

Networks of the Tibetan Aristocracy

—From the End of the Nineteen Century
to the Middle of the Twenty Century—

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This is an analysis based on my field data, genealogies with affinal relations of the major Tibetan noble families (*Kuda, sKu-drag*), which have been influential during the time of a half century prior to 1959, when the present Dalai Lama took refuge in India. In collecting these data, I was helped great deal by Mrs. Rinchen Dolma Taring, to whom my profound gratitude goes.

The central part of this essay is devoted to the analysis of the major noble families (about a dozen, their genealogies are given in Fig. 1-13). As a starting point of the investigation of these highly complicated kinship networks, I took up two distinguished families, the Tsarong and the Yuthok, which have numerous affinal relations with other major families, and both produced Ministers in the early part of this Century. There are several families which have marriage relations with both families; and others are related to either the Tsarong or the Yuthok. Out of twenty major ones those families which have no direct relations with the two are very few. Even these families have more than two marriage relations with families who have direct affinal relations with the Tsarong or the Yuthok. Therefore all these major families are closely connected to one another through kinship and marriage relations, forming a distinguishable circle. Moreover, for these major families which form the circle, most of their spouses came from the families within the circle (as shown in Fig. 15). Such relations multiplies by cases of polygyny and polyandry and also remarriages, all of which are not unusual among them.

The circle shows a highly endogamous tendency. Tibetans follow the patrilineal descent system with the exogamous rule applied to those who

are related, as they say, within the seventh ascending generation. As a matter of fact, in spite of intricate networks among those families, there is no single instance of the exogamic rule being broken. Instead, there are many cases where two or three marriages took place between two families within one or two generations. In relation to marriage, the discussion touches also on the following points: 1) In the absence of a male, a family takes a man from outside as a husband to the heiress, or the divorcee or widow to fulfil the duty as the head of the family as well as a man to be an officer in the central government. This man is called *mag-pa*. *Mag-pa* are normally found within the families of the same circle mentioned above. As shown in my data *mag-pa* cases are frequently found: sometimes in every generation or more than one in the same generation of a family. For example, see Fig. 4, the Surkhang (an arrow mark indicates a *mag-pa* case). Therefore continuity in terms of descent in a family (*Kuda*) is not the necessary requirement. 2) There is no such status differentiation as wife-giving and wife-receiving between families. 3) Inclusion of *Yapshi* (Dalai Lama's family) into the circle: it is a well observable fact that the most influential family (-ies), such as of the current Minister, provided spouses to the family members of a newly created *Yapshi*.

List A (p. 30) consists of the names of major families dealt with in detail and of those who are close to them. Their affinal relation networks are shown in Fig. 15 (p. 29). List B (p. 31) includes families which have marriage relations with those in List A; and comparatively big families, including those who were in the *Kashag*, but did not form the top stratum discussed above. It is assumed that the number of *Kuda* in Tibet was about two hundreds, so that there were still about one hundred *Kuda* families, which were socially located in the outer circle of those in List B. The analysis of this essay suggests that the composition of the Tibetan aristocracy was something like that of the Russian aristocracy under the Czar: it did not form a homogeneous stratum clearly separated from the rest of the population, but existed in a somewhat graded manner from the major top ones located at the centre to minor insignificant local ones. In the course of history, there have also been renewals by the decline of older powers and rising of new ones.