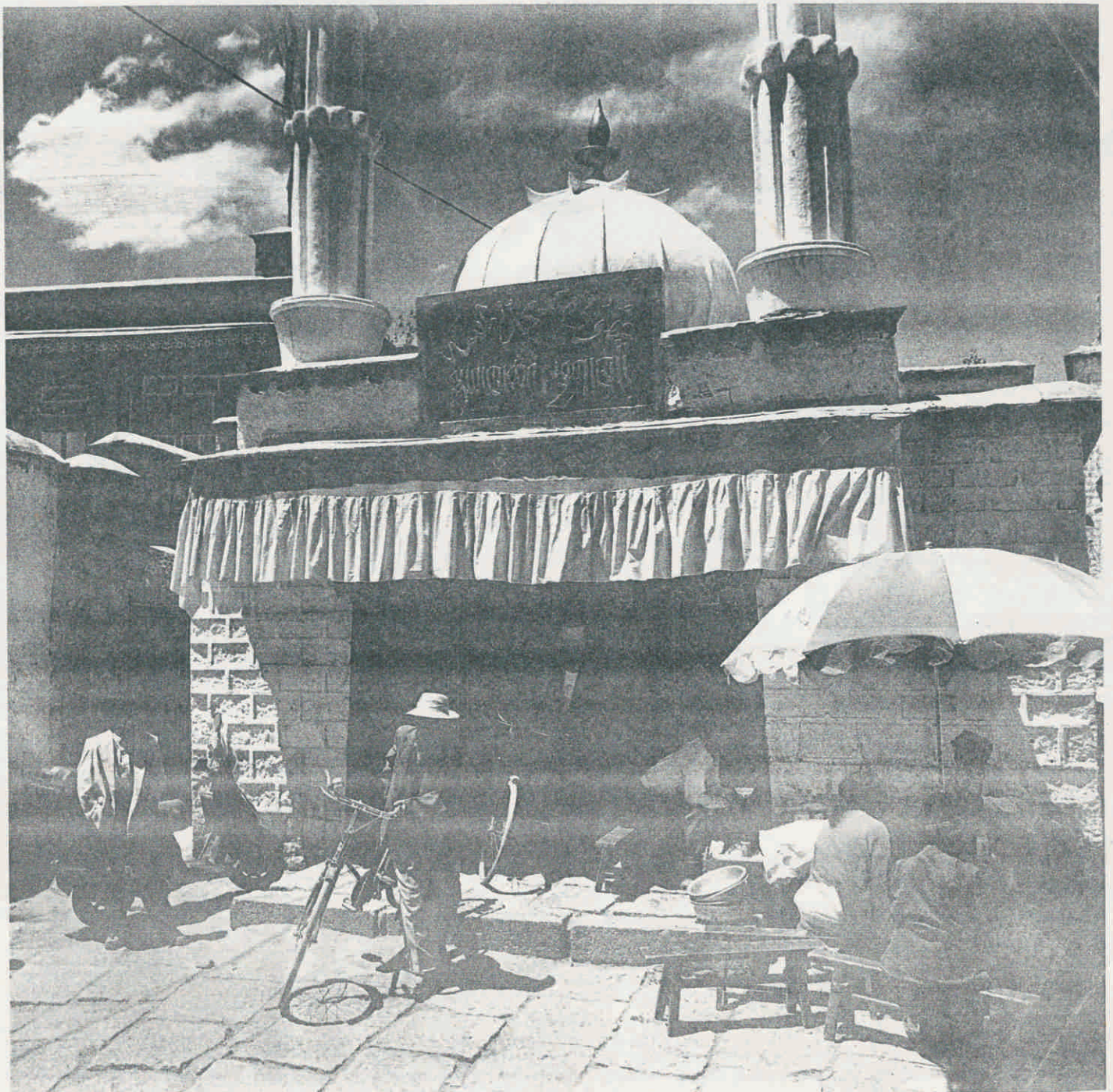


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 Written by José Ignacio Cabezón | Photographed by Kevin Bubriski

IT WAS DURING A VISIT TO LHASA IN 1991 THAT I SAW MY FIRST TIBETAN MOSQUE. OF COURSE, STUDENTS OF TIBET ARE AWARE THAT MUSLIMS EXIST IN THAT COUNTRY AND HAVE IMPORTANT FUNCTIONS IN TIBETAN SOCIETY, BUT BEING CONCERNED PRINCIPALLY WITH BUDDHISM—UNCONSCIOUSLY, I THINK—NONETHELESS WORK ON THE PRESUPPOSITION THAT TIBETAN CULTURE IS MONOLITHICALLY BUDDHIST. WE REALIZE HOW UNFOUNDED THAT PRESUPPOSITION IS ONLY WHEN WE ARE CONFRONTED BY SOMETHING THAT CHALLENGES THE STEREOTYPE: A MOSQUE IN THE HEART OF LHASA, OR SIMPLY A WALK THROUGH THE CITY'S MUSLIM QUARTER.

THERE, I WAS STRUCK ANEW BY THE DIVERSITY OF THE CITY AND ITS INHABITANTS, AND I WONDERED WHAT THIS HIMALAYAN URBAN CENTER MUST HAVE BEEN LIKE IN EARLIER TIMES, WHEN PEOPLE FROM INDIA, NEPAL, BHUTAN, LADAKH, CENTRAL ASIA, MONGOLIA, CHINA AND EVEN SOUTHEAST ASIA HAD GREATER ACCESS TO LHASA, WHOSE NAME MEANS "PLACE OF THE GODS" IN TIBETAN.

Adapted from "Islam in the Tibetan Cultural Sphere," by José Ignacio Cabezón, in *Islam in Tibet*, edited by Gray Henry (Louisville, Fons Vitae, 1997, ISBN 1-887752-03-X, 328 pgs., pb.)

Islam spread to Tibet from two directions: the north and the west. Moving from Arabia through Persia and Afghanistan, it reached China in the seventh century by the ancient Silk Roads across Central Asia. (See *Aramco World*, July/August 1988.) From the northern province of Ningxia and other points in China, the religion then moved southward into what is today eastern Tibet. Chinese Muslims, known as Hui (See *Aramco World*, July/August 1985), eventually settled in Suing and in the Kokonor region of eastern Tibet generally, and carried on trade with central Tibet. Though many of these merchants remained permanently in eastern Tibet, where their descendants can be found today, some, like their brethren from the west, eventually moved to Lhasa. There, they preserve their religion and customs to the present day in a small and tightly knit Hui community.

A variety of Tibetan sources attest that Tibetan rulers conquered large portions of Central Asia westward to Persia during the eighth and ninth centuries, a time when Persians, Uighurs, Turks and Tibetans vied for control of portions of Central Asia. In one particularly interesting episode we hear of the ruler of Kabul, who was originally a vassal of the Tibetan king, converting from Buddhism to Islam sometime between 812 and 814, and capitulating to the Abassid ruler al-Ma'mun. As a token of his sincerity, he is said to have presented what from the Muslim accounts appears to have been a gold statue of the Buddha. Al-Ma'mun sent it to Makkah, where it was melted down to make coins.

The regions which make up present-day Afghanistan and the new nations of Central Asia (See *Aramco World*, May/June 1997) have lain outside the sphere of Tibetan influence for centuries now. Though Tibetans and Arabs were in direct contact even from these early dates in the ninth century, it seems that Muslims began settling consistently in western and central Tibet only in the 12th century.

Part of this influx came from Turkistan, Baltistan and Kashmir through Ladakh (See *Aramco World* July/August 1993) and spread into western Tibet and Lhasa from there. Indeed, two Muslim teachers from a Central Asian religious order, Ali Hamadani of Srinigar and his son, Muhammad Nur Bakhsh, appear to be responsible for extensive conversions in Baltistan in the 14th century.





Above: Habibullah Bat, a tailor by trade, is the imam, or prayer leader, of Lhasa's oldest mosque, which dates back to a 17th-century grant of land by the fifth Dalai Lama. That gift established a pattern of peaceful coexistence of Lhasa's Muslim minority with the city's overwhelming Buddhist majority.

Opposite, top: Friday prayers fill the Bara Masjid, or Large Mosque, used by the roughly 2000 Hui Muslims of Lhasa, who trace their roots to southern China. The mosque in Wa Pa Ling, a neighborhood of the old city east of the center, is one of three in Lhasa.

Opposite, lower: Abdul Halim, the son of Habibullah Bat, is responsible with his father for the care of the buildings, trees, fruit orchard and cemetery of the old mosque in Ka Che Gling Ga, or Muslim Park, the expansive land grant whose borders were determined by shooting arrows in four directions.

Previous spread, left: On a busy street in Lhasa's old city, the Chota Masjid, or Small Mosque, is used by several hundred Tibetan Muslims of Kashmiri, Balti, north Indian or Nepali descent, many of whose forebears developed the caravan trade that linked Lhasa with cities across the Himalayas.

At right, a Tibetan Muslim woman offers prayers for her parents during her visit to Ka Che Gling Ga, location of the city's only Muslim cemetery.



Above: On their way to Lhasa's only Islamic school, Tibetan boys pause to pose for the camera in front of the inner gateway of the Bara Masjid, to which the school is attached.

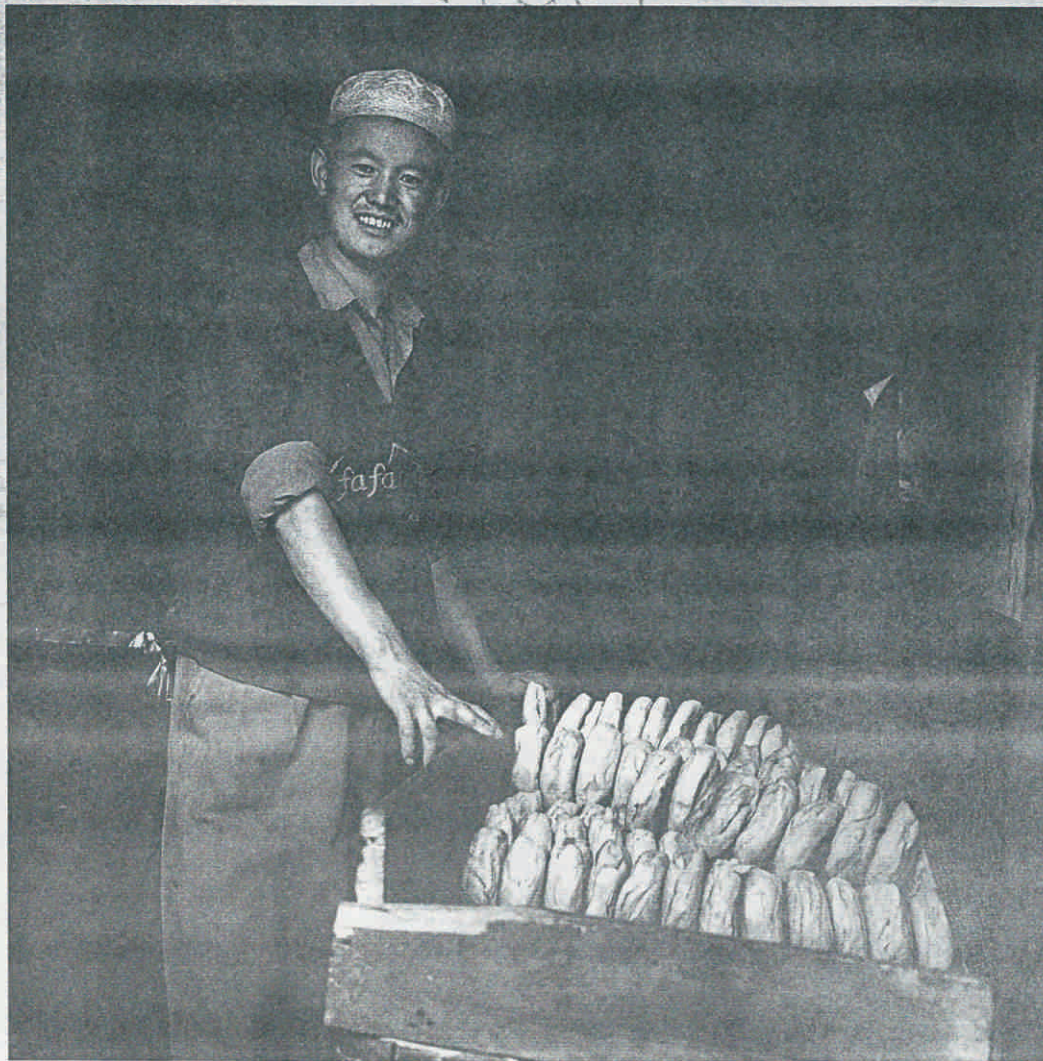
Opposite, upper: The proprietor of a noodle shop—fast food, Tibetan style—beams a welcome through a curtained doorway that opens onto Linkuo Lu, the thoroughfare that skirts the edge of Lhasa's Muslim neighborhood.

Opposite, lower: A few dozen meters from the Bara Masjid, a baker sells bread to passersby from a cart. Muslims of both Chinese and Indian origins—the latter called kha che, or "Kashmiris," in Tibetan—are well known for the bread, noodles, meat and other foods that they sell.

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The Muslim community of Lhasa today comprises two distinct groups of people: those whose heritage is Chinese, and those whose heritage is Kashmiri, Nepalese, Ladakhi, Sikh or otherwise non-Chinese. There are fewer than 1000 of the latter, called *kha che* in Tibetan, a term which means both "Kashmiri" and "Muslim." Some of them trace their roots back to the 12th-century traders. The Chinese Hui, called *gya kha che*, number roughly 2000. Each subcommunity of Muslims uses one of the city's two main mosques: Those principally of Kashmiri and other non-Chinese origin use the Chota Masjid, or Small Mosque; the Chinese Hui use the Bara Masjid, or Large Mosque. Each group has its own leader and ruling council, and each maintains administrative ties to the Tibetan government. Like most Tibetans in Lhasa, Tibetan Muslims have undergone hardships since the Chinese occupation in 1959. The situation at present has improved, however, and there is greater freedom of religion than there was, for example, during the Cultural Revolution.



Many of the Hui are butchers or vegetable farmers. Like the Kashmiris, they belong to the Hanafi *madhhab*, one of the four traditions of law in Islam, have their own *imam*, or prayer leader, their own *madrassa*, or religious school, and a cemetery known as the Kygasha, 15 kilometers (9 mi) outside Lhasa.

Although Muslim traders were already a long-established presence in Lhasa and other major Tibetan cities by the 17th century, the reign of the fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) marked a turning point for Islam in Tibet. According to oral tradition, a certain Muslim teacher who lived in Lhasa at the time used to pray on an isolated hill at the edge of the city. The Dalai Lama spotted the man at prayer every day, and one day asked that he be brought to him. The teacher explained that he was worshipping according to the precepts of his religion, and that he did so on the hill because no mosque existed in the area. Impressed with his faith, the Dalai Lama sent a bowman to a site near the hill



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Above: Appealing to a moderately upscale clientele, this woman's restaurant offers more than the traditional noodles, and provides a television and a cassette player for her guests' entertainment.

Opposite, top: A Muslim mother and her son pose outside their shop, a neighborhood grocery named "Al-Salamah" that sells snacks, ice cream, laundry soap and other daily necessities.

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Opposite, lower: Steaming bowls await the after-prayers rush early Friday afternoon in the noodle shop attached to the Bara Masjid. The noodles are fresh, made on the premises early each morning and stretched to arm-span lengths.

and had him shoot arrows in each of the four cardinal directions. A house was built at the place from which the arrows were shot, and the land around it, extending as far in each direction as the arrows had flown, was deeded to the Muslim community. The place came to be called The House of the Far-Reaching Arrows, and became the site of Lhasa's first mosque and cemetery.

But the fifth Dalai Lama provided more than land to these Muslims of Kashmiri origin. He is said to have given official patronage to the 14 elders and 30 youths who were the original occupants of the site. His positive stance toward the Muslims of Lhasa seems to have been part of a larger formal policy of encouraging ethnic, cultural and economic diversity in Tibet, a policy called *mi sna mgron po*, or "the invitation of the peoples." In addition, Muslims were given considerable freedom to settle their own legal affairs within their community in accordance with Islamic law, and to open their own shops and trade freely without having to pay taxes.

Today the land bequeathed by the fifth Dalai Lama is also known as the Kha Che Gling Ga, or Muslim Park. It is used by the Kashmiri Muslim community as a picnic ground and a site for other communal functions. Recently, a traditional Tibetan arch (*sgo*) was built to mark the spot where the original mosque stood. Until a separate Kashmiri mosque—today's Chota Masjid—was built in the center of Lhasa, the mosque at Kha Che Gling Ga was the Kashmiri Muslims' only place for communal prayer, and thus came to be known simply as the Friday Mosque. The men of the community would walk several kilometers each Friday from their homes in the city to the outlying mosque, and then share the traditional meal together. Leftovers would be brought back to Lhasa as *tshogs*, or "blessed food," to be shared with those who could not come. Although it is the Chota Masjid that is the main center of regular worship for Kashmiri Muslims today, the site in the park is still occasionally used, especially during festivals, and the community's imam, Habibullah Bat, resides nearby.

Most Tibetans have little knowledge of the historical and religious texts that discuss the history of the Muslims who live among them. Their encounters with Islam come as they always have, by





Above: A muezzin calls the congregation to prayer on Friday before the inner gate of the Bara Masjid, an architectural hybrid of Tibetan and Chinese styles.

Opposite, top: At the Chota Masjid, teapots of a traditional full-bellied Tibetan shape are convenient to hold water for the ablutions required before prayers.

Opposite, lower: A Chicago Bulls cap, an impish look and a rubber band at the ready indicate that this pupil at the Bara Masjid's Islamic school may have more on his mind than the lessons on the well-worn writing board on his lap.

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Although Muslim traders were already a well-established presence in Lhasa considerably before the 17th century, the reign of the fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) marked a turning point for Islam in Tibet.

direct contact with ordinary Muslim traders: in the east from China, and in the west from India, especially the regions of Ladakh, Kashmir, Bihar and Kalimpong. Even before the economic incentives offered during the reign of the fifth Dalai Lama, Muslim traders from the west were already one of the few sources of many items indispensable to Tibetan life, such as saffron, dried fruit, sugar and textiles. On their return trips, the Muslim merchants carried wool, musk and tea, as well as Tibetan shawls, salt, gold, Chinese turquoise and yak tails—a traditional symbol of authority among peoples descended from the Mongols. Some of the Muslim merchants kept their permanent residences outside Tibet proper, but many settled in the country and became the nuclei of small but often prosperous and culturally thriving Tibetan Muslim communities. It was not uncommon for the men of these communities to marry women from the Tibetan Buddhist community who converted to Islam.

We know much less, however, about the Muslim communities outside Lhasa. We know that mosques existed, for example, in Shigatse, Tsethang and Suing, and

Even before policies to encourage diversity were established in the 17th century, Muslim traders from the west were already one of the major sources of many items indispensable to Tibetan life.



that the first two of these communities were sufficiently organized to have appointed imams, but apart from this we can say little else.

Though well-integrated into Tibetan society economically, culturally and linguistically, the members of Lhasa's Muslim community have probably maintained a stronger sense of religious and ethnic identity than their coreligionists in Tibet's border regions. This is to be expected, given their commitment to preserving their religion in the face of the overwhelmingly Buddhist world that surrounds them—a world that is nonetheless their home. 🌐



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Above: On the eastern edge of the old city, the Bara Masjid announces its presence in Arabic, Tibetan and Chinese.

Opposite, top: After a Saturday picnic and memorial visit to the cemetery, a Muslim couple poses in the old house at Ka Che Gling Ga, the Muslim Park. Just as many of Lhasa's kha che Muslims have done for centuries, this family works in the caravan trade that links Lhasa and Katmandu—though they now drive diesel trucks instead of camels.

Opposite, lower: On a far shorter route, it takes this Hui trader 10 to 15 minutes each day to push his peddler's cart from his home in the Muslim neighborhood to the Barkhor, the center of Lhasa, where he offers for sale plastic kitchentware, pots and pans, flashlights, batteries, candles, penny candy and the small thermos jugs popular for carrying hot noodles or tea.