, or viewing the image of a worldly deity that is native to that particular temple. By the same token, offerings to these deities can be neither made nor prepared by a menstruating woman. In wider Tibetan Buddhist society, menstruation is tightly policed as the powers of the protective amulets blessed by high Buddhist masters can easily be neutralised by it (McGranahan 2010, 789). Yet not all sexual activities between high Buddhist practitioners and menstruating female Buddhist masters, both of whom fall under the big people rubric, are considered defiling in central Bhutan. I shall return to this issue later.

Another common pollution concern relates to death: in principle, both men and women across all classes distance themselves from a human corpse. When a person dies, all of the close consanguineous members of the deceased become defiled, necessitating their immediate exercise of ablutions. Direct contact with the corpse and attendance at obsequies are particularly defiling not only to persons of all statuses but also to their gods. As soon as a person has died, their bodies, clothing and jewellery become impure, immediately tainting the habitation and the immediate surrounds of the house. The death severs the familial and social bonds, engenders the sorrow of loss, and ultimately warrants Buddhist rites to reclaim previous states (cf. Desjarlais 1992, 2016). The dangers surrounding this new state can be attenuated through expeditious cremation. Pollution arising from death is, therefore, only strong in the first few weeks, and is considered to be only mildly polluting.

Like marriage and death, childbirth, in theory, is also considered defiling, if not more polluting by all groups. Entering the house of a woman who has just borne a child is particularly polluting, and failure to avoid such a woman contaminates the visitor. Childbirth is evaded, even by gods, by isolating themselves behind a certain nine hills and nine mountains for three months. For it is during this period that virtually no spiritual protection is available to those affected. Pollution from childbirth can persist for months, threatening all the members of the house and the village, so much so that villagers can become affected without even entering the house of a newborn. Nor can giving birth in a medical centre invalidate the cultural dimension of uncleanness, for the cleansing ritual (*labsang*) is considered the appropriate way to get rid of impurity, regardless of the location of birth. Although people do not bury dead bodies, it is held that childbirth can pollute areas beyond the village, whereas death can contaminate only the burial pit.

On closer scrutiny of pollution practices, asymmetrical effects of contamination from death and childbirth across classes emerge. The deaths of big people of the upper–upper class, particularly of the high Buddhist masters, are rarely polluting. At the moment of death, the realised Buddhist masters can enter a meditative state (*thukdam*), either sitting in an upright

position or lying in the sleeping lion posture,⁶ and remain in that state for many days. Unlike the dead bodies of medium and small people, which can turn stiff and emit bad odours in only a few days, the dead body of the high Buddhist master remains relaxed, flexible, glowing in luminosity and without losing warmth at the heart. The dead bodies of high Buddhist masters thus become extremely sacred, indeed with more powers than living high masters to bless and transmit their wisdom to disciples in their presence. Furthermore, the bodies of some high Buddhist masters are preserved in a reliquary stupa inside the temple and worshipped as the manifestation of the deceased master, while the remains of non-big people are immediately discarded into the river for fear of pollution.

Similarly, childbirth among the high Buddhist masters is hardly polluting for the medium and small people. Take an example of the birth of a child who is a reincarnate person (*tulku*) of a deceased Buddhist master. The *tulku* is always born on one of the auspicious days in the lunar calendar, and their birth is accompanied by an unexpected drizzle, rainbow or the turning of water into milky white and blossoming of flowers, etc., all signifying the birth of a pure and holy child. Hence, the birth of the *tulku* child is concealed from the public until the formal enthronement ceremony. In doing so, visitors, including the medium and small people at the *tulku*'s home, are prohibited, limiting the child's exposure to pollution. Coming into contact with a polluted person can directly lead the child to becoming contaminated or, possibly, an 'unsuccessful' *tulku* (in other words, mentally unstable). Rather than considered as polluting, parturition through which a *tulku* is born is viewed by the medium and small people as pure and sacred to the degree that they seek to obtain the blessings of the newborn by becoming exposed to the child.

The consequences of becoming polluted in a Bhutanese context range from mental instability and emotional inertness to physical torpidity, and have a direct bearing on the centrality of the local cosmology to people. The common impurity beliefs, when not followed, generate anger in certain protective gods and other non-human beings who live in close proximity. This local pantheon is not only highly structured but also responds to threats of pollution very differently, becoming easily angered (Mumford 1989) by a person's physical contact with contaminated matter or exposure to polluting activities, even leading to severance of the bond between that person and the gods. It is this severance that can render big people polluted, ultimately leading them to display the physical and mental dispositions of a defiled person.

Conducting the cleansing ritual is the primary modality for dealing with all forms of pollution. It not only works towards purifying the sullied body but also reconnects the defiled person with gods by placating them through offerings. By mending the severed bond between people and their volatile gods, it lays the groundwork for the person to achieve the previously existing state of affairs. The cleansing rituals are, therefore, a singular antidote for the contaminated persons and, most importantly, gods, who inflict harm on humans when polluted and angered but restore their benevolence when cleansed and appeased (cf. Day 1989, 141). If a person fails to circumvent the effects of dirt and uncleanness through specific rituals, feelings

⁶ The posture in which the historical Buddha entered a state of Parinirvana.

of fatigue and apathy will shadow them. I shall now turn to the hierarchy of the local pantheon and contrast it with the structure of social organisation against a backdrop of the effects of pollution.

Pollution Beliefs and Social Stratification

The classification of social class in Bhutan seems to be influenced by Indian notions of a caste system, but these two systems are not interchangeable as the social and vertical mobility among the different groups in Bhutan do not require them to switch their religious beliefs. That is, unlike caste in Hindu India, which is seen as a closed structure,⁷ and with the recent reappearance of caste as a ‘portable form of belonging and connectedness structuring opportunity’ (Mosse 2012, 262), there is considerable openness among the Bhutanese classes. Nevertheless, the existence of the three groups is not weakened by such movements. In fact, as will become clear, such movements operate to reify as well as to perpetuate the existing social stratification. One example of such movement concerns women. There are many ordinary/small women who have achieved mastery in both *sutric* and *tantric* practices, some of whose teachings are not only central to Bhutanese Buddhism but are also recurring themes in the wider tantric lore. In contrast to the ordinary/small female’s dangerous and polluting bodily discharges, the menstrual blood of these high/big female Buddhist masters and nuns across Tibetan Buddhist societies, let alone those of the enlightened female Bodhisattvas, deities and *dakinis*, is considered as ‘bliss-giving and liberating’ (Huber 1999, 124).

The sanctity of menstrual blood in tantric understandings is embodied in the attributes of the deities, protectors and *dakinis*. Within Bhutan, there are pilgrimage sites and holy waters associated with the menstrual blood or ‘female aspect’ of these highly realised women said to have cathartic properties. The female tantric master’s body is, in this sense, considered as more sacred than profane. A high tantric female and male master’s urine is similarly viewed as a kind of elixir, possessing cleansing properties that their disciples and the laity covet. Whereas the urine of the medium and small people is certainly not a blissful elixir desired by others but, rather, deemed unclean and requiring avoidance. The same is the case with ordinary/small nuns who are seen as subjects of lesser worth, requiring supplication and subordination to the high Buddhist masters of the *che* group.⁸

Upward mobility among small people is less common but best illustrated by examples of the movement trajectories of members of families within which the birth of reincarnate religious figures takes place. A child born to a small class family in the late twentieth century in central Bhutan was recognised as a reincarnation of a deceased Buddhist master. He first lived a celibate life, but later married a girl, ultimately leaving the village. There are, however, high Buddhist masters in the region who, while descended from a family of small people, did not marry to establish a religious family. In any case, when the reincarnation of a high Buddhist master is born in a family of small people, regardless of their future marital status, honour and

⁷ But this view has been disputed by scholars, see Vaid (2014).

⁸ See also Gutschow (2004, 224).

prestige are immediately achieved by family members. Rather than using the ordinary kinship terms of father (*apa*) and mother (*ama*) to refer to the parents of such a child, they are addressed by others as ‘*yab*’ and ‘*yum*’. While these are social honorific titles, elevating the status of the child's parents to ‘divine father and mother’ has gained popular support. The reincarnations of Buddhist masters are, therefore, mostly found in the family lineages of religious nobility, and upon dying they are reborn as grandsons, nephews or nieces with ritual obligations repeating along the kinship lines for generations.

Within religious circles, it is interesting to note that in the event of two reincarnate claimants, the candidate who is descended from the religious family of his predecessor is generally favoured over the other who is born in a different family. While being identified and formally recognised in a different family does not always lead to downward mobility, it demonstrates that class is always at play. Reincarnate masters are rarely found in the family of small people, although such families can also achieve ‘big’ status upon the birth of a *tulku*. Another example among non-big families without filial or conjugal relationships with high masters is the growing number of medium people studying in Global North countries. Upon their return, some of them invest in land, while some secure higher-paying jobs. Both of these offer an alternative channel to breaking the barrier to upward mobility. On the other hand, the former nobility in the old *che* category, which is currently in a downward mobility mode, is the *dungje*, predating *chöje* whose pedigree is based on the pre-Buddhist Bon beliefs and feudal powers rather than Buddhist religious ancestry (Tashi 2020; Phuntsho 2013; cf. Ardussi 2004, 61–70). These former nobilities, who were overpowered by the latter religious lines, currently inhabit central Bhutan without political powers, while retaining some of their status.

While political and economic success is an important characteristic of big people, the birth of a reincarnate Lama in one’s family leads automatically to higher status. Recognition of such religious persons in the family through the process of what I call ‘reincarnation’ (see next section), endows its members with not only the affiliation to higher divinities but also with the divine filiation manifested in the form of the reincarnate Lama. Such religious figures are proximate Buddhas and, to employ Durkheim’s language, are a ‘figurative expression’ of purity. Because of their perceived purity, family members associated with them are conceptually closer to the sacred otherworldly divinities, while the poor families without any affinal and consanguineal ties with such reincarnate Lamas are structurally within the domain of low-level worldly gods. The closer the person is to the supermundane gods, the purer he/she is viewed.

Such movements implying change in group status, in turn, generate corresponding effects on the polluted states of the persons who achieve new status. In order for the new higher status to be perpetuated, constant vigilance must be exercised to protect themselves from pollution and contamination—underpinning the view that big people are less polluting. As such, boundary-maintenance by the big people becomes strict—commensality with small people becoming near-taboo. Transition from high to low status is accompanied by a concomitant dilution of ideas about uncleanness, impurity or dirt because the neophytes in the downward trajectory are no longer bound by pollution rules. Thus, the big people relegated to lower status

become resistant to pollution. It is this idea of immunity to pollution that provides big people with a basis for viewing small people as more polluting.

A brief overview of the multi-layered local pantheon (see Tashi 2020) is central to understanding how big and small people are affected differently by pollution. The local pantheon of each village in central Bhutan constitutes supramundane and mundane divinities, that is, various Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, enlightened and oath-bound dharma-protectors, and a range of local gods, deities and spirit beings (cf. Allison 2016, 169). Distinctions between them are made on the basis of pragmatic and nirvanic aspects. The Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and enlightened dharma-protectors represent the other-worldly class as they are fully enlightened beings. They are the highest in the hierarchy of divinities—*che* category—implying intrinsic purity or transcending the pure/impure duality. The range of local deities and spirit beings that constitute the this-worldly complex comprises not only the unenlightened divinities but also those oriented towards worldly ideals of everyday life. These local divinities, some of whom are partially incorporated into Buddhism, and other non-human beings, constitute the *chung* class. The oath-bound dharma-protectors, on the other hand, are neither fully other-worldly nor fully this-worldly beings. Despite being commonly viewed as worldly beings by the religious masters and monks, most of the oath-bound dharma-protectors are indeed near-enlightened gods and therefore occupy the middle category—*ding/bar*.

All forms of pollution threaten only the worldly dharma-protectors, local deities and serpent beings (*lu*) (cf. Mills 2013; da Col 2012), leading them to retract their protection from humans. The worldly gods are sensitive to the worldly pollution that they are repeatedly required to re-invoke and re-placate, through patterns of sacramental comestible-offerings, in order to re-establish the existing order and, of course, to procure the protection of these beings. While the *ding* class do benefit from social equilibrium by maintaining an isolated alliance with groups of both *chungwa* and *chewa*, whose social divide is clearly marked, such as in caste-based societies, the big people are more vulnerable to impurity.

Upon closer scrutiny, one can notice tensions between big and small people occupying the two poles of the social spectrum. The former enduringly seek to cordon off the latter, while the small populace try to establish social ties with the big people through servility. The most compelling evidence is the attendance at big people's celebrations, funerals and rituals as in the recent passing of reincarnate Lamas by *chungwas* and *barmas*. Most of the small and medium population were not necessarily disciples of the deceased master but rather than treating the corpse as polluting, they viewed it as pure and sacred with a power to bring blessings. While the death of high political persons, who equally revere high Buddhist masters, is not considered as sacred per se, the small and medium people nonetheless gravitate to their funerals, signalling that the deaths of nonreligious big people are not considered highly polluting. The small people perceive themselves to be on the cusp of achieving a new status when they join the events in big people's social fields, however, the latter see the relationship in opposite terms, viewing the former as inferior and thereby perpetuating the ordering of a social hierarchy. As indicated by the low number of big people at the baby showers and funerals of medium and small people, even where close kinship ties exist, the world of the medium and small people is precariously built out of highly structured and well-defined social orderings.

The social system can be better understood through a typological model of this worldview, which is built on hierarchical principles. One theme underlying impurity beliefs in central Bhutan is that they are fundamentally concerned with the defilement of the low-level deities and spirit beings who, as a result of their exposure to polluting activities and substances, abandon people by retracting their protections and, ultimately, rendering them sick. Rather than polluting the person directly, the unclean activities and substances always befoul some of the divinities first, and hence serve as precursor to actual somatic symptoms (cf. Ortner 1999, 68). In other words, a person begins to experience the feeling of defilement only in relation to their low-level pantheon beings, who are seen as vulnerable to becoming unclean and thus the first to be polluted.

Because the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and enlightened dharma-protectors are inherently incorporeal, supramundane, pure, and beyond the affairs of this-worldly orderings, the mundane pollution associated with this-worldly occurrences can neither defile nor anger them. Figure 1 depicts the hierarchy and register of classes in the village worldview. The negative sign indicates those who cannot be polluted as they exist beyond notions of corporeal activities or karma theories. The positive sign stands for those who are greatly polluted or annoyed by polluting matters, while the cross sign indicates that they can be mildly polluted. Finally, the equal sign represents those who are seldom polluted by life cycle events.

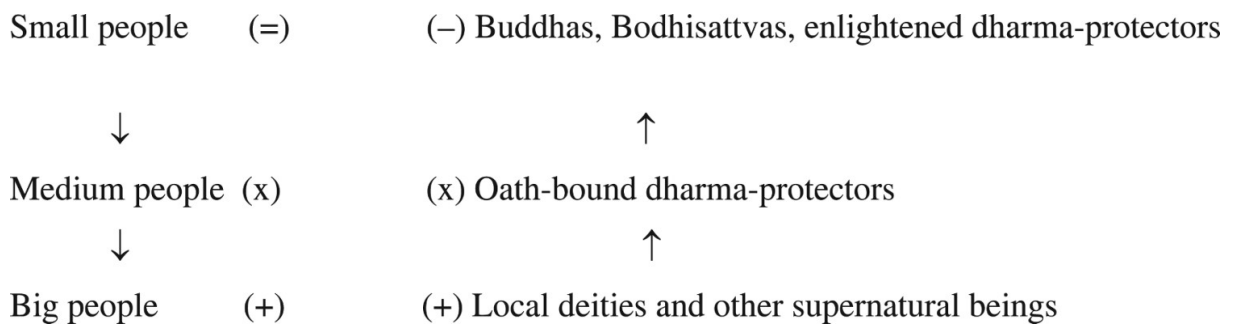


Figure 1 The hierarchy of gods and people

During fieldwork, I witnessed all three groups conduct cleansing rituals and make regular offerings to the local pantheon in order to placate them and to invoke their blessings. However, as far as the effects of pollution go, the cleansing rituals and offerings were oriented towards purifying the two lower levels of divinities. This indicates that purity/impurity concepts have varying meanings and effects on the three classes of gods and people, and that they can upset only the circle of big people and low-level gods. While this suggests that both the low-level dharma-protectors and the local supernatural beings are angered by human pollution and somewhat vulnerable to polluting humans regardless of class, the partially incorporated-local gods and deities along with the serpent beings were the most common divinities propitiated in the rituals. It is, therefore, the partially incorporated-local deities and other autochthonous beings who are easily angered by people’s uncleanness. Correspondingly, the big people are more vulnerable to various polluting activities and substances than the medium and small people.

Small people are then associated with, or connected to, the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and enlightened dharma-protectors, who are immune to threats of pollution. The medium people's response to uncleanness is best reflected by the oath-bound dharma-protectors who, like the former, occupy the middle rank in the supernatural hierarchy. The medium people are linked with the middle-ranking gods who are, similarly, not completely immune from dirt. Finally, the big people are connected with the lower level or small gods who, due to their vulnerability to pollution, are required to distance from humans in the event of polluting activities. The vulnerability of low-level gods to defilement and the need to conciliate them through ritualistic offerings, not only reflect the hierarchy and inherent tension among the social classes but also the big people's sensibilities towards the small people, and the latter's desire to negotiate the highly structured order. In this sense, the structure of social distinction is conceptually linked with, shaped and rationalised by the hierarchy of their local pantheon, although the pollution beliefs encompass and permeate primarily the two lower levels of people and gods.

Social Mobility and Reincarnation

Social hierarchy is fundamentally linked to both the hierarchy in pollution beliefs and the local pantheon of gods. However, Bhutanese pollution beliefs are distinct from those of Hindu India. In Indian society, the Brahmins constituted the dominant caste among the four *varnas* with higher numerical and material strengths (Srinivas 1956, 1987), while the former Untouchables not only occupied the lowest status but their category was also situated outside the system of the four main castes. Consequently, the ex-Untouchables were characterised as ritually impure: they were avoided through direct physical touch, taboos and residential segregation, and by imposing restrictions on eating together and conducting ritual activities (Vaid 2014, 393; Jodhka and Shah 2010). Impurity beliefs can, therefore, be divided into two types: direct pollution and indirect pollution. Direct pollution is relevant among caste-based societies such as India's, wherein the higher castes are, without the obvious agency of divinities, directly vulnerable to former Untouchables who had been permanently characterised as polluted primarily because of hereditary impure occupations. With direct consequences on the contravener or the contaminated person, the effects of pollution are immediate and, therefore, reflect the rigidity of the social system.

Indirect pollution is common in a class-based society such as Bhutan. This form of polluting is indirect because the person only suffers as a result of contaminating two lower levels of deities and spirit beings to the extent that subsequent bodily illnesses are indirectly afflicted by the now angered gods. That is to say, in order for the person to be polluted, the polluting activities and substances must essentially defile their gods first. As in the case of the small people, dirt and uncleanness do not affect them per se but only become polluting through their effects on the different level of divinities. In this sense, the agency of divinities is central to the notions surrounding indirect pollution. The vulnerability of low-level divinities who are easily polluted by everyday physiological processes, such as urination and other forms of elimination, is the primary concern of the big people. Given that the consequences of contamination in central Bhutan are indirectly caused by the abandonment of the person by the two lower levels

of divinities, this form of pollution is indirect and, therefore, represents a less rigid system of social mobility. Both types of pollution are, however, about social order, and only vary in terms of the rigidity of class structure and social mobility.

Apart from success in economic and political domains, the lower groups can achieve the big status through a process of reincarnation. I employ 'reincarnation' as opposed to reincarnation as every individual in the Tibetan Buddhist universe is believed to be an avatar of a certain sentient being, for example, of animal, of ordinary human, or of insect etc., but rarely of a high Buddhist master, let alone of Buddha and Bodhisattva. Reincarnation operates according to a principle similar to Srinivas's (1956) Sanskritisation in that both are forms of upward social change. It implies the ways in which the medium and small people achieve upward mobility towards the big category. Based on karma theory, reincarnation occurs when learned Buddhist masters, upon death, take rebirth as incarnate Lamas so that their lineage teachings are preserved and perpetuated. But some *tulkus* are also believed to be the manifestation of Bodhisattvas who return to human form so as to liberate sentient beings from the samsaric cyclicality (Goldstein 1973, 446). Unlike in reincarnation, reincarnation does not always lead to higher status.

The modality of a formal recognition of *tulku* entails confirmation, by the senior disciples, of a child as an unmistakable incarnate Lama of their master, on the basis of: a letter left by the deceased master, the recollection of the past life, teachings and identification of ritual implements of his or her predecessor. Reincarnation, however, is not restricted to the system of rebirths of high Buddhist masters alone. For instance, ordinary monks, who were originally not acknowledged as incarnate Lamas by Buddhist masters at birth, upon spiritual accomplishment through rigorous training and learning can not only incarnate in their next lives but also, at a mature age, are regarded as emanations of some Buddhist masters by senior Lamas. In this sense, reincarnation constitutes achieving higher status in the hierarchy in this life by incarnating as a high Buddhist master and ensuring the perpetuation of that high status in the next life by acquiring and mastering Buddhist knowledge.

One key element of reincarnation is that the predecessor's monasteries and estates are inherited by the subsequent incarnate Lama (Samuel 1993, 280), thereby engendering *tulku* as the true symbol of big people on both spiritual and economic fronts. The enormous desire for the birth of a *tulku* in one's own family is felt across almost all classes and often leads to either identification of multiple *tulku* claimants, or the unsuccessful training of a *tulku*, which is equivalent to downward mobility or de-reincarnation. It is this proclivity for the rebirth of such a master that can also influence the child to later become an incarnate master, by self-proclamation. Hence, while de-reincarnation is rare, it is not at all an unprecedented phenomenon. It occurs when the formerly recognised *tulku* candidate is later deemed to be not authentic or a false incarnation by masters other than the one who initially recognised him or her, or when a young neophyte or ordinary monk fail to pursue rigorous Buddhist paths and trainings. This process, however, does not apply to non-religious persons even if they belong to one of the sub-classes of the *che* matrix.

Given that it is mostly the incarnate masters and their consanguineal and affinal members who constitute the big class, by giving birth to a *tulku* both small and medium people can

become prominent figures. This was attested by the birth of a *tulku* in a family of small people in central Bhutan, which consequently allowed them to achieve a higher status. In a further example, some ordinary monks born to the two lower classes, while not recognised as *tulku* at birth, became accomplished masters; some reincarnate Lamas later attributed their mastery of Buddhist teachings to the system of reincarnation as either emanations or even reincarnations of some Buddhist masters. That said, unlike in Sanskritisation, mere adoption and emulation of Buddhist literature and rituals by becoming a monk do not always lead to upward mobility, unless they are either recognised as legitimate *tulkus* or have attained a higher level of spiritual realisation which works in tandem with the former very well.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion indicates that Bhutanese pollution beliefs structure the ordering of three groups by underwriting the superiority of the higher-ranking group. Coming into close contact with the polluted states of the small people represents the contravention of the ordered groups. All temporary physical states and, to a lesser extent, certain substances, are all anomalies that are simply ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 1966). These beliefs about temporary physiological states, carried over from the past, act to reinforce and firm up the three classes, which are less rigid than the pre-1950s hierarchy. This is attested by the existence of the three well-ordered classes of people, which operates in the same manner as the hierarchical pantheon of divinities, particularly in relation to purity beliefs.

The threat of pollution has an opposite (or contrary) effect on the social categories of humans and the categories of divinities. While the oath-bound worldly dharma-protectors and medium people are affected by uncleanness to some extent, it is primarily the big people and partially incorporated deities and spirit beings who are extremely vulnerable to pollution. On the contrary, the enlightened divinities and the small people are characterised by such perfect immunity to defilement that the latter are rarely required to reverse the effects of pollution and, hence, reconstruct the boundary so as to fit into the particular category. The enlightened beings are beyond the impurity/purity dichotomy; therefore, as attested by the cleansing rituals, apart from the two lower level gods and spirit beings, enlightened beings are never ritually cleansed. The forms of pollution and the asymmetrical effects on each of the three levels of divinities and the three social groups reflect the highly structured society that characterises villages in central Bhutan, despite the increase in flexibility in terms of social mobility.

It is clear that the clean/unclean concerns are primarily located on the cusp of the big and small classes—a social interface that is mirrored in cosmological concerns with the polluting of two low-level deities and spirit beings. The social distinction drawn between groups is particularly pronounced at gatherings such as meetings and public events within which interaction takes place. A resurgence of appeal for use of the big, medium and little categories has taken place in recent years, particularly among politicians who employ them to refer to themselves and others, thus not only perpetuating their own status but also that of others. Political campaigns and other forms of large congregation fuel the system underpinned by pollution beliefs. While politicians also occupy the big group, not all of them necessarily have

consanguineal links with the high Buddhist masters. The only relation between them is that they fall under the same category; nonetheless, the politicians have better access than the lower groups to the high Buddhist masters who, I have already indicated, are reified as the big category.

Given that the big class is embodied primarily by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the big people feel threatened by pollution because purity beliefs are deeply influenced by their religious worldview wherein they perceive themselves and are perceived by other groups as the manifestation of the higher pantheon, to the extent that even their remains, upon being seen, let alone by contact, exude blessings to all. This worldview revolving around the structural hierarchy of gods and the process of reincarnation also pervades the laity in equal measure, increasing their desire to establish connection with, if not achieve, the higher *tulku* status—further perpetuating the significance of the big people. The persistence of social stratification, despite the state's efforts to abolish it, is therefore not just because of wealth accumulation and power symbols alone but also because of the pollution beliefs shaped by the process of reincarnation.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank his supervisor, Professor Nicolas Peterson, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable and constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Funding

The second fieldwork was generously supported by HDR Research Support Fund, The Australian National University and an Endeavour Award provided by the Australian Government's Department of Education and Training.

References

- Allison, Elizabeth. 2016. "At the Boundary of Modernity. Religion, Technocracy, and Waste Management in Bhutan." In *Religion and Modernity in the Himalaya*, edited by Megan A. Sijapati, and Jessica V. Birkenholtz, 163–181. London: Routledge.
- Ardussi, John. 2004. "The Gdung Lineages of Eastern and Central Bhutan." In *The Spider and Piglet*, edited by Karma Ura, and Sonam Kinga, 60–72. Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Aris, Michael. 1989. *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives: A Study of Pemalingpa (1450–1521) and the Sixth Dalai Lama (1683–1706)*. London: Kegan Paul International.
- Aziz, N. Barbara. (1978) 2011. *Tibetan Frontier Families: Reflections of Three Generations from D'ing-ri*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Barth, Fredrik, and Unni Wikan. 2011. *Situation of Children in Bhutan: An Anthropological Perspective*. Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Childs, Geoff. 2004. *Tibetan Diary: From Birth to Death and Beyond in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- da Col, Giovanni. 2012. "The Poisoner and the Parasite: Cosmoeconomics, Fear, and Hospitality among Dechen Tibetans." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (1): 175–195.

- Day, Sophie. 1989. "Embodying Spirits: Village Oracles and Possession Rituals in Ladkh, North India." PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Desjarlais, Robert. 1992. *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Desjarlais, Robert. 2016. *Subject to Death: Life and Loss in a Buddhist World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Dumont, Louis. 1980. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goldstein, C. Melvyn. 1973. "The Circulation of Estates in Tibet: Reincarnation, Land and Politics." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 32 (3): 445–455.
- Gutschow, Kim. 2004. *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Huber, Toni. 1999. *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain, Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jodhka, S. Surinder, and Ghanshyam Shah. 2010. "Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia." *Economic and Political Weekly* 45 (48): 99–106.
- McGranahan, Carole. 2010. "Narrative Dispossession: Tibet and the Gendered Logics of Historical Possibility." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (4): 768–797.
- Mills, Martin. 2013. *Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism: The Foundations of Authority in Gelukpa Monasticism*. London: Routledge Curzon.
- Mosse, David. 2012. *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India*. London: University of California Press.
- Mumford, Stan. 1989. *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Ortner, B. Sherry. 1973. "Sherpa Purity." *American Anthropologist* 75 (1): 49–63.
- Ortner, B. Sherry. 1978. *Sherpas Through Their Rituals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ortner, B. Sherry. 1999. *Life and Death on Mt. Everest, Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Parry, P. Jonathan. 1994. *Death in Banaras*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parry, P. Jonathan. 2013. *Caste and Kinship in Kangra*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Penjore, Dorji. 2016. "Harvesting the Half: The Persistence of Sharecropping in Samcholing, Bhutan." PhD Thesis, The Australian National University.
- Phuntsho, Karma. 2013. *The History of Bhutan*. Haryana: Random House.
- Pinto, Sara. 2008. *Where There is No Midwife: Birth and Loss in Rural India*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Pommaret, Françoise. 2010. "Alliances and Power in Central Bhutan: A Narrative of Religion, Prestige and Wealth (Mid 19th-Mid 20th Centuries)," in "The Dragon and the Hidden Land: Social and Historical Studies on Sikkim and Bhutan," Edited by Saul Mullard, Special Issue. *Bulletin of Tibetology* 45(2)-46(1): 49–66.
- Samuel, Geoffrey. 1993. *Civilised Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Srinivas, M. Narasimhachar. 1956. "A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization." *Journal of Asian Studies* 15 (4): 481–496.
- Srinivas, M. Narasimhachar. 1987. *The Dominant Caste and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- Tashi, T. Kelzang. 2020. "Contested Past, Challenging Future: An Ethnography of Pre-Buddhist Bon Religious Practices in Central Bhutan." PhD Thesis, The Australian National University.
- Vaid, Divya. 2014. "Caste in Contemporary India: Flexibility and Persistence." *Annual Review of Sociology* 40: 391–410.
- van Driem, G. 1994. *Language Policy in Bhutan. Bhutan: Aspects of Culture and Development*. Gartmore: Kiscadale Publications.
- Wikan, Unni. 2012. *Resonance: Beyond the Words*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.