CHAPTER SIX

HOW THE DALAI LAMAS LINEAGE EMERGED

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Tsepon Shakabpa’s narration of the incarnation lineage of the Dalai Lamas provides a backbone to the remainder of the text. In this chapter, he explains how the lineage emerged and provides the historical context that frames the lives of the first four Dalai Lamas, from the birth of first Dalai Lama (1391–1474) in 1391 until the death of the fourth (1589–1617) in 1617. In the process, he sketches the arc followed by the early Dalai Lamas, from a politically insignificant and essentially religious figure to a lama most notable for the fact that he had been born into the powerful Mongolian royal family. The chapter serves as an introduction to the pivotal seventh chapter in which the fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) comes to be a potent political figure by calling on his Mongolian patron Gushri Khan to overcome his enemies, consolidating rule under the person of the Dalai Lama for the first time in 1642. Thus, Shakabpa sets the stage for those events here by demonstrating some of the tensions, rivalries, and grievances that animated the political developments that culminated in the middle of the seventeenth century.

The chapter opens by invoking the name of Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), the charismatic founder of the Geluk School that will eventually become a potent religious and political force under the guidance of the Dalai Lama lineage. He is mentioned in the context of being invited to teach at Trashi Dokhar by King Drakpa Gyeltsen in 1415, and Shakabpa reports that the first Dalai Lama Gendün Drupa attended those teachings and became Tsongkhapa’s “primary disciple” (slob ma’i gtsos bo). This claim is doubtful, but Shakabpa is trying to elevate the Dalai Lama’s status by associating him with Tsongkhapa’s unquestionable authority.a By founding Trashi Lhünpo Monastery in Zhikatsé in 1447, the first Dalai Lama helped extend the influence of the nascent Geluk School from Ü into Tsang, a traditional stronghold of the Kagyü School.

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Almost immediately, a rivalry began to emerge between these two schools. The Kagyü School had a long history, and it was headed by several prominent incarnations, including most notably the lineage of the Karmapa lamas. The rivalry between the schools also took on a regional dimension as the prominent patrons of the Kagyüpas included the king of Tsang, while the Gelukpa patrons were centered in Ü. Likewise, powerful family alliances, like the Rinpung and Nedong families, were aligned with the Kagyüpas and the Gelukpas respectively. Just as the Gelukpas had made inroads in Tsang by building Trashi Lhünpo Monastery, the Kagyüpas sought to establish a monastery in Lhasa with Rinpung patronage. Gelukpa monks from Sera and Drepung monasteries destroyed it in 1479, thereby fortifying the divisiveness.\(^b\)

A generation later, Tsang troops attacked Geluk-affiliated interests in 1498. As a punishment to the vanquished, the monks of Sera and Drepung monasteries were barred for twenty years from attending the Great Prayer Festival, a massive public religious observance. Gelukpa monks felt particularly aggrieved by this prohibition as the festival had been inaugurated by Tsongkhapa in 1409. In 1517, the second Dalai Lama (1475–1542) left Trashi Lhünpo for Lhasa, where he became abbot of both Drepung and Sera monasteries. He lived at Ganden Podrang, a monastic estate at Drepung Monastery that would remain a formal residence attached to the Dalai Lama lineage. When the fifth Dalai Lama eventually became a political leader, his government was named after this compound. The third Dalai Lama (1543–1588) attempted a rapprochement with the Kagyü School by entering into friendly relations with Künkhyen Padma Karpo (1527–1592) of Bhutan. However, just a few years later Rinpung forces once again attacked Ü in 1575, reigniting the conflict.

The Mongolian leader Alten Khan invited the third Dalai Lama to visit Mongolia, and his departure in 1577 marked the beginning of a prolonged absence from the troubled landscape of Central Tibet. Instead, he spent most of the remainder of his life ministering to new Gelukpa converts among the Mongolian tribes in the borderlands between Mongolia, China, and Tibet. Alten Khan was a descendant of Kublai Khan with whom Pakpa Rinpoché had established a preceptor-

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