

THE CULTURE OF THE TIBETAN BORDER REGIONS¹

by

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The area which forms the subject of this enquiry includes the small countries of Sikkim and Bhutan, a small part of the Indian frontier region around Darjeeling and Kalimpong, and (from some points of view) the mountain areas of Nepal. Of Nepal we shall say little here. Whatever can be said of its Tibeto-Buddhist tribesmen in the Nepalese mountains hardly differs from what can be said about the rest of the region. Moreover, Nepal is, in the main, a Hindu country with Hindu rulers and a predominantly Hindu way of life. It belongs to the area with which we are concerned here only because of its minority population.

Geographically, our area consists of the Eastern foothills of the Himalayas where they rise sharply from the North Indian plain, and a part of the mighty Himalayas themselves, especially in the neighbourhood of that immense and magnificent giant, Kanchenjunga. The author cannot claim to be familiar with the whole area. In fact, his personal observations have been confined to Southern Sikkim and to the Indian frontier region including Darjeeling and Kalimpong. As for Bhutan, it is a closed kingdom more difficult for foreigners to enter than any country on either side of the so-called Iron and Bamboo Curtains. The author's knowledge of that mysterious kingdom is limited to hearsay and to his acquaintance with some exceedingly charming and almost frighteningly intelligent ladies who form part of the Bhutan Royal Family.

The little state of Sikkim, with which more than half of this narrative is concerned, is only sixty miles long and forty miles broad, but it offers samples of every type of climate in the

1. Adapted from a lecture delivered at the March 10, 1958, meeting of the Siam Society.

world, except that of the desert. The valleys, with their jungles, rice fields and tropical vegetation, might well be a part of Northern Thailand. A little higher are pine forests and other vegetation reminiscent of the Shan States. Higher still, the climate is like that of the temperate zone. Here can be seen one of the loveliest sights imaginable — mile upon mile of splendid rhododendron forest. Above the rhododendrons, one might be in Norway; and, going higher still, the visitor acquires a pretty good idea of what to expect at the North Pole.

Sikkim is less of an independent kingdom than Bhutan, but the Government of India refrains from much interference in her internal affairs; it stations no police or troops in the state, and limits its representation to a Resident, who is (for internal purposes) very much like an ambassador. The King of Sikkim, like most of the officials and great landowners, is a Bhutia, which means a person of purely Tibetan extraction, though not a subject of Tibet. The royal family and other important Sikkimese families have intermarried not only with the rulers of Bhutan, but also with the Lhasa nobility. They differ from Tibetans proper only in having been resident in Sikkim for several generations. Their religion, language and customs are almost purely Tibetan; in a sense they are more Tibetan than the Tibetans of Tibet, because in religion and certain other matters, they cling to older forms of Tibetan culture.

The great majority of the middle and lower classes in Sikkim, with the exception of the many Tibeto-tribes such as the Lepchas, are not Tibetan, but Nepalese (which is a broad term, covering a number of races). With these, for the purposes of this discussion, we are not much concerned.

The first part of the author's journey in this area consisted of a bus trip which brought him from the torrid plains of India high into the Himalayan foothills, following a zigzag course along the banks of the beautiful Tista, to Gangtok, capital of Sikkim. This little town is about seven thousand feet above sea level. Its

temples and a few public buildings are Tibetan in style, its one-street bazar more or less Indian or Nepalese, and its private dwellings very much 'Bangkapi-style,' except that they are scattered about the lovely mountainside and approached by steep, winding paths. In fact, there is very little that is specifically Tibetan about the appearance of Gangtok, but the author was fortunate enough to meet many of its Tibetan inhabitants and to be entertained in their houses.

The Tibetans are a picturesque people. The upper-class men wear an ankle-length, very full Chinese-style robe belted at the waist, and their hair is still twisted in a long braid, fastened with a scarlet ribbon and wound round the head. They look as if they had stepped out of some Chinese ancestral portrait, and it is rather incongruous to find them speaking beautiful English and talking of all sorts of modern subjects, such as cinematography and scientific horticulture. The women wear a purely Tibetan dress, consisting of a long, sleeveless wool or silk gown worn over a blouse with sleeves of a colour contrasting with the that of the gown. They may also wear a horizontally striped apron in bright colours, some of which show the insignia of noble rank at the upper corners. Their hair is worn in two long braids. I doubt if, on the average, any women in the world look healthier or more lovely. Women of all classes wear costumes of much the same pattern, though of differing materials. The men who are not living the relatively soft lives of officials wear great knee-length boots of beautiful, soft, coloured leather and hitch their long gowns over their belts, so that the skirts of the gowns resemble kilts. Some of the men wear a large gold and turquoise earring, in the right ear only.

The manners of all the Tibetans are delightful. They are kind, courteous, hospitable and exceedingly graceful in their movements, so that almost every gesture seems part of a traditional ritual. Their houses are furnished with great elegance. Instead of chairs, they have hard, square cushions covered with small sections of gaily woven Tibetan carpet, and these cushions may

be piled one on top of another to provide a seat of any height. The rest of their furniture is of highly carved and painted lacquer, notable for the excellent choice of colours and for the very wide variety of carved ornamentation. Though Tibetans are fond of bright colours, their natural taste enables them to avoid any ugly clashing of colour.

It is a delightful experience to be entertained in a Tibetan house. Well-to-do people do not regularly eat the national food, *T'sampa*, which is simply a porridge of parched corn and water or buttered tea, with salt. Their food is more or less Chinese. Tea, usually churned with butter and salt, is offered very ceremoniously to guests in porcelain cups with filigreed or chased silver lids and saucers. The favourite alcoholic drink is *Ch'ang*, a sort of beer served in a segment of silver-bound giant bamboo, about a foot round, and drunk through a 'straw' made of a length of very thin bamboo. Specially prepared fermented meal is placed in the giant bamboo and hot water poured in until the vessel is full. Water can be added several times before the beer becomes weak and tasteless. If the guests do not drink enough, their charming hostesses will encircle them, performing a dance and singing words such as:

"We're sorry you cannot stay longer;
 Why don't you change your mind?
 And, at least, while you're here,
 Pray do us the honour
 Of drinking a long, long drink
 To our health."

Few can resist such invitations, however often they are offered; and, though the *Ch'ang* is very mild, few guests are permitted to leave a party absolutely sober. Throughout the entertainment, one is treated with a very attractive combination of rather formal, ritualistic manners and a friendly, laughing intimacy, which is most winning. The upper-class Tibetans are probably among the few people left in the world whom one can call highly sophisticated, using the word without the smallest implication of

'Westernized.' Almost all other Oriental cultures have suffered so much from the impact of the West, that the habits and manners of the educated classes are almost more international than traditional—which is rather sad. Of the many travellers who have written books on Tibet, only a few ever had the opportunity to come in contact with the Tibetan upper classes; but, wherever they have done so, they have usually paid a similar tribute to Tibetan good manners, good taste, and high sophistication.

In Gangtok, the author visited the chief places of interest. Most important, in some respects, is the huge *Chorten*, a sort of giant *Pra Chedi*, built in five sections symbolizing the five elements, including ether. The Tibetans are extremely strict about keeping the shoulder towards holy structures of this kind. The author is sure that Tibetan visitors to Nakorn Prathom would not dream of driving straight into the shopping area, thereby exposing the left side of their cars and themselves to the *Chedi*. Wherever a *Chedi* is near a road, a special path is built round it, so as to avoid this difficulty.

Tibetan temples are not particularly attractive on the outside, but their interiors are lovely. From floor to ceiling there are beautiful frescoes of sacred subjects, and there are also many *Tanka*, hanging, silken scrolls on rods tipped with silver, which serve as mountings for lovely paintings. The silken mountings usually contain the five sacred colours. One may watch the court artist at work and be delighted to see that there are still living exponents of Tibetan art whose standard is not inferior to that of former days.

From Gangtok the author journeyed to the monastery of Tashiding, which crowns a conical mountain in the centre of a deep bowl, and which is almost an island, for it is nearly encircled by the waters of two mountain torrents which clash thunderously into one near its foot. The journey, which took several days, was accomplished partly on horseback and partly on foot, through leech-infested jungles, and along narrow paths, sometimes

through knee-deep water. At each stage, there is a comfortable government rest house; and, whenever the sun shines, all around are magnificent views of green mountains with the pure white Himalayan giants rearing their heads above them. The spectacle of dawn in one of these places is about the loveliest sight earth has to offer—no less than a dance of the fire-gods across the snow.

The monastery consists of a long narrow street of quite small houses with a large Hall of Ceremony at either end. The chief lama, Tangku Rimpoché, is a man famous for his piety and learning. His rituals and meditations continue for almost twenty-four hours a day, except in the late morning when he sleeps for a few hours. Careless about his dress and wearing a wig very much on one side (for he belonged to the ancient, 'unreformed' sect who do not shave their heads), he might be a figure of fun. But his charming dignity, the light of knowledge and spirituality in his eyes, and his great, warm friendliness inspire immediate respect, making one forget, after the first moment, his otherwise laughable appearance. His hospitality is unbounded. The author shall never forget the morning after an all-night ceremony, during which laymen had been busy cooking a meat dumpling called *momo* (sarapao) that was bigger than he had ever seen before. The Lama invited him to eat with the group and kept pressing upon him more and more of these gigantic *momo*. Almost at his last gasp, he managed to choke down thirteen of them, all protests having been in vain. And, just as the last piece of the thirteenth dumpling was swallowed, the old man smiled. It was a lovely smile of simple pleasure and contentment. The way the Tangku Lama looked at that moment was unforgettable. It was one of the high points of the author's whole tour.

From Sikkim the journey led to Darjeeling, which is very lovely but a bit too much of a hill station. However, a most delightful story was told there which illustrates well the

impressive manners of the Tibetans. A former Governor of Bengal was spending the hot season in Darjeeling. For some reason, the Tibetans and British were not on very good terms at the time and, when the Governor sought to entertain the Tibetan gentry round about, very few, if any, Tibetans accepted. The Governor called for his local chief of police, who happened to be a Tibetan, and asked him to arrange things as best he could. Apparently several distinguished Englishmen had been promised that they should meet Tibetans, so Tibetans there must be. On the night of the ball, some twenty or thirty grave, dignified men in long silk robes appeared at the Governor's residence and charmed everybody with their beautiful manners. Because none of the British present could speak Tibetan, conversation had to be carried on with the help of the police chief. Everyone was delighted and the evening was a great success. It was not until some years afterwards that the Governor learned the truth about his stately guests. They had been quite humble people, some of them sedan-chair bearers from a neighbouring town, who, thanks to their borrowed silk robes and naturally beautiful manners, had passed quite easily for distinguished gentry. Few races, certainly, have such graceful manners at all levels of society for a trick such as this to be possible.

From Darjeeling the author went to Kalimpong, where he stayed for quite a long time. Less picturesque than Darjeeling, though in any case very lovely, it is far more attractive because it is the end of the chief trade route from Tibet. Not only are there many Tibetan scholars and monks living in and around the little town, but thousands of Tibetans journey back and forth from Lhasa. Kalimpong is an excellent place for buying Tibetan knickknacks, as well as for meeting Tibetans, including the most lovely and talented Bhutanese princesses who live at Bhutan House, who act as agents for the King of Bhutan. (Incredible as it may seem, the Foreign Minister of Bhutan is, or was, a woman.)

Tibetans are skilled in many arts. Besides music and poetry, they have an extensive literature, largely on religious subjects, and such arts as painting, weaving, rug-making, embroidery, making jewelry of gold and silver set with coral, turquoise and other semi-precious (or sometimes very precious) stones, metal-work of several kinds, block-printing, paper-making, wood-carving, bronze-casting, and architecture. Their taste is so good that one rarely sees an un-beautiful Tibetan object, except those sold to tourists in the great cities of India. And the Tibetans like their possessions to have individual qualities. A very poor man may have nothing in the world but his clothes (often ragged and filthy dirty) and three or four little personal objects, such as a sheath knife, a chopstick case, or a flint-lighter. But usually each of these objects, in addition to possessing some artistic merit, will be in some way different from similar objects in the possession of other people.

Religion seems to mean more to the Tibetans than to any race in the world, with the possible exception of some of the more traditional Near Eastern Moslems. But, although excellent translations of Tibetan texts with very full notes and commentaries have been published by Dr. Evans Wentz (Particularly the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and the book about the Tibetan saint, Milarespa), the rest of the world seems surprisingly full of misinformation on the subject of Tibetan religion. One reason, no doubt, is that so few of the travellers who have written about Tibet have had enough knowledge of the subject to be able to judge Tibetan Buddhism at its true worth. The criticism usually made of it is that it is a degenerated form of a noble religion, in which magic and demons play a larger part than the exalted teaching of the Lord Buddha.

This criticism is certainly not without some foundation. To claim the reverse would be going too far. It is true that many Tibetans still follow the ancient Bon religion, and that even more of them subscribe to a kind of Buddhism which is really Bon with

a thin Buddhist veneer and a mere change in the titles of the principal deities. Many foreigners go to the Tibetan borderlands in order to scale the mighty peaks of the Himalayas; the only Tibetans or Tibeto-tribesmen with whom they come in contact are generally their bearers, who are most often drawn from that class of ignorant, superstitious folk to whom such criticism chiefly applies. There is yet another factor which contributes to visitors acquiring a poor impression of Tibetan Buddhism. Among the Tibetans education is limited to a very small percentage of the population. The percentage of males who become monks, however, must be about the highest in the world. These conditions naturally lead to the existence of huge numbers of monks who are barely, if at all, educated. The religious qualities of such monks may, in certain cases, be very high indeed; but, on the whole, uneducated monks tend to lower the high standards of their religion, as Catholic Europe discovered during mediaeval times.

Magic, sorcery, divination, witchcraft, fortunetelling, miraculous healing, spirit worship and the evocation of spirits are all common enough in Tibet. These practices contain a certain fascination for many of us, but we shall not be concerned with them here. We shall look rather at the more serious, the more spiritual, and the more scholarly aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. We shall emphasize these just because they have all too often been lost sight of by most travellers.

The author's own impression of Tibetan Buddhism, based on a twenty-year study which began under the tutelage of learned Tibetan and Mongolian lamas in China long ago, is that it is a religion of strange contrasts. If it is true that some Tibetan monks are remarkable for ignorant and superstitious practices, it is also true that the genuine scholars among them have probably gone more deeply into the implications of the Dharma than almost any other group in the world today. What is even more important, they have achieved heights of

spirituality which have been very seldom equalled anywhere in the modern world. Some of these scholars have spent as much as thirty or forty years at the great Buddhist university in Lhasa, which instructs thousands of monks in every aspect of religion, as well as medicine, logic, and other subjects. Moreover, during the years they spend at the university, they do not vegetate. They apply themselves constantly to the study of the Dharma, the human spirit, and the mind of man. No less a psychologist than the great Jung has paid many glowing tributes to the discoveries Tibetan students have made of the workings of the mind. Some of the results obtained by them he actually utilized in his own work.

The criticism of 'ignorant superstition' levelled constantly at Tibetan Buddhists may be partly due to a misunderstanding of another kind than those already mentioned. Tibetan Buddhist practice is highly ritualistic, although the Lord Buddha described ritual as one of the great hindrances to Enlightenment. The author has often discussed this matter with Tibetan lamas and has received an answer somewhat as follows:

"It is quite true that rituals recited or performed by rote without any proper understanding of, or reflection upon, their meaning are, at the very least, useless and, at most, a great obstacle to progress. But our rituals are not intended to be treated in that way. The Dharma is very profound and contains all sorts of more or less abstract ideas which the ordinary disciple finds it hard to recall or even to understand. One of the main purposes of our rituals, besides encouraging a spirit of devotion, is to impress the different aspects of the Dharma upon the minds of the devotees taking part."

To illustrate the meaning of this reply, a few examples are offered here. When a Tibetan is about to prostrate himself, he first raises his hands (palm to palm) above his head, then lowers them to the level of his face and, finally, brings them down to his chest. This symbolizes the threefold purity of body,

speech and mind, which he hopes to achieve by submitting himself to the Dharma. Upon most Tibetan altars will be found two rows of offerings consisting of the same symbols (water, flowers, incense, etc.), but laid out in reverse directions. This serves to prevent simple-minded people from supposing that the Buddha resides in the statue or *tanka* (picture) before which the offerings stand. One row is offered to the Buddha, as symbolized by that statue; the other 'to the Buddha in our own hearts,' which one may assume refers to the potential Buddha-nature in all of us.

A more complicated example concerns the Tibetan mantra, *Om mani padme hum*. The meanings of this short sentence are so manifold that a German scholar has recently produced a book, translated into three European languages, in which he treats the mantra in no less than four hundred pages. The words *mani padme* are usually translated as the Jewel in the Lotus, a correct translation, but one with an incredible number of meanings which the Tibetans (or some of them) know intimately. According to one interpretation, the Jewel is the Buddhist Church together with all outward manifestations of Buddhism; while the Lotus refers to that inner meaning of the Dharma which only a few of us will be fortunate enough to discover in this life. The word *om* (or *aum*), when properly pronounced, begins right at the back of the mouth and ends with the lips closed. It thus symbolizes, among other things, the totality of all sound, but rather in the spiritual sense of that expression best conveyed in English by 'The Music of the Spheres.' The word *hum* is a 'creative' sound, symbolizing the purity and religious or spiritual worth of the devotions being or about to be performed. The whole mantra is used in scores of different ways, of which one may be mentioned here. According to traditional Buddhist teaching, there are six kinds of life; that in the *Loka* or temporary heavens, that of the *Asura*, that of men, of animals, that of *Preta*, and of sufferers in the temporary hells. The six syllables of the mantra are therefore recited very slowly indeed, while the

devotee radiates thoughts of kindness and compassion to all beings who are bound to the Wheel of Life and who are undergoing one of these six states of existence. Each of the states is thought of separately in conjunction with the solemn intoning of the appropriate syllable of the mantra.

Almost every Tibetan temple contains a large, coloured picture of the Wheel of Life, known to many English readers through Kipling's novel, *Kim*. The explanation of all the symbols on this Wheel requires several hours, but we will attempt to give some broad indications of its most obvious meanings. In the centre is a small circle containing pictures of cock, snake and pig, symbolizing lust, malice and ignorance, the three fires of evil which cause us to revolve upon the Wheel. Around this is another circle with representations of beings progressing upwards or downwards in accordance with their self-built karmic destiny. The next circle is divided into six sections, representing the six states of existence already alluded to. Graphic representations of the pleasures and pains of the various sorts of life fill these sections. If the picture of the Wheel is a large and detailed one, there will be within these six sections various sub-types of being, such as men or animals enjoying a relatively pleasant existence and others who undergo almost hellish sufferings while still well above the state of hell. The outermost circle is divided into twelve sections, each containing a picture representing one of the twelve *nidana*, the chain of cause and effect which entails countless rebirths. Of these, we shall have something to say later. The whole Wheel, or series of concentric circles, is grasped by a hideous demon, who symbolizes *avidhya*, or primordial ignorance, the main cause of all our woes, of our endless journeying from life to death and from death to life, ever bound to the great Wheel of Sangsara. The implication is that striving for rebirth in Heaven or in any of the other relatively high states is foolish, for, in any case, such beings are still within Sangsara. When their stock of good karma has been exhausted, they will have to descend

to one of the lower states and fight the ancient battle all over again. At the top left corner of the oblong picture on which the Wheel is displayed is a figure of the Lord Buddha pointing towards the opposite corner at a small wheel depicted there, representing the Wheel of the Law (Dharma). The implication is obvious. Instead of striving for Heaven, or some such transient reward, we should follow the teaching of the Dharma and escape forever from Sangsara into Nirvana.

The Twelve *Nidana* are:

1. A blind man, symbolizing ignorance which leads to the rest of the twelve links and, in turn, results from them.
2. A potter, symbolizing the fashioning, or the taking on of personality which results directly from the operation of ignorance.
3. Two men in a boat, symbolizing *nama-rupa* (roughly, name and form) or the particular type of personality which follows.
4. A monkey and fruit, symbolizing 'tasting good and evil,' or the formation of consciousness.
5. Six empty houses, symbolizing the six senses (including cognition), which grow from consciousness.
6. A pair of lovers, symbolizing the contact of the newly incarnated personality with external phenomena.
7. A man blinded by two arrows, symbolizing the distinctions we foolishly make between 'pleasant' and 'unpleasant.'
8. A man drinking *Changy*, symbolizing the thirst for more 'pleasure.'
9. A monkey gathering flowers, symbolizing the grasping which arises from desire for 'pleasure.'
10. A pregnant woman, symbolizing the certainty of rebirth as a result of our grasping at life.
11. A woman bearing a child, symbolizing the actual process of rebirth.
12. A corpse, symbolizing the death which follows one birth and precedes the next.

From these several examples, which are by no means the most profound, but rather the more popular sort of Tibetan teaching, it will be obvious that the Tibetans are very far from being the ignorant, degraded followers of a debased religion. On the contrary, they are so deeply religious and spend so much time upon religious study, meditation and discussion that they have amplified the inherent doctrines, filling in the details from their own religious experience, until Tibetan religious works have come to be almost the bulkiest Buddhist literature in the world. Moreover, the quality of much of this literature is extremely high. It may be pointed out that, in some instances, the Tibetans have departed from the original teaching of the Lord Buddha. But any Buddhist would be unwise to cast this particular stone at Buddhists in another country.

It is not the intention here to give the impression that the Tibetans, because they are religious, are a very serious and gloomy people. Very much to the contrary, they are gay and full of humour. If, in their more serious moments, they find life sad (and who, during such moments, does not?), they certainly make the best of it.

The outstanding characteristics of the Tibetans, most of which have at least been touched on here, would seem to be due to a fairly rare combination of circumstances. On the one hand, the Tibetans are (in a sense) a very simple people, mountaineers who have no conception of the complexity of city life and who have remained almost untouched by the great changes which have destroyed the traditions of other races. On the other hand, thanks to the wisdom of their kings more than a thousand years ago, they have for centuries drunk deeply at fountains of wisdom from both India and China. One remembers that in the middle centuries of the first millennium after Christ, some of the most learned scholars of Christian Europe went out to inhabit the wild coastlands of Scotland and Ireland. The combination of extreme

simplicity and profound scholarship which doubtless resulted from this must surely have had a close resemblance to the cultural atmosphere of Tibet today.

It may be thought that the author is inclined to look at the Tibetans through rose-coloured spectacles. It may also be that a longer residence in that lovely part of the world might cause him to modify some of his opinions. But, in self-defence he can say that most of those few writers who have had the opportunity to come in close contact with the more highly cultured Tibetans share his enthusiasm to a very considerable degree. And in that part of the region contained in India proper will be found quite a few Westerners who have settled down for the rest of their lives, partly no doubt because of the bracing climate and the gorgeous scenery, but largely because they find the Tibetans such a fascinating and congenial people. If the author were sentenced, for a crime, real or imagined, to perpetual exile in one or the other of the Tibetan lands, he should be inclined to present the judge with his cherished Volkswagon, useless in Tibet, as a trifling token of esteem to a most generous benefactor.
