Tibet, religious, political and economic power have always been intertwined. Tibetan political theory is based on a confluence of politics and religion in the form of Lamasim, finding its expression in choyon, a ‘preceptor-patron’ relationship in which both parties are considered equal. The term was often used to designate the relationship between a Tibetan lama and the leader of a foreign country, such as that of Phagpa Lotro Gyalpo (1226-1282), the head of the Sakya Order, and Kubilai Khan, the Mongol emperor, in the 13th century.

Turmoil in Tibet

In 1548, the aristocrat Shingzhag Tseten Dorje was appointed governor of Tsang province by the ruler of Central Tibet, a Rinphung lord. Shingzhag supported the Karma Kagyu Order and had a residence in Kappo castle (also called Shigatse), near the Gelug monastery Trashilhumpu. Soon after, he rebelled against the Rinphung lords and proclaimed himself King of Tsang. Together with his nine sons he gradually expanded his kingdom and established control over U and Tsang, Central Tibet’s two main provinces.

The new government wanted to revive the institutions of the imperial period and to bring peace and prosperity to the country through a five-point policy, the so-called ‘Five Great Actions’, supported by various religious orders including the Sakya, the Jonang and the great Karmapa hierarchy. As the legitimate representative of authority, Shingzhag also maintained good relations with the Gelug abbot of Trashilhumpu, though the latter remained suspicious of the new dynasty’s intentions.

In 1577-78 the conversion to Buddhism of Altan Khan, the Mongol emperor, in the 13th century. However, viewed the event as a politico-religious alliance in which both parties are considered equal. The term was often used to designate the relationship between a Tibetan lama and the leader of a foreign country, such as that of Phagpa Lotro Gyalpo (1226-1282), the head of the Sakya Order, and Kubilai Khan, the Mongol emperor, in the 13th century.

In 1567-62, the prime architect of the Gelug’s rise to political power. Later he received the title Desi, meaning ‘Regent’, which he was unable to distinguish between them! When he left the room I heard him tell the people outside that I had successfully passed the tests. Later, when he became my tutor, he would often admonish me and say: “You must work hard, since you were unable to recognize the objects!”

The Fifth Dalai Lama remained bitter memories of his childhood during which the philosophical and religious regarding reincarnation served political purposes. In his writings he recalls with irony the political manipulations of his own religious order, which involved the Mongol in all its affairs. He writes in his autobiography: “The official Tsiawa Kachu of the Ganden Palace showed me statues and rosaries (that belonged to the Fourth Dalai Lama and other lamas), but I was unable to distinguish between them! When he left the room I heard him tell the people outside that I had successfully passed the tests. Later, when he became my tutor, he would often admonish me and say: “You must work hard, since you were unable to recognize the objects!”

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The Fifth Dalai Lama was dismayed and remarked that the Desi had gone too far. However, it was now out of the question to turn back the Mongols. Shortly after, Gushri Khan’s army confronted the king’s troops in what was a long and bloody war. Towards the end of 1642, having resisted the Mongols and the Gelug Tibetans for almost a year, the king and his two ministers finally surrendered.

Immediately, the Dalai Lama was invited to Samdrupthang castle, where he was enthroned as the temporal leader of Tibet and his army’s advance against Tsang reached Lhasa, surprising the Dalai Lama, the Desi finally told him the truth: that he had issued this order in the Dalai Lama’s name! The Dalai Lama was dismayed and remarked that the Desi had gone too far. However, it was now out of the question to turn back the Mongols. Shortly after, Gushri Khan’s army confronted the king’s troops in what was a long and bloody war. Towards the end of 1642, having resisted the Mongols and the Gelug Tibetans for almost a year, the king and his two ministers finally surrendered.

Gushri Khan: king of Mongols, patron to the Dalai Lama

The Fifth Dalai Lama and the Desi discussed the possibility of the Desi assuming the role of the Dalai Lama, which he was unable to distinguish between them! When he left the room I heard him tell the people outside that I had successfully passed the tests. Later, when he became my tutor, he would often admonish me and say: “You must work hard, since you were unable to recognize the objects!”

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in the Kanjur region. Thus he played an essential role in the maintenance of peace, which the Manchus, fearing Mongol attacks, desperately needed.

After receiving several invitations from the Manchu Emperor Shun-chih to visit Peking, the Fifth Dalai Lama finally accepted in 1654. He set out with an entourage of 5,000 men and the journey lasted nine months. Near Peking, the Manchus built the Yellow Palace specifically for the Dalai Lama to reside in during his visit, which lasted two months and was marked by two grand imperial receptions in his honour.

For having successfully completed this long and hazardous journey, he was welcomed home by all of Lhasa. In return for the Buddhist teachings he provided throughout his journey to Amdo Tibetans, Mongols, Manchus and Chinese, he was given thousands of horses, camels and precious objects.

In 1674, the Fifth Dalai Lama received the Karmapa Choying Dorje (1604-1659) at the Potala Palace, a reconciliation welcomed by both parties after the many conflicts and misunderstandings between 1612 and 1642. But he was not so lenient towards other religious orders, banishing the Jangang from Central Tibet to Amdo, and forcing some Bonpo monasteries to convert to the Gelug tradition. But the new government’s attitude was actually determined by political rather than religious considerations.

Two other incidents during the Fifth Dalai Lama’s rule provide insight into that era’s court intrigues and the link between religion and politics and its effects, which are still felt today. Among the three candidates for the reincarnation of the Fourth Dalai Lama was Dragpa Gyaltshen, recognized as the reincarnation of another important lama of Drepung Monastery. As a result, he was seen as a trial of the Fifth Dalai Lama even though he invariably proclaimed himself to be his disciple. In 1654 he died under mysterious circumstances. Afterwards, it was believed that his spirit had returned as a sort of ‘protector of the Buddhist religion’. This marked the beginning of his relationship with the establishment order. His exceptional, complex and engaging personality made him one of Tibetan history’s most important figures. His legacy had a profound effect on almost every aspect of the country’s culture, notably architecture, poetry, historiography, civil administration, painting and, of course, philosophy and meditation. He was remarkable as both statesman and monk, embodying the Buddhist ideal of a ‘great being’.

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For further reading
- Samten K. Karmay, Directeur de Recherche émérite, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris, own Nomata Visiting Professor at Leiden University and an IAS visiting fellow from February 15 until July 1, 2009. The life of the Fifth Dalai Lama and his work on Dzogchen meditation were the subject of two of his 15 lectures while at IAS.