

**Topic Analysis #1: Tibetan Buddhism**

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ANT1001 1N1: Cultural Anthropology

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23 March 2025

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### Introduction

This paper will discuss the religious practices of the Buddhist population living in the region known as Tibet, located between modern-day China and other nations such as Nepal and Bhutan. This branch of the traditional Buddhism is considered vastly different due to the influence of the native cultures and religions of the region.

Tibetan Buddhism also cannot be grouped with other branches of Buddhism in the region of Eastern Asia because of its major differences. Some anthropologists had previously defined Tibetan Buddhism as a sub-group of other branches, such as Lamaistic Buddhism and Northern Buddhism, neither of which fit well to the esoteric nature and particulars of the Tibetan Buddhism.

The culture of the people in the region has had a major influence on the differences found between traditional Buddhism and the type found in Tibet. Folk religions such as Bon were of major importance regarding the modification of the standard Buddhism. Beyond the preexisting regional religions, Tibet is highly isolated and difficult to traverse, further allowing the branch to evolve independently and without many of the checks of other Buddhists on the continent.

### Theoretical Framework of Authors

The theory behind many of the anthropologists studying Tibetan Buddhism can typically be explained by the definition of functionalism as found in the book *Cultural Anthropology* by Evans, “Functionalism considers a culture as an interrelated whole, not a collection of isolated traits.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the Buddhist religion found in Tibet is integrating of all aspects of the adherent’s life, from religion to the way they go about their day. This is especially noticeable when

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<sup>1</sup> Evans, *Cultural Anthropology* (Libre Texts, 2023) Section 3.3.

considering the differences in thought process: “The clear-cut relations between cause and effect which are so much a part of our own thinking [...] seem replaced, in Tibetan thought, by a rather shadowy relationship.”<sup>2</sup> The minds of the Tibetan Buddhists seem to often be focused on not only the events currently occurring in their lives, but also the supernatural, and its influence on their day. This is particularly apparent when considering the supernatural forces the Tibetans understand to be present at all times, such as the “bDub”<sup>3</sup> (a type of demon) and the “aDre”<sup>4</sup> (a type of goblin), which can have negative consequences if not properly handled. This seemingly forces the Tibetan Buddhists to be considerate of all religious and material aspects of their lives constantly, contributing to a much more functional type of religious model.

### **Emic Perspectives**

The anthropologist William Weedon offered a new light to look into the branch of Buddhism now at study, “[...] to see in the Buddhism of Tibet a distinctive but plausible reinterpretation of some of the basic conceptions of Buddhism.”<sup>5</sup> The monks of Tibet have shared with anthropological researchers that they use many of the texts found among other Buddhists, especially the more ancient when which existed when monks from other lands introduced Buddhism to Tibet. The reason this branch is an interpretation is its application of native religion and supernatural beliefs into the incoming Buddhism.

### **Etic Perspectives**

Anthropologists tend to agree on at least one point in relation to Tibetan Buddhism: “Buddhism underwent a renaissance in the tenth and eleventh centuries the in the unlikely of

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<sup>2</sup>Weedon, William S., *Tibetan Buddhism: A Perspective* (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 1967) 172.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Weedon p. 168

places: the barren stretches of far western Tibet.”<sup>6</sup> Though it shares a name with traditional Buddhism, it shares very little otherwise. Many anthropologists understand Tibetan Buddhism to more of a melting pot of beliefs from native cultures and then the missionary work of travelling monks who taught the principles of Buddhism.

While it would appear hard to define Tibetan Buddhism in this sense, the Tibetans are actually very clear in their records and details regarding the religion. From the teachings of the Dali Lama to those found from original Buddhist texts, the monks of Tibet have a thorough understanding of their religion cannon of scripture. The perspective of many contemporary authors such as Hopkins hold Tibetan Buddhism as a religion based in clearly defining truths:

In the context of the two truths, "ultimate reality" is the final nature of what exists; although it exists, it is not-like the first interpretation of "ultimate reality" given above-everything that exists. Rather, it is the final mode of subsistence, the mode of being, of what exists. This is emptiness, an absence of inherent existence, called "ultimate truth" (paramarthasatya). A truth is something that exists the way it appears in direct perception and thus is a true object. It is something that does not deceive. An emptiness is an ultimate truth in that it is a truth (satya), existing the way it appears in direct perception, for an ultimate (paramartha) consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

This outside view of the religion considers what anthropologists have been able to gather strictly through looking at Buddhist texts and hearing from secondary sources. While very informative, it doesn't paint a full picture of the beliefs of many Tibetan monks and adherents of Buddhism.

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<sup>6</sup> Aldenderfer, Mark, *Roots of Tibetan Buddhism*, (USA, Archeological Institute of America, 2001) 1.

<sup>7</sup> Hopkins, Jeffery, *Ultimate Reality in Tibetan Buddhism*, (Hawai'i, University of Hawai'i Press, 1988) 113-114.

## Conclusion

Because Tibetan Buddhism originated from the infusion of native folk-style and shamanistic religions and traditional Buddhism, it necessarily is unlike typical branches of Buddhism. From a near constant consideration of supernatural forces on oneself among the strictest adherents to being isolated long enough to develop their own practices, Tibetan Buddhists and evolved to become their own sect. Though many of their teaching derive from the types of Buddhism found in the South and East, the Tibetans have reinterpreted many written teachings, particularly through the guidance of the Dali Lama.

It is hard for anthropologists to bring forth a fully emic perspective of Tibetan Buddhism due to the facts that Westerners have only had access to the region for a few centuries, the region is extremely difficult to travel through, and the only other group interested in documenting the Tibetan records and religion, China, is focused in the main cities of Tibet and not where their Buddhism is focused.

Tibetan Buddhism is a very diverse and notable religion which has a somewhat small number of adherents when compared to the major world religions, which merits ethnography from anthropologists in an effort to preserve it and learn from it.

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