

PERSONAL NAMES AMONG TIBETANS:
THE RELEVANCE OF SPIRITUAL BONDS
IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT

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Personal names are at the centre of two fundamental cultural processes: the process of identification of the individual as distinct from the outside world and recognition of the individual by the other members of a group; and the process by which an individual is considered a possible subject of a linguistic, and hence social relationship. The first is a cognitive, the second a communicative process.

The act of naming gives every individual a place (or several places, in different times or situations) within a culturally defined frame of reference. Only in this very general sense can one assert that naming is always an act of classification, as Lévi-Strauss does (1962 : 252). But what an individual is defined in terms of and in relation to, this is a cultural choice. The variety of linguistic expressions and, even more, the variety of attributes and meanings of personal names and their use counsel extreme caution before attempting hazardous generalizations.

The natural and social spheres can be considered the two fundamental dimensions within which man lives and communicates, and in which the process of his own identification takes place. But nature and society are not always the only dimensions taken into consideration in the naming process. If a group expresses vagueness and uncertainty in the classification of individuals in the natural as well as in the social sphere, the question arises whether this is a sign of indeterminateness in the classificatory systems and weakness in the social structure or of alternative cultural categories.

Individuals can be named with an *indicatif de classe* or a *déterminant individuel*, says Lévi-Strauss (1962 : 249). The distinction is made between names used as *termes de référence* and as *termes d'adresse*, the former being terms referring to a group (kinship terms, totemic appellations), while the latter are truly individual names. According to Lévi-Strauss, both secular and sacred names can be used as *termes d'adresse* as well as *termes de référence*, with some restrictions for sacred names.

This distinction is in fact widely accepted, with the assumption that the function of naming systems is twofold: on the one hand, to indicate the position of the individual within the network of social relationships, stressing group membership (sacred or secular); on the other, to help the process of identification of the individual, with psychological and sociological consequences.

But naming processes may pursue goals that take less account of the rules of social relationships and the position of the individual in this natural world in order to stress other, spiritual values.

In Tibetan culture¹, personal names — both secular and religious — are used in the social context with great indeterminateness; and there are secret names, which are never used, and whose social function is therefore doubtful. Tibetan secret names are not appellatives used by members of a secret society. The social function of that sort of name would be self-evident. The Tibetan secret names are *Tantric names*, and are given to those who follow Tantric practices in their religious life.

A disciple is given a Tantric name by his teacher, and neither disciple nor teacher ever pronounces it again.

Tantra (Indian in origin like other religious doctrines and practices) is an important part of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism. As Charles Bell says, « its essence was magic. Those who held to a prescribed ritual could gain salvation by magical methods » (1931 : 32). Tantrism is considered a difficult and dangerous way to follow *dharma* (religion). Tantra teachings and practices are kept secret from the uninitiated, while initiation is a long and gradual process carried out under the guidance of a personal teacher. When a teacher considers his disciple ready, an initiation ceremony is prepared, during which he receives a name to be

1. The information used in this paper has been collected during various periods of fieldwork among Tibetan refugees in Europe and in India.

kept secret from the outside world. The various sects of Tibetan Buddhism follow different rules in the initiation ceremonies and give different names to the Tantric deities but the meaning of the ritual is identical (Tucci 1976 : 132-133). The Sa-skya tradition is described here, on the basis of information provided by the religions leader of the sect, Sa-skya Trizin Rin-po-č'e. To select a disciple's Tantric name, the teacher prepares a *mandala* on the ground. Inside he draws the images of the five supreme Buddhas Mi-bskyod-pa, Rin c'en abyuñ ldan, Odapg-med, Don-yod-gjub-pa, Rnam-par-snañ-mdzad².

A « family » of deities appertain to each Buddha, and they can become the *yi-dam* or protectors of a human being. Their number ranges from ten to seventeen in each « family » and their names varies from sect to sect. One who is initiated into a « family » will receive one of those names. The disciple to be initiated carries a flower in his hand, and at a certain point the teacher invites him to throw the flower into the *mandala*. The position of the flower indicates the « family » into which the disciple will be initiated and where his *yi-dam* is to be found. The teacher chooses one of the names of that « family » and gives it to the disciple, at the same time indicating his guardian protecting deity. This name, preceded or more rarely followed by the fixed name Vajra (diamond, *rdo-rje* in Tibetan, a highly symbolic name in Buddhism) forms the Tantric name. One example is Vajra Ratna. The name can be communicated by the teacher to the disciple in two ways. The teacher may put his mouth to the disciple's ear and whisper the name, or he may write it on a small piece of paper, which the disciple swallows immediately after he has read it. The Tantric name will never more be uttered or written again during his lifetime; but it is believed that this name will be useful after death. In the intermediate state of *bar-do*, when the conscious principle of the dead man is wandering, prior to the next incarnation, the

2. The present author agrees with Bell's statement, written almost half a century ago: « There are several competing systems of transliteration into Roman characters, but none are quite satisfactory » (Bell 1931: Preface). Because of typographical limitations, the following transliteration system is suggested:

<i>ka</i>	<i>ča</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>pa</i>	<i>tsa</i>	<i>ža</i>	<i>ra</i>	<i>ba</i>
<i>k'a</i>	<i>č'a</i>	<i>t'a</i>	<i>p'a</i>	<i>ts'a</i>	<i>za</i>	<i>lu</i>	<i>a</i>
<i>ga</i>	<i>ja</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>ba</i>	<i>dza</i>	<i>'a</i>	<i>ša</i>	
<i>na</i>	<i>ña</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>va</i>	<i>ya</i>	<i>sa</i>	

The transliteration, of course, does not mirror the actual phonetic shape of spoken Tibetan.

deities of the mystic family that know the Tantric name he received during his previous life, can call him with that name and help him to find the right path towards a new life. Evil deities will not be able to call the conscious principle of the dead man or will use the common names used during his previous life. The conscious principle of the dead man will then be able to recognize the evil spirits and avoid their temptations and eschew the wrong path they indicate.

A voice that calls someone by his Tantric name can be trusted, provided the person, during his lifetime, never revealed the secret name he shares with his mystic family. The Tantric name can be revealed only after spiritual realization, when the temptations of this life and the power of evil spirits can do no more harm. That is why the Tantric names of some high lamas of the past are known.

The Tantric name can therefore be made public when it is of no more use. During its period of secrecy, the Tantric name may have the character of both *terme d'adresse* and of *terme de référence*, but in a very special way. Indeed, the name shows group membership — the « family » of a Buddha — and can indicate precisely a single person. The name has enormous power. But what can be considered its function, in sociological terms, if this power is never expressed within the society and resides totally in a belief concerning the outside world? Granted that at least once, during the secret ceremony, the Tantric name performs an overt function: when the teacher *calls* the disciple by that name. The disciple receives the message by swallowing the piece of paper or by apprehending his teacher's whisper, but this is an extremely minimal act of communication.

While the use of Tantric names can be considered an extreme case, another set of questions arises in the analysis of the names the Tibetans use in everyday life as appellatives and indicators of group membership. Even here, the relationships between the individual and nature and between the individual and society are often vague or barely expressed, while spiritual ties receive greater attention.

Tibetans are usually given two names, rarely a mononym. Many of these names are ambiguous as regards sex, that is, they can be applied equally to males and females. Of the 101 names commonly used among Tibetans from the central regions (col-

lected by Lindegger (1976), 47 are male-oriented while 13 are female-oriented.

The other 41 names are ambiguous and include those most frequently given to boys and girls. Like name pairs, the mononyms are also usually ambiguous. In fact, most Tibetans are given double names that, if taken separately, would not indicate their sex.

If the first name is ambiguous, the second will often be a masculine or a feminine one. If the second name is also ambiguous, then the whole name is considered masculine. An unambiguously masculine and a truly feminine name should never be put together. Complicated as this rule might be, it would be sufficiently precise to discern sex by name. But the rule is not strictly applied, and not because of ignorance of the meaning of the names or of the rule itself. One example will suffice: the Dalai Lama named his personal secretary Tents'in Ch'öni.

The first name is ambiguous, while the second is feminine, but the individual is a monk. This is not an isolated case, so the rule cannot be considered a safe guide. Sex indication is seldom evident in everyday nomenclature. The second name is generally dropped, and only the first name is used (i.e. the one that is most frequently ambiguous). Another possibility is to form a short name by joining the first syllable of the two names. (With few exceptions, personal names, like most nouns in the Tibetan language, are bisyllabic). Often it is only the second syllable of an unambiguous name that bears a masculine or feminine orientation, so the short name may appear ambiguous. For example, P'un-ts'ogs d Bañ-rgyal is a masculine name, consisting of an ambiguous name (P'un-ts'ogs) and a masculine one (d Bañ-rgyal).

d Bañ-mo is the feminine equivalent of d Bañ-rgyal, both derived from the root *d bañ* 'power' (as a *character*, not a physical attribute); *rgyal* is the contracted form of *rgyal-po* 'king'. A man with this name will be called either P'un-ts'ogs or P'un-d Bañ, and in both cases there will be no indication of sex. A primary physical attribute is thus only vaguely taken into consideration in the process of identification and classification of an individual.

In the social sphere too, individual names perform their function in a very imperfect and unstable way. The use of one individual name or of a contracted form of the two is considered a confidential form of address. In more formal relations, individual names are carefully avoided. Generic terms like *rku-*

'*bas*, in the respectful form of *kush'o-la* for men and *a'čags-lags* 'sister' for women, are preferred in direct conversation. People older than the speaker must be addressed with the terms *pa-lags* and *a-ma-lags* ('father' and 'mother'). These etiquette rules were strictly observed in a highly formalistic society, as Tibet used to be, and are still important among refugees.

Inhibition and shyness in pronouncing one's own name are frequent (Lindegger 1976 : 35). This is consistent with what has been said above, since one usually gives one's name only to strangers for purposes of introduction or recognition. But here it is not simply a matter of etiquette. Reticence in pronouncing one's own name is a means of protecting something very intimate. Individual names are not neutral terms used to identify a member of a group; they are something closely related to the individual's personality and destiny, a religious blessing of spiritual significance, and often have a very praiseful meaning.

As for meaning, individual names can be divided in two major groups: the first has some reference to the natural world and personal attributes; the second belongs to Buddhist tradition and includes names of virtues and qualities of ethical value, of deities, and religious symbols.

Widely used, in the first group, are the names of astral bodies, which also indicate the days of the week, if the prefix *gza'* 'planet' is added; to form an individual name, the astral body is chosen according to the date of birth³. Similarly, some auspicious dates can be used, such as the 15th day of the lunar month (*bč'o-lña*), i.e., full moon, if the child is born on that day. Reference can also be made to a special event that took place on the day of birth. Lindegger (1976 : 27) cites an episode, which is also part of my experience: the arrival in Switzerland of a group of Tibetan refugees with an extra member who was not with them when they left India, since a child was born in flight. The newborn girl was provisionally named *gNam-gru sGyol-ma*, the first name being the Tibetan neologism for airplane (« air boat »). Some names like *Me-tog* ('flower'), have

3. The names of the days of the week are as follows:

(*gza'*) - *zla - ba* 'Monday'

(*gza'*) - *pa - sans* 'Friday'

(*gza'*) - *mig - dmar* 'Tuesday'

(*gza'*) - *spen - pa* 'Saturday'

(*gza'*) - *hlag - pa* 'Wednesday'

(*gza'*) - *nyi - ma* 'Sunday'

(*gza'*) - *p'ur - bu* 'Thursday'

a generic relation to the world of nature. Such names connect the person with nature, in its coordinates of time and space.

Other names of the first group are related to subjective feelings, to the hopes and fears of the parents. If the attack of evil spirits is feared, a newborn baby may be given a strongly pejorative name to distract the spirit's attention. For example, *Kyi-lod* 'bad dog'. Such names are usually changed as soon as possible. They are used as whole names, as mononyms. The first group also includes some monosyllabic names used as second names, e.g., *Čuñ* 'small', in the sense of 'last born' (as a hope, when parents do not intend to have other children), *'Ts'o* 'alive', used by parents who have had still-born children. *sKyid* 'happy', is sometimes used. Monosyllabic names are used mostly by Tibetans from the Amdo region.

The second group is much larger and more important. One feminine name is *hLa-mo*, meaning generically 'goddess'. *sGyol-ma*, also feminine, is the Tibetan name for the deity Tara, while *Dolkar* is the contracted form of *sGyol-ma dkar-ba*, the White Tara. One masculine name is *Saṅs-rgyas*, the Illuminated, a title of Buddha himself. Other names indicate virtues, like *Šis-rab* 'wisdom'; *bLo-gsal* 'clarity of mind'; *mKas-gyub* 'active knowledge', *Ts'ul-k'yims* 'morality'; *Byañ-č'ub* 'complete purity', *P'unts'ogs* 'three perfections together'. Many names are synonymous or very similar in meaning, referring to intellectual qualities of profound and clear knowledge and, to a lesser extent, to ethical qualities.

A subgroup includes names indicating earthier qualities of persons or things, but with spiritual overtones: *Ts'e-riñ* 'long life'; *Jigs-meñ* 'fearless'; *Rin-č'en* 'great treasure'; *bKya-šis* 'good luck'; *sKal-bzañ*, 'fortunate'; *ñPa-mo*, a heroine. *O-rgyan* is the name of an unidentified region, the original home of the great *guru* Padmasambhava.

Tibetans consider it dangerous to leave a living being unnamed; he would be more exposed to attack by evil spirits, since a name is considered a powerful protection. And, in the case of untimely death, serious problems would arise for the next incarnation, since a person without a name is not fully a human being.

Prompt naming of a newborn infant also expresses a social need: a newborn baby must have a name, for reference and address, if he is to be recognised as a new member of the family and a broader social group.

Given these primary religious and social demands, the baby is given a temporary name by parents or relatives. Neutral names are often used, including the name of the astral body corresponding to the day of birth. But lay people are generally considered unqualified for a task, as delicate as the attribution of a name: something that can powerfully influence a person's present and afterlife.

Whenever possible, parents turn to a wise and learned lama for another, permanent name. Or the child himself may do so when he is grown up.

Names given by a lama are considered a blessing and a good omen. Their proper meaning is often unknown or ignored in common usage. But their spiritual value fosters the inhibitions to uttering them that have already been mentioned. The personal name is considered a precious gift and a powerful means of protection from misfortune and evil influences. When the lama chooses someone's permanent name, he seeks one that may be suitable to the person throughout life. The lama may resort to dice for inspiration, or he may wait weeks until the right name comes to his mind.

But most often it is a conscious process, which takes into consideration physical appearance, qualities of mind, and especially what is considered likely to be a person's adult activities, interests, and character. This is based partly on objective data, such as the family of origin, probable main occupation, etc., and partly on divination. Therefore lamas who are well known for spiritual qualities and magic powers are approached whenever possible. These powers will be useful not only for divination but are believed to exert influence on a person through the name that is decided upon. Name influence is thought to last not only in this life but also in the next one. (Ts'e-riñ 'long life' is considered an auspicious name).

Therefore some people consider it dangerous to make frequent use of nicknames such as 'bird' or other animals, since this might lead to a person's rebirth in a lower animal rather than human form; but many Tibetans consider this mere superstition. Highly spiritual names are preferably given to those destined to enter religious life and dedicate themselves to study and meditation. Names connected with the natural world or with worldly qualities are often given to people who will probably work the land or live as shepherds. If a man decides to enter religious life after receiving a name, his spiritual teacher will most probably give him a new one in keeping

with the disciple's new status. Generally, it is only a person's second name that refers to him directly. Lamas give their own name to all their disciples and to most other people who apply to them.

Lamas give their own lay name as first name to those who will probably remain laymen, and their religious name to those who intend to become monks. In both cases, the names reflect continuity between the religious teacher, his disciples, and laymen who consider themselves followers of his religious sect.

This is reinforced by the preference the various sects give to some particular names for laymen and monks. Karma is a name often given to their followers by lamas of the bKa'-rgyud-pa, especially the bKa-gdams-pa; Lop's'ang is popular among the dGe-lugs-pa; Sönam among the Sas-kya-pa; and Pema among the rÑiñ-ma-pa (Tents'in is common in all groups, since its meaning, 'holder of knowledge', is appropriate to any line of religious knowledge represented by the tradition of the various sects. Anyone named by the Dalai Lama always receives, as one of his two names, the first of the Dalai Lama's many religious names, Tents'in).

Parents preferably ask a monk of their own religious tradition to name their child. Since the first name is that of a lama, and the second one is of particular significance to a religious sect, individual names are likely to indicate membership in a social group linked by spiritual bonds.

A name change during one's life time is sometimes considered necessary, to divert some persistent evil influence, as in the case of serious illness. As an extreme curative measure, monks may be asked to perform the *gdo-bčos* ceremony, in which a new name is given to a sick person. This is a symbolic rebirth, in which all the bad features and influences connected with the old name are eliminated. This practice stresses, on the one hand, the Tibetan belief in the power of a name and its close connection with personality and destiny; and on the other hand the minor importance attributed to its social function as an appellative. From the social point of view, a change of name obviously may be confusing and misleading, especially because no official announcement is made. Becoming a monk is also considered a symbolic rebirth, and a new, religious name is required.

Tulkus are considered incarnations of important religious figures. When a person is recognized as a *Tulku*, he assumes the

name of his deceased predecessor, who in turn had received it from his previous incarnation, and so on, back to the first recognized incarnation, whose personal name it was. A *Tulku* name is usually a mononym, sometimes a common individual name but more often unique. From the moment of recognition, the person will be known by his *Tulku* name, and individual names will be used only on special occasions, e.g. during ceremonies, or sometimes as a confidential form of address. Recognition as a *Tulku* gives a man a new identity, that of his predecessors, and the *Tulku* name stresses this fact. The *Tulku* name indicates continuity in a line not based on blood-descent but on the principle of successive incarnations. The general framework of this belief is represented by the « wheel of life », within which all living beings are thought to pass from one incarnation to another, under different life forms. People have no memory of their own previous lives nor can they usually recognize other people's incarnations. The *Tulkus* are an exception, beings on their way to perfect realization, who can help others through example and teaching. Reincarnations of *Tulkus* must be recognized, so that their action can be more effective. The lamas can see from certain signs if and where the rebirth of a specific *Tulku* has taken place. When the incarnation is found, the child is taken to a monastery for special training. He acquires great prestige within the community and in the society at large. In traditional Tibetan society, the monastic hierarchy held positions of primary importance. The prestige, political influence and economic power of the monks were even greater than those of the members of the old aristocratic families. While the power of the aristocracy was based on hereditary rights and marriage alliances, monks used spiritual links as a system of transmission of roles. That of the *Tulkus* was the most important link and the one most similar to blood descent in regard to continuity from one generation to another. Continuity in social roles and prestige through successive recognized incarnations was initiated among the bKa'-rgyud-pa sect and adopted by the reformed sect of the dGe-lugs-pa. So a very peculiar kind of continuity was developed within Tibetan society, a continuity that was not based on the social fact of kinship but on the religious belief in reincarnation. This was possible because of the primary importance of religious beliefs in the traditional Tibetan cultural system.

Family names, household names and names indicating place of origin (*oikonoms*) are of limited use among Tibetans. The extent

to which Tibet adopted names indicating membership of a corporate group is partly a matter of speculation. Many Tibetan refugees in Western countries tend to adopt oikonyms to form new surnames. This is part of an acculturation process and often fills the demands of their new situation, since a surname is required in various circumstances: for legal documents, birth registration, public administration, employment, etc. People who do not have an original family name form an oikonym by adding the suffix - *tsang* to the place of origin. An example is Dahortsang, « from Dahor » (Lindegger 1976 : 37). A place name without a suffix may also be used as a surname.

In other, more traditional situations, « the house-name was the common term of reference and identification », as Claes Corlin (1975) observed in a group of Tibetan refugees living in Nepal close to the Tibetan border. They had entered Nepal a few years earlier and maintained their old community in their new home. They came from a Tibetan village called Kyirong. In Kyirong society, writes Corlin, the house-name indicated not only residence but also membership in the « household group — usually an extended family of 3-4 generations », in most cases virilocal but sometimes uxorilocal and dropped by those who left it. This name reflected an important phic polyandry for the men, and marriage outside the household for the women. But « if there were no sons in the family uxorilocal residence would be practiced and the son-in-law (who might marry polygynously if there were several sisters) then regarded as a “provisional” son, *even picking up the household name of his wife or wives* » (Corlin 1975 : 45; my italics). In that case, the *terme de référence* was applied to those who remained within the household and dropped by those who left it. This name reflected an important economic rule, and the members of the group in fact adopted the rule along with the name: household property was indivisible. « Inheritance was entirely bound to residence », writes Corlin (1975 : 47): and an individual's residence was indicated by his (or her) household name. « Family names (i.e. based on kinship alone) were completely absent » in Kyirong society.

This was not the case elsewhere in Tibet. Family names reflecting patrilineal descent were adopted by the aristocracy and considered a mark of high status. These names were generally of ancient origin and reflected continuity of economic privilege (i.e. feudal rights to land and labourers) and political influence. Although family names were not restricted to the aristocracy as a rule, family names were

not common among people of lower status, where kinship ties were weak outside the residence group. Even when a new residence group was formed among aristocratic families, a new family name was sometimes adopted, to indicate the centre of the new network of close relationships. This was the case, for example, of the Sumpö family. The last governor of Shigatse under the old political regime was a member of a venerable aristocratic family from Lhasa.

When he moved, he built a house in a place called Sumpö and took the place name for his family; the descendants of that original group now use Sumpö as a surname. In other cases, when a man left his family, he simply dropped the name he shared with his relatives, which shows that the name indicated residential links rather than kinship ties.

Old family names following patrilineal descent, as well as proper household names and *oikonoms* were referred to in Tibetan with a term indicating « household ». In the case of noble families, the honorific term *gzim-šak* was used; otherwise the common term *nan* was employed, often preceding the name itself. Group names were infrequent except in the case of aristocratic names, which were treated like honorific titles and used in direct and indirect address to members of a certain family. A person might even be ignorant of his group name.

A Tibetan inculcated in the principles of traditional culture considers himself and the world around him as *samsāra*, the illusory dimension of life. Through spiritual practices and the teachings of religion, man can achieve at least a partial experience of the true, supernatural dimension. The social dimension is part of *samsāra*, only the *saṅga* (the community of monks) possessing a high spiritual value. Thus a Tibetan can be seen to participate in a) a natural dimension, b) a socio-structural dimension, and c) a religious, or supernatural, dimension. His culture stresses the last dimension, affirming that a) is the domain of sorrow and that b) is usually not conducive to liberation from a) towards c): other people may help, but individual experience is unique, and individual responsibility total. These principles are reflected in the choice and use of personal names. As far as the basic feature of sex is concerned, the natural dimension is neglected in individual names. Nature appears as a symbol of some quality, like beauty, and has some religious significance, as in the case of Me-tog « flower », referring specifically to the lotus flower, an important Buddhist symbol. Star names refer less to natural phenomena than to astrological influences

connected with one's day of birth. Blood-relationship, an important connection between the natural and the social dimension, is not primary and is indicated only in rare cases; a person is rarely defined by family name, if it even exists.

A name is not so much something that places an individual within the social network of relationships, but rather an aid to finding one's own identity and the right path through this life and, to some extent, the life to come. It is a word of blessing on men and women living in the illusory dimensions of nature and society. Individual destiny, which is stressed by religion and specifically by the law of *karma* (which explains the present status of an individual not in terms of social reference but in terms of good or bad deeds performed in previous lives), is consistently reflected in the use of individual names in preference to group names.

Social cohesion and continuity are entrusted to religious institutions, where blood-relationship has little or no relevance. Links from one generation to another are assured by the *Tulku* lines, which do not simply represent a spiritual heritage but are conspicuously strong socially, forming a chain of successive recognized reincarnations. Thus *Tulku* names reflect the social recognition of ties that do not belong to the natural dimension but have direct consequences on the life of individuals and on the community. Secret Tantric names, finally, testify to the great importance attributed to the spiritual dimension, even when completely separate from individual everyday experience and from the social dimension.

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Sommario

Una analisi dei sistemi di attribuzione dei nomi personali tra i Tibetani, del significato dei nomi stessi, nonché dell'uso che di tali nomi viene fatto, consente di allargare il senso troppo restrittivo attribuito agli appellativi individuali. La funzione comunicativa, in particolare, viene riesaminata, alla luce dell'esistenza di nomi tantrici, che non vengono mai pronunziati, e dell'usanza di cambiare il proprio nome nel corso della vita, tra i Tibetani. Questi ed altri elementi — come lo scarso uso fatto di nomi familiari e di gruppo — mettono in risalto l'importanza prevalente, nel caso in esame, di legami spirituali rispetto a quelli direttamente dipendenti dalla struttura sociale.

Summary

The present article analyses the systems of personal name attribution among the Tibetans, as well as the meaning of the names and the use that is made of them. This analysis makes it possible to amplify the overly restrictive sense that has been attributed to individual appellatives. The function of communication is particularly considered in the light of the existence of Tantric names, which are never uttered, and of the habit among Tibetans of changing one's name during one's lifetime. These elements and others (e.g., the scant use of family and group names) highlight the preponderance, in the present case, of spiritual bonds over those derived directly from social structure.