

new Pakistani state has failed to be accepted by a majority of the population as being legitimately “theirs”. This, and not the growth of fundamentalism, has fed a continuing hunger for surrogate moments of empowerment of the kind described in Gabriel’s book. Pakistani Christians, in short, are the victims of the same problems of democratic deficit and massive social inequality that drive the transgressions against them.

Markus Daechsel

EAST ASIA

MELVYN C. GOLDSTEIN, BEN JIAO and TANZEN LHUNDRUB:

On the Cultural Revolution in Tibet: The Nyemo Incident of 1969.

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This book is the outcome of pioneering research into a controversial period of Tibetan history. It is the first study to tackle events from the Cultural Revolution using extensive interviews and fieldwork in the areas concerned, complemented by newly retrieved contemporary Chinese documents.

It provides a detailed account of the “Nyemo incident”, which culminated with Tibetan villagers, inspired by a possessed nun (Trinley Chödrön), but guided by the Gyenlo revolutionary faction, attacking the PLA and, earlier, unarmed local villagers whom they mutilated and killed, and then marching on the local government seats in Nyemo County on June 13–14 1969. Although this event was limited in scale, it became highly significant for Tibetans, the Chinese government and scholars of Tibet. The Chinese government at first considered the incident an anti-revolutionary uprising to be crushed by the army, subsequently criticized this view when it was declared a factional fight, and has since resumed a position closer to the initial one to the extent that a patriotic shrine was recently dedicated to the victims of the attack. The exiled Tibetan community celebrated the Nyemo incident as an epic of national resistance, and even though some of the disturbing details, linked to local revenge, occasionally percolated through informal networks as people from the area came to India, these failed to be reflected in general views.

The book aims to unravel the intricacies of this event and often runs against the grain of Chinese and Tibetan nationalistic interpretations. It sets the incident in the wider context of the Cultural Revolution and the bitter factional fights still happening in Tibet when in the rest of China the turmoil was winding down. The main narrative examines the emergence of a local medium, a nun, as a charismatic leader, the creation of an “army of the gods”, and its manipulation by one of the two revolutionary factions, the Gyenlo. This was a group primarily led by Chinese political activists who were seeking ways to overthrow the dominant faction of revolutionary activists, the Nyamdre, and the established cadre-force. The analysis highlights how local dissatisfaction with government policies was used by the Gyenlo to gain support for their movement and how they deliberately encouraged the uprising by the followers of the nun in an attempt to gain power from the competing faction.

By providing a painstakingly detailed reconstruction of what happened as narrated by direct witnesses, the authors have sought to look beyond the legend. In particular they highlight how ethnic or nationalistic interpretations of the event may have led to an underplaying of local factors, particularly economic issues linked to taxation and land reform as well as local allegiances. They provide an analysis of how a revolutionary faction like the Gyenlo could harness widespread consensus among the population by presenting itself as a potential agent for change in the broadest terms. This led to an alliance between a group of religiously inspired Tibetan people and Communist revolutionaries largely led by Chinese that would seem, at first sight, paradoxical. In the conclusion the authors suggest that “Tibetan villagers who marched on the county and district seats in June 1969 were, really, pawns in the hands of Gyenlo revolutionaries, who themselves were also pawns in the larger political struggles created by Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution” (p. 171). Although the authors warn that “We shouldn’t minimize what clearly fuelled this incident: the anger many rural Tibetans felt at the direction party policies had taken, not only in the realms of taxation and economic freedom, but also towards religion and culture” (p. 170), they do not explore in detail the links between religious, political and economic factors.

Based on oral history research, the authors provide plenty of circumstantial detail and a wide range of contrasting views. However, the book does not seem fully to overcome the difficulties associated with research into topics that are still considered sensitive, which must inevitably have had an impact on the informants’ accounts. For example, only antagonists could easily have referred to the ethnonationalist profile of the Nyemo movement, and not people who directly or indirectly supported it. The book stimulates questions that should merit further research. For example, other, possibly interconnected, fights happened during the same period as the Nyemo incident. How significant was the fact that these areas (for example Pemba, Chamdo Prefecture and Shentsa, Nagchu Prefecture) had experienced bitter fights between local rebels and the army for several years in the wake of the 1959 Tibetan uprising? Also, what role did the 1960s destruction of traditional religious and social control mechanisms of medium possession play in the process that led a marginal, controversial, spirit medium to become a charismatic leader who people would die for? A most intriguing open question is why an apparently minor incident of local factional feuding, but with a religious and Tibetan historical element (the army of the gods referred back to Gesar epic heroes), developed such a mythical character. The ethno-nationalist relevance of the event was fostered in the early stages by the Nyemdrel faction to denounce their opponents (as highlighted in the book). From a Tibetan perspective, however, the story of a nun who led a revolt against the government at a time of widespread dissatisfaction by mobilizing deeply engrained Tibetan cultural symbols provided fertile ground for all those who projected into this act their emotions, frustrations and aspirations. This is likely to have happened not only in hindsight but to have influenced the unravelling of the events and their impact at the time. The role that perceptions of events play in making history, highlighting the importance of affect in political life, is certainly an important avenue for Tibetan oral history research (as it has been elsewhere, e.g. Portelli’s Second World War studies).

This book provides a fascinating insight into a critical period in Tibetan history and a starting point for future research. It demonstrates the value of co-operation and represents an important stage towards the development of a rigorous scholarly debate concerning controversial periods of Tibetan history.

Hildegard Diemberger