

An Introduction on Tibetan Muslims: Marc Gaborieau. Published in the Tibetan Journal, Autumn 1995

This special issue, entitled Tibetan Muslims, deals not only with the few thousand Muslims of Tibet proper (the present autonomous province of Tibet) but also with the numerous Muslims who live outside Tibet and are in some way or other connected with Tibet. The latter fall into two groups. Firstly, Muslims of Tibetan origin and/or culture who live on the borders of India and Pakistan, south west of Tibet and can really be called Tibetan Muslims. Secondly, a much more varied group of people living north of Tibet who have political and economic relations with her: some are of Tibetan stock, others of Turkish stock; but the most conspicuous among them are the Muslims of Chinese stock and/or culture, the Hui.

MUSLIMS IN TIBET PROPER

The presence of Muslims in Tibet proper has been known in the West since the beginning of the 17th century through the reports of Catholic missionaries sent to Bhutan, Tibet, and Nepal, and from the end of the 18th century through the British envoys in Nepal and Tibet, who had gathered information about them, particularly about their roles in trade (Gaborieau 1973, pp.14 -15). But it is only in this century that systematic research about them was undertaken : it was initiated by the orientatlist W. Barthold, who, in his seminal article on Tibet in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, outlined the main questions about the Muslims of Tibet and pointed to the most important sources (Barthold 1938). After the war several more detailed publications appeared in succession: a paper by Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark based on interviews of Lhasa merchants he met in India (Peter of Greece and Denmark 1962); a book I wrote on the basis of an Urdu manuscript I found in Nepal, completed with data collected from refugees in Nepal and India (Gaborieau 1973); a book in Urdu by a Tibetan Muslim (Abu Bakr Amiru 'd-Din 1979); as well as a recent compilation published from Lhasa (Fang Jiangchang 1989).

The early history of Muslim influence and presence in Tibet is still shrouded in obscurity. In the 8th century Arab armies clashed with Tibetan armies in the south -west of Tibet around Gilgit and in the north - west in Turkestan (Barthold 1938, p.780). Two centuries later an anonymous geographical work

in Persian, the *Jjudad al-alam*, underlined the role of Tibet in the commerce between India and Muslim countries, and described Lhasa as "a small town with numerous idol temples and one Muslim mosque: a few Muslims live in it." Muslim influence was important not only in commerce, but also in the development of language (notably Persian loan words), literature (the *Cesar* epics portray the Muslim West as the country of riches,) and sciences (particularly medicine); there most probably were Muslims in Tibet in all these centuries, but their presence has not yet been documented. 'We come on firm ground only in the 17th century, when two distinct Muslim communities were successively substantiated: the Khace of Kashmiri origin; and the Gya Kache or Hopaling Kache of Chinese origin. Their separate mosques and cemeteries, as described in the paper of Corneille Jest, testify to their distinct identities which were preserved over the centuries. The first group, the Kashmiri, came from the south-west and south in the wake of the Islamicization of Kashmir which started in the 14th century. Their presence is first mentioned by the Christian missionaries in the 17th century. Their community remains the best known. These Kashmiris were merchants who had come directly from Kashmir or Ladakh, or more commonly through India and Nepal; they traded with India, Nepal and China: They had adopted Tibetan as their mother tongue and were rather well integrated into Tibet's cultural life: at least one specimen of "buddhist-islamic" literature has survived (Tsering 1988).

Four papers in this issue deal wholly or partly with the Kashmiris: Pascale Dollfus's article alludes to their history in connection with Ladakh; Marc Gaborieau analyzes their beliefs in the power and authority of Muslim saints; Yusuf Naik, in his short biography of his father, describes the wide administrative and judicial autonomy Kashmiri Muslims enjoyed in Tibet; and speaks of the sad fate of most of them, who escaped from Tibet to India after the Chinese took over in 1959, and are mostly still in Kashmir (see *Tibetan Review* 1976). Finally Corneille Jest describes the present state of the community in Lhasa, reduced to 56 families, and includes photographs of their mosques.

Less is known about the Chinese Muslims. Their presence was not documented in Tibet before the end of the last century. We now have a chronological landmark; their mosques in Lhasa, described in Corneille Jest's paper, is said to have been built in 1716. Claude Moevus, working on sources in Chinese, has

published here much new information: she dates the trade of Chinese Muslims in Tibet back to the 17th century. Also, according to her, Chinese Muslims started settling in Tibet in the 18th century. They were not only, as is commonly said, keepers of restaurants; they were present in every branch of commerce. While the number of Kashmiri Muslims in Tibet has drastically declined since 1959, the number of Chinese Muslims has considerably increased lately in the wake of the new economic policy: they are getting more and more conspicuous, and this may lead to conflicts with the Tibetan population.

TIBETAN MUSLIMS OF HUNZA, BALTISTAN AND LADAKH

South west of Tibet is a vast area which was originally under Tibetan influence, sheltering many Muslims of Tibetan origin or culture whose ancestors were converted to Islam after the nearby provinces of Kashmir was Islamicized. It was annexed by the British in 1849 after they defeated the Sikhs; since then administrators, missionaries, linguists, and lately ethnologists have gathered a considerable amount of information on the Muslims who live in this area. This area is cut into two parts by the cease-fire line drawn in 1949 after the first Indo-Pakistani war for the control of Kashmir. North-west of this line are the districts controlled by Pakistan which have been thoroughly Islamicized since at least the 15th century; practically all the people who live there are Muslims; they are mostly of Tibetan stock and speak Tibetan as in Baltistan. In the westernmost area, Hunza, people known as Burusho, who speak a language of their own, Burushaski, were once adepts of Tibetan Buddhism; they continue, after their conversion to Islam, to sing a version of the Cesar epic in Burushaski. None of the papers in this issue addresses directly this area under Pakistani control, although Pascale Dollfus, in the beginning of her paper, refers to the Muslim conquest of Baltistan. To the south-east of the cease-fire line, in Ladakh, the proportion of Muslims to local Buddhists decreases progressively as one proceeds eastward. Three papers relate to the Muslims of Ladakh who make up nearly half of the district's population. Pascale Dollfus gives us the history of the coming of Islam to central Ladakh, in the Leh area where Buddhists are a majority. The other two papers concentrate on western Ladakh where Muslims are in a majority: Nicola Grist studies the working of the religious leadership in Suru valley through an analysis of the mourning rites

of the Muharram festival; and Smriti Srinivas studies Muslim society as compared to Buddhist society in the nearby area of Nubra.

MUSLIMS ON THE BORDERS OF TURKESTAN, CHINA AND TIBET

The presence of sizable Muslim communities in Chinese territories north of Tibet and their relations with Tibet had long been known; but they are not yet well documented. The two papers which deal with them in this journal are particularly innovative. . The one by 'Thierry Zarcone, based on Persian and Turkish sources, leads us to Eastern Turkestan from where several attempts were made by Muslim rulers and mystics to overcome Tibet by conquest or by peaceful means: he concentrates on the attempt made by a Turkish mystic of the Naqshbandiyya Sufi order to propagate Islam in north-west China and Tibet in the 17th century; he probably converted some Tibetans to Islam, although this is not well documented. Interestingly, the story of his alleged meeting with the Dalai Lama closely resembles the encounter of the Indian Sufi Khairu'ud-Din with the Dalai Lama as told by the Kashmiris and analyzed in my paper. From Chinese sources, Claude Moevus studies the role of the Muslim traders in the same areas of north-western China and Tibet as mentioned by Thierry Zarcone. She gives glimpses of the economic, religious and social life of these people of Chinese stock who specialized in trade with Tibetans; some became new Muslim settlers in Tibet and may have become Tibetanized. All these papers are innovative, and this issue adds to our knowledge of Tibetan Muslims. One of the lessons we may draw from reading them is that on the whole the relations between Muslims and Buddhists were harmonious, but it seems that lately tensions and conflicts have arisen both in Ladakh and on the northern border. Let us hope that this outburst of communalism will not last