

Changing conceptions of hereditary rank – '*rigs btsog pa*' families in rural Central Tibet.

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This paper deals with hereditary social status in present day Tibet, and in particular the lower ranked groups of people defined and termed as '*rigs btsog pa*' (polluted/unclean lineage). The research is based on fieldwork conducted in several villages in Panam (Pa snam) county, Shigatse prefecture, in 2002. Some of the villages in Panam are known for their strong presence of *rigs btsog pa* families, and these places provide an opportunity for a study of Tibetan concepts of family lineages, pollution and social hierarchies in general.

Hereditary social status, and the classification of certain families as low and 'dirty', is found significant in most of the Tibetan ethnographic region. However, the extent to which these conceptions determine social interaction varies greatly. In Panam, the polluted groups include butchers (*bshas ba*), blacksmiths (*lcags bzo ba*), burial workers (*barul*), and beggars (*bslongs mkhan*), who are ranked in this order.

Since the 1950s, radical structural changes in Tibet influenced the work possibilities of the lower ranked groups. After the land reforms in 1980/81, the *rigs btsog pa* (who were traditionally skill workers), as the rest of the population in the farming areas of TAR, received land to cultivate. This alternation of relation to land have led to a change of work for most of the *rigs btsog pa* families, although in varying degree. Their new position as farmers have, however, not led to significant changes in their social position. It is my intention to analyse the discrepancies between the vast structural changes and the, to a large extent, remaining low position of the *rigs btsog pa*, as well as to present some findings on inter-*rig* relations in rural Tibet.