

"Coral - flower of a marvelous tree

Turquoise - treasure of the divinities of the lake"¹

Table of Contents

1.) Introduction.....	2
2.) History.....	5
3.) Women.....	11
4.) Religion.....	18
5.) Conflict.....	23
6.) Now.....	29
7.) Contributions.....	31
8.) Education.....	35
9.) Conclusion.....	37
10.) Methodology.....	38
11.) Contacts.....	40
12.) Bibliography.....	42

tseten.samdup@orange.co.in

Photographs to above address.

¹ Jest, Corneille. Tales of the Turquoise - A Pilgrimage in Doipo. Mandala Book Point, Kathmandu:1985, pg. 1

One who exchanges bronze for gold is foolish.

If you mistake turquoise for a fake,

you must be stupid”²

Introduction

“Turquoises (yü -ཡུ) are similar to people; they live and they die... In Tibetan culture, the turquoise has a particularly profound symbolic value. Being both a 'living' stone and susceptible to destruction, it shares with humans a common destiny. It conjures up vitality, then disappearance. It represents both beauty and wealth and also serves as a 'support' to human life itself. The term la-yü (literally 'vital-spirit-turquoise' ལྷ་ཡུ) occurs frequently in the mythical and legendary themes and in folk tales referring to the vital spirit that humans are believed to possess, the will to live, the ability to function as an integrated person. It is this spirit or force that a turquoise guards, conserves, protects, and supports.”³

Turquoise is most definitely a means of support. I suppose it may not actually be realized as a “la-yü” to the dozen or so Tibetan Muslim women I spoke to over the month of April; yet without doubt, being surrounded by turquoise day after day created an apt context for the vibrant vitality these women showed.

There are few incentives to being stuck in the touristy swarms of Thamel, Kathmandu. Fending off Tiger Balm hawkers, hashish dealers, and carpet sales-hungry people is not necessarily the most enthralling way to spend a month of research. Nevertheless, sitting in the cool refuge of numerous Tibetan Muslim-owned jewelry shops and mocking foreigners that

² Khache Phalu's *Advice on the Art of Living*, trans. Dawa Norbu, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala: 1987, pg. 5

³ *Tales of the Turquoise*, pgs 4-5.

pass by wearing skimpy shorts and (those oh-so-amusing) Funny Hats provided much of a relief (and most importantly, friendly banter) to an otherwise haggard-filled day. So most Tibetan Muslims in exile in Kathmandu own jewelry shops. The most perplexing thing is, no one necessarily knows why this is the case. The most common explanation is that since many Tibetan Muslims in Kathmandu are related, one family decided to open a shop and the rest of the relatives followed suit later on.

By being told that most Tibetan Muslims own jewelry shops, you set out to locate the 60-70-odd families in the city. Basically this consists of walking past shops and peeking in, pretending to be overly fascinated by turquoise, malachite, lapis and coral whilst surreptitiously scanning the walls for traces of thangkas or His Holiness's photographs. If these exist, you have to politely and suddenly not be interested in jewelry anymore until you come across a store bearing silver stickers that say "Allah" in Arabic next to Muslim calendars bearing a photo of the Ka'bah at Mecca. It is at this point that you cease talking about jewelry and start chatting about Tibetan Muslims.

A minority minority minority, Tibetan Muslims in exile exist and thrive very well, thank you. Generally, when most people (no matter what part of the globe they hail from) think about "Tibet," they envision monks wandering around monasteries, His Holiness the Dalai Lama giving Mönlam teachings, Losar festivities and other countless (you know what I am getting at) *Buddhist* imagery. However, Buddhism is not necessarily synonymous with Tibet. In fact, even some Tibetans themselves are not aware that Tibetan Muslims comprise a significant percentage of the community. For example, Habibullah Batt (one of the oldest members of the Kha-che linka mosque in Lhasa) chuckles as he remarks that one of the mosques is located on the Barkhor, the kora route around the Jokhang in Lhasa. At least once a day, pilgrims (from mainly remote regions like Kham) will mistake the mosque for another temple, and walk in, murmuring *om mani padme hum*, fingering

LA-YÜ: Treasure of the Divinities

(Cultural and Religious Perspectives of Tibetan Muslim Women in Exile)

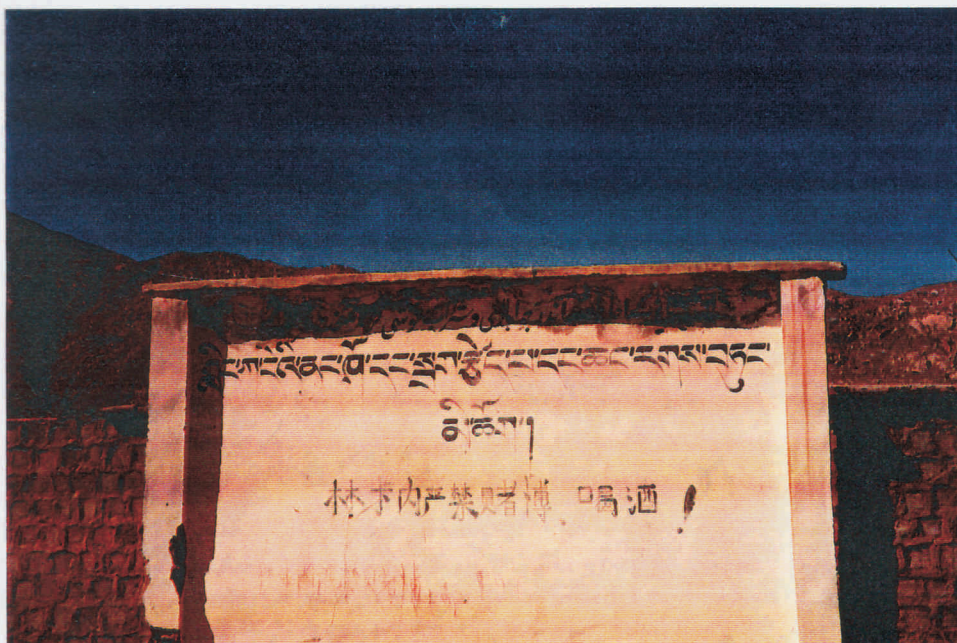


Tina Harris
Wesleyan University
SIT Tibetan Studies
Spring '97

prayer beads, and doing prostrations in front of the large photo of Mecca. Thus the basic factor that Tibetan Muslims exist in the first place is ground enough to garner various perspectives of life after nearly 40 years of exile. And what better way to obtain a snippet of Tibetan Islamic culture than through the eyes of its rarely-listened-to women.



Entrance gate to Kha-che linka, Lhasa, with the date of the 5th Dalai Lama's founding (1650).



Sign upon entry: "Do not gamble or drink chang inside the linka"

*"Carnations are the garden's ornaments;
when they blossom and grow
the garden is at its best.
A great king is the country's ornament.
If he is in accord with law,
his realm will be glorious and powerful."⁴*

History

Most unfortunately, Tibetan Muslims don't possess a proper written history, and the oral history is also considerably vague and dubious. A number of pieces have been written by academics vying to garner a general Tibetan Muslim origin, yet there is still a lack of clarification on their varied origin. Apart from brief contact with Afghanistan and Persia in the 7th century or so, most Tibetan Muslims can trace their origin back to the 15-17th centuries, when numerous trading caravans dealt goods (mainly saffron) between Kashmir, Ladakh and Tibet. Indeed, the word for "Muslim" in Tibetan is "Kha-che," (ཁ་ཇེ་) which is also derived from the word for Kashmir (ཁ་ཇེ་ཡུལ་). One of the most widely accepted stories is that most of the Tibetan Muslims primarily originate from Kashmiri traders that had spent a few months in Lhasa a year and intermarried with the Tibetan Buddhist women they met at their trading stops. The 5th Dalai Lama (1617-1682) noticed the "kindness and sincerity" of the settled Muslim traders, and decided to grant them land for a mosque and cemetery (since the Islamic tradition calls for a ground burial rather than the Tibetan tradition of sky burial). Thus, he shot four arrows from a hill near the Potala, and marked the boundaries for what today is called Kha-che linka (Muslim park).

⁴ Khache Phalu, pg. 10



Entrance to the small mosque in Kha-che lingka



The small mosque in Kha-che lingka - note its Tibetan style

Another group of Muslims in Tibet are descendants of a group of Chinese Muslims who had settled in Amdo (mainly in the capital of Siling) in the 18th century, also with the intent of trading with Lhasan merchants. Eventually these Muslims settled in an area called Hobalinka and are thus named the Hobalinka Muslims to this very day. They also bear the name Gya Kha-che ("Chinese Muslims") yet should not be confused with the Chinese Hui Muslims who have recently settled in Lhasa from areas such as Western China and Eastern Turkestan in order to sell goods in the rapidly-sprawling capital city.

Yet one more oral Tibetan Muslim origin story dates back to 1841 when the Dogra troops from Kashmir moved into Tibet after a successful attack on Ladakh. As winter drifted closer, the Tibetan troops overtook the Dogra Kashmiris; hence they were able to take over 700 Dogra prisoners of war who were unable to bear the frigid temperatures. Nevertheless, they were later given permission to remain in Tibet and like the Kashmiri traders, eventually a number of them intermarried with Tibetan women and settled in the country. Since many of them had the name Singh, they are a minority in Lhasa today called the Singh Kha-che, yet are almost always indistinguishable from the Kha-che themselves, according to Nilofur Jami and her cousin Hidaidullah, claiming to be Singh Kha-che in origin.

Around the time of the Chinese infiltration of Tibet in the late 1950's, the Tibetan Muslims started noticing that like their Buddhist counterparts, they were certainly not exempt from religious persecution. In fact, the inability to practice Islam is the main reason why most Tibetan Muslim families departed from their homeland. According to Masood Butt, "their religious institutions like mosques and Madrasas were closed. They were not even allowed to carry out their last rites for their dead according to religious traditions. They were banned to travel about in the country. Merchandise



Minaret of Gya Kha-che mosque, on the Barkhor in Lhasa: note the auspicious symbols



Entrance gate of Gya Kha-che mosque - a mixture of Tibetan and Chinese styles

held by them were either frozen outright or purchased by the Chinese at arbitrary prices."⁵

The Ponj Committee (Ponj is actually the number "5" in Urdu) consisted of five members who mostly took the responsibility of making sure the Tibetan Muslim community in Lhasa did not break the Shari'at (Islamic law). At the time of Chinese occupation in 1959, the Ponj committee pleaded and appealed to the Indian government in order to be considered Indian (Kashmiri) citizens so as to escape persecution. All five members (including Abdul Qadir Jami, Nilofur Jami's grandfather) were tortured and imprisoned by the Chinese. However, in 1960, the Indian government agreed to allow Tibetan Muslims to enter India, and most were allowed to leave Tibet with permission from India.

At the time of writing, there are thriving exile communities in Kathmandu and Darjeeling, but by far the largest group of Tibetan Muslims live in the conflict-ridden Indian state of Kashmir. Hidaidullah Jami, former member of a Tibetan Muslim Youth Organization (now defunct because of the problems in Kashmir) talks about a group of elderly Tibetan Muslim women in Srinigar who had formed an organization called Bibi Moreed (literally 'volunteer ladies' in Urdu) who would sit outside the State office until something was done for the well-being of the Tibetan Muslim community in Srinigar. Though they were mainly known for their position as mediators if anything went awry with married couples' relationships, they were also known for appealing for (and receiving) electricity for the settlement in Srinigar as well as the fixing of the roads during times of severe monsoon washouts.

⁵ Butt, Masood. Muslims of Tibet (unpublished article) pg. 7



The inside of the Gya Kha-che mosque and a gaggle of enthusiastic Muslim children



Nilofur Jami

...one. Though it was claimed to be a general success, some people expressed skepticism that it was just a ploy to extract financial aid from Islamic countries and that the conference tried to encompass every single aspect of the Tibetan Muslim situation in too broad of a context (see copy of agenda below). In particular, the possibility of having a representative seat in the exile government's parliament for a Tibetan Muslim was discussed, yet almost all of the Tibetan Muslims I spoke to were aware of this and mentioned that the decision was "still pending and will probably go on pending forever..." At this point, most Tibetan Muslims are still waiting for the response from His Holiness; that is, his administration.

Delegation from Kalimpong and Darjeeling



Delegation from Nepal.
Far left: Karimullah Bhatt



*"No matter from what good lineage
she hails,
woman is an aspect of the devil.
If you listen to whatever she says,
you will be in trouble.
If you let her do what she pleases,
it will cause you a nervous breakdown."*⁶

Women

One must keep context into perspective when dealing with exile communities. Obviously, after 40 years of exile, the comments made by the women in the Tibetan Muslim community in Kathmandu are not going to parallel that of the Tibetan Muslim women in Lhasa, or even those residing in Srinagar. Likewise, not all the women have the same ideas of strictness in terms of dress, religious practice, etc. Nevertheless, all of the women I spoke to in Kathmandu and India did not wear head scarves; yet they did wear differing combinations of chubas, kurtas, and Western dress. In Lhasa, on the other hand, all the women wore head scarves. Razia Chishti spoke about the inconvenience of "taking purdah" (the covering of the face and head - always complete with veiling gesticulations). "Tibetan Muslims are not taking purdah because all the bad things - rape, bad relations, happen when there is much distance and hiding the face." Though she puts a head scarf on when visiting Kashmir, Razia insists that "nowhere in the Koran does it say that women have to stay at home. The reason why we don't wear head scarves in Kathmandu is that Tibetan Muslim men and women can be friends, so there has never been a rape by a Tibetan Muslim."

⁶ Khache Phaju, pg. 34



Chö, Chö - the Mad Tea Party at Kha-che lingka. I just happened to stumble upon
Tibetan Muslim women in Lhasa - in the chair sits Habibullah Batt's elder wife



Nilofur thinks that sometimes it is good to wear a head covering "so men don't get wrong ideas" but then pulls out a photograph of herself in the full black head-to-toe chador (black head-to-toe covering) in Srinigar in 1989. "One of the reasons why I came to Kathmandu is that I had to completely cover in school, and one of my friends told me that after I left [Srinigar], they would throw acid on any girl who didn't have her head covered." This heightens the fact that almost all of the women in Kathmandu expressed joy in being a Tibetan Muslim as opposed to a Nepali or Indian Muslim women. Another similar story that marks the difference between exile communities in Kashmir and Srinigar is the time when Razia went to visit her sister-in-law in Srinigar. A neighboring Hindu girl came over to the house and started a friendly conversation with Razia, and in response to her chat, her sister-in-law gasped, "don't speak to that girl, she's Hindu." Razia couldn't believe her relative's attitude and responded with the remark: "you have been in Kashmir way too long - you are not a Tibetan Muslim anymore, why should you hate someone who is the same as you?"

In particular, Salima Banu Iezzi has made a bit of a mark within the Kathmandu Muslim community. Calling herself a Khasara (literally "mule" in Tibetan), Salima is half- Nepali, half- Tibetan Muslim. After I asked her about the atmosphere of women attending the mosque in Lhasa, she states that "it's not like the women sit in the back, they're in different sections that mainly exist because if men and women think about each other during prayers, their minds will deviate from religion." She contentedly remarks that she feels lucky to grow up as a Tibetan Muslim and now the owner of Banu's Fitness, an upscale fitness center near Kamal Pokhari, Kathmandu: "coming from a Muslim society, dancing around in leotards is just not acceptable." But after awhile, she states that the Tibetan Muslim community realized that she wasn't drinking alcohol or "men-izing" (Salima's equivalent



Razia Chishti



Salima Banu Iezzi

to womanizing) and even accepted her 1991 marriage to an American man who converted to Islam.⁷

Upon blowing my cover as a jewelry-crazed tourist and explaining that I was really interested in studying Tibetan Muslim women, Sophia remarked, "I am a simple woman. If you really want to do a scientific story with good information, you should study hardworking Tibetan Muslims." On the contrary. All of the women I spoke to were in the shop from morning until evening, oftentimes with very meager business per day. Hence, economics plays a large factor in the role of Tibetan Muslim women in Kathmandu. As an example, Razia Chishti (who very kindly invited me to her home to eat The Best Momos in the World - halal meat, of course) talked about the prevalence of Tibetan Muslim women behind the counters of jewelry shops. Apparently the times have changed; i.e., women never worked outside of the home until the last few years, perhaps due to the declining shopping industry in Thamel. "Now all the injiis just want to go trekking and only stay in Kathmandu for a day, whereas in the past they would stay for one week, maybe two..." remarks Tahira's brother, Enayat. In order to support two young children in school in Darjeeling, Razia and her husband Aziz both must work, keeping the shops open until past nightfall. Old turquoise, with the Chinese restriction on export of antiques, has gone up from 35 Nepali rupees a gram to 65 rupees a gram in the past year and is still rising. The women sincerely push me to get a good piece of turquoise before I leave for the U.S., for next year they have to purchase it for perhaps over a hundred rupees a gram.

In Debra Zickafouse's 1987 account of the Tibetan Muslim community in Srinagar, she mentions that "it is possible that in 10 years' time, after the community is more settled, Western influence will appear more emphatically

⁷ Salima kindly lent me her wedding video, which included a traditional Islamic ceremony one day, and a Tibetan reception the next, where a group of women in fancy-printed chubas were getting down to Billy Idol's *White Wedding*.



Sophia at Sophia Gift House, Chhetrapati



The Takos minus Tahira: starting 2nd from left; Enayat Tako, Karimullah Bhatt, Sakila and Abdul R. (a.k.a Chöden) Tako

*"Do not postpone it (religion) till tomorrow or the day after tomorrow;
If you delay your practice, the caller (viz death) will come any day;
and then you will come to regret."*⁹

Religion

I walk into Nilofur Jami's jewelry shop and this time, her brother greets me; "Oh, you are studying Tibetan Muslims? Have you heard the saying, 'Kathmandu = Kha-che Mindu?' It means that if you are Muslim, don't come to Kathmandu since there are so few of us." All Tibetan Muslims hail from the Sunni tradition. Unlike living in Tibet, the women are not allowed to attend the mosque in Nepal and thus perform Namaz (praying five times a day - one of the pillars of Islam) at home. In Kathmandu itself, the men attend the Nepali Jami Masjid.¹⁰

Since Tibetan Muslim women must pray at home, I asked about how they performed Namaz and was answered with a number of different opinions - most being that they usually only prayed twice a day or "when I feel like it." Razia looks at me with an amused gleam in her eyes and says "you can take purdah or wear a long white beard and white cap and pray five times a day but if you are doing this and still hating every people then what is the use? You are only doing this for other people, not for God. If you only pray sometimes but are still working very hard and have a clean heart, then God will know." How poignant. Once again, my stereotypes that murmur

⁹ Kha-che Phalu, pg. 3

¹⁰ Joanna Claire (a Fulbright scholar studying Muslims in Kathmandu) and Sophia both explained to me that the Tibetan Muslims were more strict in the sense that they do not practice any Sufic forms of Islam and thus do not attend the Kashmiri mosque in Kathmandu where "incense and picnics are allowed at the cemetery..."

...the girls receiving education may begin to rebel against feminist arguments, which may arise. However, for now, the women are more concerned with school, marriage, and family."⁸ It is now exactly "10 years' time" and Zickafouse's claim is more or less correct. At least the statement reflects the state of the community in Kathmandu. Nowadays, in the 1990s, it consists of a number of families who have left Kashmir because of the political problems affecting the region shortly after Zickafouse's study.

A different perspective comes from Habibullah who claims that in Lhasa, women are beginning to work because of the influence of the Chinese who instigate the policy that both men and women should be equally included in the workforce. Likewise, much was mentioned about women in Tibet nowadays under Chinese control. For example, Salima mentions that "women are stronger in Tibet because they have to face an aggressive society - they will ask men out on dates and mock them loudly." Likewise, Tahira talks about Lhasa gradually becoming a bad influence on Tibetan Muslims with the lure of discos and alcohol.



Habibullah Batt and Abdul, translator

⁸ Zickafouse, Debra. The Tibetan Muslim Community in Srinagar. ISI, Spring 1988

"Do not postpone it (religion) till tomorrow or the day after tomorrow;

If you delay your practice, the caller (viz death) will come any day;

*and then you will come to regret."*⁹

Religion

I walk into Nilofur Jami's jewelry shop and this time, her brother greets me; "Oh, you are studying Tibetan Muslims? Have you heard the saying, 'Kathmandu = Kha-che Mindu?' It means that if you are Muslim, don't come to Kathmandu since there are so few of us." All Tibetan Muslims hail from the Sunni tradition. Unlike living in Tibet, the women are not allowed to attend the mosque in Nepal and thus perform Namaz (praying five times a day - one of the pillars of Islam) at home. In Kathmandu itself, the men attend the Nepali Jami Masjid.¹⁰

Since Tibetan Muslim women must pray at home, I asked about how they performed Namaz and was answered with a number of different opinions - most being that they usually only prayed twice a day or "when I feel like it." Razia looks at me with an amused gleam in her eyes and says "you can take purdah or wear a long white beard and white cap and pray five times a day but if you are doing this and still hating every people then what is the use? You are only doing this for other people, not for God. If you only pray sometimes but are still working very hard and have a clean heart, then God will know." How poignant. Once again, my stereotypes that murmur

⁹ Kha-che Phalu, pg. 3

¹⁰ Joanna Claire (a Fulbright scholar studying Muslims in Kathmandu) and Sophia both explained to me that the Tibetan Muslims were more strict in the sense that they do not practice any Sufic forms of Islam and thus do not attend the Kashmiri mosque in Kathmandu where "incense and picnics are allowed at the cemetery..."



Nepali Jami Masjid, Kathmandu. Where the Tibetan Muslim (men) attend



In Dharamsala, Masood Butt and his mother, Fatima (who was visiting from Kashmir at the time)

"All Muslims are Strict" were shot. It is uncannily similar to how my misconception of "All Monks Are Pious Buddhists" disintegrated when I saw a monk in Bouddha gamble and purchase a revealing poster of an Indian filmstar.

A number of scholars have been interested in the phenomenon of the Tibetan Buddhist/Muslim dialogue. On one hand, Beatrice Miller mentions that "fortunately or unfortunately, Buddhism has no equivalent easily identifiable kernel to match monotheism."¹¹ On the other hand, Alex Berzin picks out some very significant similarities such as the understanding of Allah and Buddha as transcending humanness, and both deities having no beginning and no end. In *Caravane Tibétaine*, Radhu writes that "though our spiritual center was Mecca, our home was always Tibet." Radhu's father always stuck close with the Batir (esoteric) aspect of Islam as opposed to the Zahir (exoteric); "the natural [Batir] piety of my grandfather showed he had a spiritual quality that allowed by intuition to feel that Buddhism was not a vulgar (i.e., kafir) form as the narrow-minded Muslims of Zakir thought."¹² Though outwardly different, Radhu sees similarities between the two religions (Buddhism and Islam) via aspects such as 1) generosity 2) patience and 3) detachment.

Mimi (a.k.a. Khadiza) has recently converted (via marriage) from a Tibetan Buddhist to a Muslim. Though it was a love marriage rather than an arranged one, she claims it was rather difficult for her parents to accept her marrying a Muslim at first, and indeed, "it was difficult at first for me to change but after a year it is OK." When asked about why it was difficult, Mimi answered that in Tibetan Buddhism, "it is easy to deal with problems. If one has a problem, you go to a lama, pay him a bit of money for a puja, and then you're fine. In Islam, everything must be done by yourself, like praying."

¹¹ Miller, Beatrice.

¹² Radhu, Abdul Wahid. *Caravane Tibétaine*. Paris:1981.

Similarly, Nilofur speaks about the differences between Hinduism and Islam: "Hinduism is so confusing. My friend worships one god one day, then another day she puts tika on and worships another god - so many, I don't understand. Islam, Christianity and Judaism come from the sky - Buddhism and Hinduism? I don't know where they come from but they are the same mythology... like Indian films or soap operas."

Almost any Tibetan Muslim will be proud to mention that there has been no historical reference to battles between Muslims and Buddhists in Tibet, and that the relationship has always been harmonious. Apart from recent antagonisms that will be mentioned later, it is certainly an attribute of relating that the rest of the world can learn from. Almost every Tibetan Muslim has a close Buddhist relative; for example, Tahira Tako mentions that during Losar, her Buddhist relatives (including monks) will invite her family to their home and order halal meat especially for the occasion.

On April 7, 1997, Kathmandu's International Airport was swarmed with well-wishers wishing well those Kathmandu Muslims going on the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). At this time, members of the Tibetan Muslim community were munching on momos on the terrace of the airport, and giving katags to the 4 Tibetan Muslims going on the journey. As I spoke to Nilofur, Razia and Tahira about the pillar of Hajj, all expressed a hint of amusement at the question "When will you go on the Hajj?" "I will go when I am ready" says Nilofur. They mentioned it would be an entirely different world, a hassle to prepare now, because it would involve obtaining the full chador and "having to be very strict."



Mimi (a.k.a. Khadiza)

Habibullah Batt at the Kha-che mosque in Lhasa (photo courtesy of Corneille Jest)



*"If the king sleeps till late,
he will not know till
society bleeds in conflict."*¹³

Conflict

Although mention of a harmonious history pervades the initial outlook of Muslim-Buddhist relationships, all is not fine and dandy on the political front. Firstly, the history around the time of the Cultural Revolution has caused a bit of tension, and secondly, Muslim stereotypes magnified by the West provide a hindrance to the "perfect religious harmony" everyone seems to speak of. The granting of Indian citizenship in 1960 has caused some hassle within the past few years of Tibetan Muslims in exile. To exemplify, Razia was sitting in her jewelry shop one day when a monk came in to browse for some amber. Suddenly he began attacking Tibetan Muslims for thinking they are so great because most of them didn't have to escape like the rest of us; with the Indian citizenship they didn't want to be Tibetan." Razia is quick to mention that if the monk was in the same position of having to survive by any desperate means, he would have applied for a foreign citizenship as well.

Many Tibetan Muslims claim that their identity is not clarified. On one hand, they are definitely not considered Kashmiri Muslims by Kashmiris, yet simultaneously they often do not believe they are fully Tibetan either. The problem of identity for Tibetan Muslims constantly reminds them of their mixed ancestry. Article 370 of the Indian constitution mentions that only true natives of the State of Jammu/Kashmir are allowed to seek jobs or own land.

¹³ Lha-che Phalu, pg. 11

At the time of writing, the Kashmir/Pakistan border remains a political dispute, and thus, Tibetans are obviously not first on the list of aid.

Tahira mentions that "sometimes we are treated like second-class citizens." Since all Tibetan Muslims are given Muslim names (I believe I spoke to over twenty Fatimas, Salimas and Abduls), she mentions this in context of a story where two Tibetan Muslim women went from Lhasa to Kathmandu (wearing chubas) to receive medical treatment. Nevertheless, they were not granted the special Tibetan refugee medical rate because they had Muslim names and the people at the health counter said they weren't able to prove their "Tibetan-ness." A similar story includes a friend who attempted to continue education in Dalhousie but was requested to change his name to Tenzin, and an uncle who in the early stages of working in the government-in-exile in Dharamsala in the 1960s, had to be referred to as Chöden instead of Abdul in order to "make sure Western organizations would give aid." So far, almost no Tibetan Muslims have been given foreign sponsorships or scholarships to study abroad, and the problem of their lack of recognition seems to be escalating in the exile communities. As Jeffrey Graham states; "The Tibetan Muslims have tried to reach the rich Middle Islamic countries but have met with little or no success. In addition, no money is coming from the Dharamsala administration or the Dalai Lama, though they did once take out a small loan. Their plight has been especially difficult because they have been unable to reach aid organizations such as Save the Children, etc."¹⁴

The fact that few people are aware that Tibetan Muslims exist has only been recently brought to the attention of the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala. I spoke to at least three people (Karimullah, Yusuf and Hidaidullah) who had attended the First Conference on Tibetan Muslims in

¹⁴ Graham, Jeffery. The Many-Centered Wheel On a Stretch of the Straight Path of Islam in Tibet) Tradition, Modernity, and the Tibetan Muslims. ISP Spring 1994



བོད་རྒྱལ་ཁབ་ཀྱི་འབྲེན་པོ་

AFRICA & MIDDLE EAST OFFICE
(Department of Information & International Relations)
Central Tibetan Administration

July 26, 1995

Dear

INVITATION TO FIRST CONFERENCE OF TIBETAN MUSLIMS,
NOVEMBER 13 - 18, 1995, DHARAMSALA

Tibetan Muslims have had a special place in the Tibetan history, especially since the time of His Holiness the Fifth Dalai Lama. It is well-known that the succeeding Dalai Lamas greatly patronised them. When the Chinese occupied Tibet and His Holiness the Dalai Lama and many Tibetans had to leave Tibet in 1959 and the Exiled Government was being established, many young and educated Tibetan muslims contributed their services.

However, the present situation of Tibetan muslim community, the education of children and the future prospects of the community cause great concern. To address these issues the First Conference of Tibetan Muslims is being convened from November 13 to 18, 1995 at Dharamsala.

It is expected that over 35 Tibetan muslims - young and old, experienced and educated, those who served in the community and those who have potential to serve in the future - from Jammu & Kashmir, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Nepal and other places will participate in the Conference.

You are therefore cordially invited to attend the Conference. We shall be grateful if you could respond positively to this invitation not later than August 31, 1995.

With best wishes.

Yours Sincerely,

Tashi Phuntsok
Representative (DIIR)



འཕགས་ལྗོངས་དང་བོད་ཡུལ་གྲུབ་འབྲེལ་པོ་

AFRICA & MIDDLE EAST OFFICE
(Department of Information & International Relations)
Central Tibetan Administration

**FIRST CONFERENCE OF TIBETAN MUSLIMS,
NOVEMBER 13-18, 1995, DHARAMSALA**

I. AGENDA:

1. The status and condition of Tibetan Muslims before 1959
2. The present situation of Tibetan muslims
3. Unique cultural and religious traditions of Tibetan muslims
4. Future Prospects of Tibetan muslims community
5. Action Plans or recommendations etc, if any.

II. VENUE & TIME

DHIR Hall, November 13-18, 1995, Dharamsala

III. PARTICIPANTS

1. Jammu & Kashmir	15
2. Darjeeling	5
3. Kalimpong	5
4. Nepal	5
5. Others	5
TOTAL	35

IV. NOTES:

1. The Conference primarily aims at bringing together Tibetan muslims to discuss freely and informally affairs of the Tibetan muslim community.
2. Since this is the first ever meeting of the Tibetan muslims it is hoped that it will receive serious and positive cooperation and the number of participants from each place is not less than what is indicated in Part III.
3. An audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama will be arranged for the participants of the meeting.
4. Both ways travelling expenses, including flight costs of those from Nepal, will be reimbursed on reaching Dharamsala.
5. Free boarding and lodging in Dharamsala for the participants will be arranged.
6. The participants to the Conference should reach Dharamsala not later than November 12 afternoon with their invitation letters.
7. All correspondences on the conference should be sent to this office.



Hidaidullah Jami



Delegation of Tibetan Muslims from Kashmir. 3rd from left: Yusuf Naik, 3rd from right: Hidaidullah Jami, - note the traditional Tibetan Muslim garb on the far left.

"I have put the nation

in the middle of a well; it has the beauty of a

peacock

*and the sweet voice of a garuda."*¹⁵

Now

One of the more interesting (and possibly unfortunate) developments in the recent history of Tibetan Muslims in Tibet is the influx of large numbers of Chinese Hui Muslims into Lhasa and other parts of Tibet. As possibly an excuse to cause tension within the Tibetan community, and since Islam provides less of a threat to China than Buddhism, mosques are being built at sand castle speeds right next to monasteries. As one imagines the sounds of puas drowning out the muezzin's call and vice versa, it is hardly surprising that a few quarrels broke out in 1987 between monks and worshippers at a neighboring mosque.

According to Alex Berzin, a scholar on the Buddhist/Muslim dialogue, most of the present problems facing the Tibetan Muslims in Lhasa are primarily economic. The Hui are supposedly very intrepid merchants, and as an example, a rather disdainful Tahira remarks that "the Hui are very money-minded. When Tibetan Muslims go on the Hajj, they [the Hui] will ask the Tibetans to carry their souvenir Saudi gold for them inside the pages of their Koran. That is very bad." According to a Chinese English-language newspaper, before the 1950's "all Moslems were generally kept at the bottom of the social ladder, since lamaism was integrated with the local Tibetan government...Now more than 100 Moslems serve as officials of the regional

¹⁵ Kha-che Phalu, pg. 37

government.¹⁶ The question is; who are these government officials? Are they Hui or Tibetan? It is rather doubtful that they could be Tibetan, as Tibetan Muslim imams are now almost all replaced by various Chinese-selected imams. Hmmm... something about this sounds relatively familiar to the post-1959 selection of tulkus...

The Hui are not the only ones who have been criticized as being ultimately "money-minded." When discussing the identity and poverty problems of the Kashmiri Tibetans with Nilofur, she remarks with a grin that there are a number of reasons why U.S. aid will not bolster support for Tibetan Muslims. "a) Because they don't know we exist in the first place" and b) Even though we are Muslim, America won't help because we don't have oil." Well put. Perhaps the situation is not singularly religious and/or politically-oriented. The Tibetan Muslims have often been compared to Native Americans - as non-natives move onto reservations in order to support the tourist industry by selling turquoise cowboy belt buckles, the original community has sunk deeper into monetary plight.

¹⁶ Mingzen, Sun.

¹⁶ Mingzen, Sun. "Moslems on the 'roof of the world'" Ta Kung Pao, Thurs., June 9, 1983

*"If you want to eat apricots later,
you must plant an apricot tree now;
you must plant roots for the benefit of all."*¹⁷

Contributions

Tibetan Muslims are definitely not exempt from typical aspects of Tibetan culture; in fact, there is "no difference except religion" as I was told time and again by the people I spoke to. It is easy to do a double-take upon seeing a Tibetan-looking woman in a chuba, apron and head scarf, or a man in an unusually long chuba (called tsecham: མེ་ཤམ་) and a white cap. Likewise, Tibetan Muslim ceremonies such as weddings will incorporate a traditional Islamic ceremony (including the contract of marriage and the dowry) with other Tibetan traditions like drowning the groom and bride in katags.¹⁸ Salima states that in Tibetan Muslim societies, the dowry is much less important than in other Muslim countries; "it is only for security, in case of divorce - and also, Tibetan Muslims are lucky because they don't have to give over money to their husband the instant they receive some." Likewise, polygamy is very rarely practiced in Tibetan Muslim societies - both Sophia and Nilofur laughed when I brought up the subject; "who needs more than one wife? That's absurd! More than one wife is fine if they get along equally, but if they are not treated equally, then there are many problems."

Most of the aspects shared by both Tibetan Muslims and Buddhists alike pertain to food. On April 17th, Eid al-Zohar (a Muslim feast commemorating the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham) was widely celebrated in

¹⁷ Kha-che Phalu, pg. 7

¹⁸ Observation minus the "participant" part thanks to Salima's wedding video, Oct. 27th-28th, 1990

the community; after eating a sweet dish made of noodles in milk called sauri, the men in Kathmandu would go to the mosque and come home to a Tibetan meal of thukpa and butter tea, for example. No alcohol can be consumed according to the Shari' at so chang is out of the question, yet halal momos and other Tibetan dishes are by no means exempt from Tibetan Muslim households.

Perhaps one of the most well-known contributions of Tibetan Muslims is the collection of proverbs under the title Kha-che Phalu's Advice on the Art of Living - Kha-che Phalu's Namthar. Possibly a corruption of the Muslim name Faizullah, Khache Phalu's simple, yet poignant sayings are still commonly used by Tibetans around the country, though few people are aware of its Islamic origin. Based on three Persian works of literature: Gulestan, Bostan, and Pantanana, references to Islam are quite vivid. For example:

"I prostrate before the Chief of all chiefs!

In Tibetan He is "the most Precious One"

And in our language 'Godhar!'"¹⁹

Upon mentioning this rather famous text to Razia, she lights up and pulls out of a glass jewelry display a rat-chomped scroll, "This is an original Kha-che Phalu," she says. My husband's (Azizullah Baba) great-grandfather in Shigatse had it presented to him by some monks who said 'you are a Tibetan Muslim. This is your wealth, not ours.'" Passed through generations, the scroll (original or not) remains a significant contribution not only to the Tibetan Muslim community, but to the Tibetan society as a whole since sometimes oral proverbs often reflect the mindset of a culture better than literature. Sakila Tako is a direct descendant of Kha-che Phalu and her

¹⁹ Kha-che Phalu, pg. 2 In Islam, "Godhar" is another name for Allah.



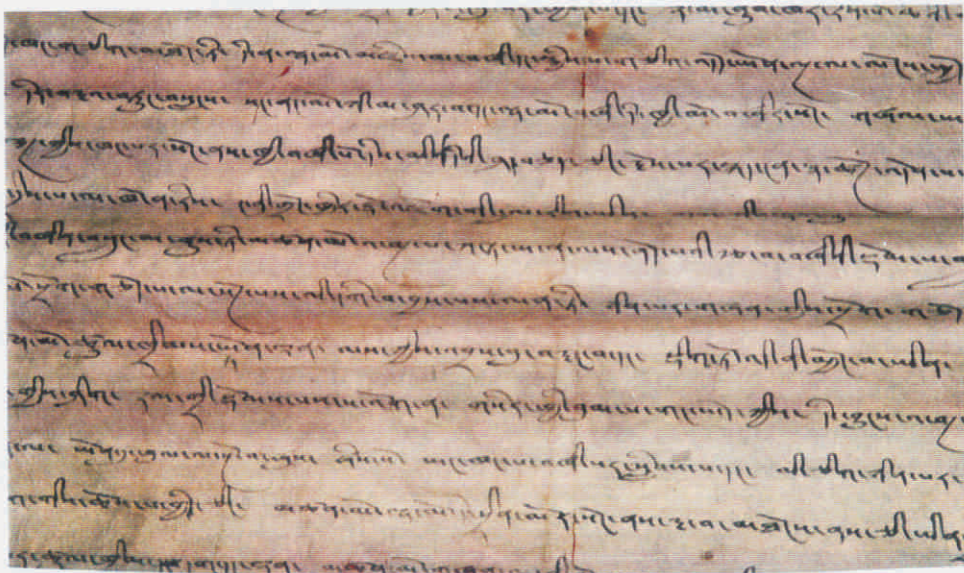
Razia and Aziz's holey scroll copy of Kha-che Phalu's Advice



Detail of the beginning (cut-off?) of Kha-che Phalu's Advice

...found in Tashi Tsering's study on the manuscript.²⁰ Apart from these two copies, there is little record of copies existing in any form except for block printed manuscripts discovered much after the 18th century.

Karimullah Bhatt was particularly versed on the various contributions Tibetan Muslims gave to the Tibetan community; for example, starting the first mint in Tibet by stamping silver coins, owning the two film cinemas in Lhasa, and providing popular vocal music in the late 1800' called Nagma (ཀླམ་?) in Tibetan (stemming from the Farsi word Naghma). He recalls that it was "the best singing, but suddenly in the 50's it stopped." One of the other major contributions of Tibetan Muslims exists in the form of butchering. To clarify, since the Buddhists were not allowed to kill animals themselves, Tibetan Muslims were hired to kill the meat in the halal fashion, thus preventing a slow death. Nilofur has earned the surname "Jami" because of this very occupation. Apparently "Jami" was the name given to any Muslim who happened to do service for His Holiness, and at the time of the 13th Dalai Lama, Nilofur's grandfather was the butcher for the residents of the Potala.



More detail of Kha-che Phalu's Advice

²⁰Tsering, Tashi. "The Advice of the Tibetan Muslim 'Phalu': A Preliminary Discussion of a Popular Buddhist/Islamic Literary Treatise" *Tibetan Review*, Vol. XXIII, Nos. 2 and 3, Feb. and Mar. 1955: New Delhi.

*"If you polish a stone,
it becomes a precious stone.
If you polish a metal,
it becomes a mirror.
Have a well-rounded education, my son."*²¹

Education

Though there are a number of Madrasas (Koranic schools that teach Urdu, Arabic, and Tibetan) scattered throughout Tibetan settlements, one of the most surprising findings is that most Tibetan Muslim women like Nilofur, Salima, Mimi and Razia attended Catholic convents (such as St. Joseph's in Kalimpong) for their early education. Nilofur remembers the convent she attended in Srinigar: "It was very, very strict. The nuns would not allow us to speak to boys, wear modern dress, and we had to go to church every week." I was a bit incredulous as to how this was achieved and asked about Islam's compatibility with Christianity, to which Nilofur replied; "no, it wasn't very strange because both Christianity and Islam believe in one God so it is not so difficult to adjust." Kerblaam! I was once again struck in the head by The Big Brick of Western-Influenced Stereotypes. Of course not all Muslims are completely incompatible with Christians. Perhaps I was subtly fed U.S. oil-related, economic terrorist propoganda as I grew up in the 1980's...

Nevertheless, growing up as a child with a history of mixed ancestry, and being exposed to an educational background that revealed more than one religion and nationality, Razia tells me once again that it doesn't matter where one hails from, "it is the heart that counts." She remembers her childhood, visiting friends' houses and decorating Christmas trees or wearing tika on

²¹ Kha-che Phalu, pg. 29

*"This world is like a mirror
into which we all look at each other
Human existence is like an echo;
we keep answering each other."* ²²

Conclusion

"As a merchant, Khache Phalu was strategically situated in Tibetan society. As a naturalized Tibetan, he was a participant, but as a Muslim, he was an observer. And above all, as a merchant, he came to observe all sections of Tibetan society...And indeed the fact that a Muslim's work is claimed by Tibetan Buddhists as theirs is indicative of the success with which Khache Phalu is able to depict the Tibetan mind in its essential mood."²³

This statement seems to resound with a familiarity as I think back upon the conversations I've had with various Tibetan Muslims, especially those "merchants" who sell jewelry in the streets of Thamel. A background of mixed heritage sheds a bit of light as well as a "participant-observer"²⁴ look on the Tibetan community. Nevertheless, if my questions about identity are any clue as to what may be the most significant thoughts underlying the community, it goes without saying that Tibetan Muslims first and foremost consider themselves Tibetan. Even though recognition of this minority may be more important to some individuals in relation to others, most hopefully wider interest will be sparked with events such as continued Tibetan-Muslim Conferences. Thus, in the future, perhaps the word "Tibet" will not simply equal "Buddhism."

Insha'llah.

²² *Ibd*, pg. 21

²³ *Ibd*, Dawa Norbu's introduction pg. xiii

²⁴ Ah, that mane anthropous gaaal jargon

Methodology

Or How To Avoid Persistent Tiger Balm Sellers

After the above-mentioned detective work in jewelry shops and dodging brilliant but skeptical researchers who doubted the possibility of my meeting any Tibetan Muslim women at all, I figured it would be relatively simple to plump out a research project focusing specifically on Tibetan Muslim women in Kathmandu. On the contrary. Not all Tibetan Muslim women think the same way. Granted, I tried to unfold themes like Thoughts on Religion and (obviously) Women's Perspectives, but these perspectives almost always depended on the context they were presented in. By speaking to women in Dharamsala, Kathmandu and Lhasa who have grown up in places as varied as Kalimpong, Paris and Tibet in 1959, I was certainly dealing with an American hamburger.* Moreover, there were age gaps as wide as 30 year, which factored into the complications.

Similarly, if women's perspectives differ, so do men's. Yet a woman's perspective does not exist without the existence of a man's perspective and vice versa. Although all of the men I contacted were though sisters or cousins, it is imperative to gather a basic background on Tibetan Muslim society today through various community members. Most interviews (if they can even be labeled that) took place over lunches or jewelry counters displaying reliquaries and unpolished malachite. Translators were only needed for the three elder people I spoke to: Fatima, Karimullah, and Habibullah, as everyone else spoke excellent English (with "sweet sound" as most Tibetan Muslims are known to do).**

* Reference to a statement Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche made when an American student's first question was "how do I get into Tantrism?" He replied, "Are you American? Because that is so typical. In America you have big cars, big houses, big big hamburgers. Such big hamburgers for such tiny mouths..."

** Even His Holiness has praised the Tibetan Muslims for their tendency to use honorifics and Urdu loan words in the Lhasa dialect.

One unfortunate aspect of studying Tibetan Muslims is brought up by both Masood Butt and José Caberzón.[†] There is a general lack of information written by Tibetan Muslims themselves, and even less written in the Tibetan language. One may notice that unlike most information conducted on the subject, I have tended to shy away from a strictly historical view. Though a written history will certainly benefit Tibetan Muslims concerned about their origin, my focus tends to be one of People Now. Most of the bibliographical information gathered is recent and unpublished (ISPs, Tibet Journal), and though the oral-garnered information may be much less accurate than encyclopedias, I believe chatting with people about their thoughts on identity holds a better look into the society in modern times.

Some Statistics (In Case You Were Wondering...)

Approximate (as of 1995) Number of Tibetan Muslim Families in

Exile:

Kashmir: 210

Nepal: 70

Kalimpong/Darjeeling: 30

Middle East: 12

Total Individuals: 2000

[†] Caberzón, endnote 3: "...a dearth of material on Islam in the Tibetan language..."

The True ISPers: Helpful People and Contacts for Further Study

DHARAMSALA:

Masood and Fatima Butt: c/o India Desk, DIIR, Central Tibetan
Administration 176215 Fax: 22457

Yusuf Naik: c/o Dept. of Health, Central Tibetan Administration,
176215

Tel: 22718 Fax: 24957

KATHMANDU:

Razia and Aziz: Aziz Gift House, 15/369 Chhetrapati Kathmandu - 3

P.P. 216074 Fax: 221344

Nilofur Jami: Tibet Enterprises, Near Gorkha Guest House,
Chhetrapati.

Phone/Fax: 412679

Tahira and Enayat Tako: Shangri - La Gift House, 12/724 Thahity Tole

P.O. Box 1837, Tel: 224371 Fax: 223194

Abdul and Sakila Tako: c/o Sunshine Handloom Ind.. Maharaj Gunj

Tel: 419328

Sophia Banu: Sophia Gift House, shops 4 & 14, J.P. School South Face,,
Chhetrapati. Tel: 216946 Fax: 229459

Mimi (Khadiza): S.M. Jewellery,, Shop 2, opposite J.P. School,
Chhetrapati

Abdul Rehman Batt: Lhasa Gift House, Thamel Tel: 419208

Salima Banu Iezzi: Banu's Total Fitness Ltd., Kamal Pokhari
Tel: 418024 / 420830

Also in Kathmandu - quite a large thanks to Hubert Decler for translating Caravane Tibétaine during a time of great stress, Habibullah Batt (Sophia's great-uncle) who happened to be visiting Kathmandu from Lhasa during Eid-ul-Zohar. Karimullah Bhatt (Tahira and Enayat's father), Hidaidullah (Nilofur's cousin and former member of the Tibetan Muslim Youth Organization), and Joanna Claire, a Fulbright scholar studying Muslims in Kathmandu.

Possible Follow-ups (i.e.. Aspects I Didn't Have the Time to Explore)

Kha-che Phalu: where are there still existing copies and what are the varied explanations of the writer's identity?

Tibetan Buddhist/Islamic connections

Various Muslim trade routes in and out of Tibet

Linguistics: speech patterns of Tibetan Muslims and loan words from Urdu

Bibliographical References

- 1) Berzin, Alexander. Lectures on the Buddhist/Islamic Dialogue. Hotel Tibet Basement, Dharamsala, February 1997.
- 2) Butt, Masood. Muslims of Tibet: Past and Present (unpublished article)
- 3) Cabezón, José Ignacio. Islam in the Tibetan Cultural Sphere. (unpublished article)
- 4) Destider, Mollica. Religious Minorities in Nepal. Nirala Publications: New Delhi, 1995
- 5) Gaborieau, Marc. "Powers and Authority of Sufis among the Kashmiri Muslims of Tibet" Tibet Journal. Vol. XX, no. 3, 1995
- 6) Graham, Jeffery D. The Many-Centered Wheel (On a Stretch of the Straight Path of Islam in Tibet) - Tradition, Modernity and the Tibetan Muslims. ISP, Spring 1994
- 7) Hibyan, Jill. The Crash and its Sale. ISP, Fall 1993
- 8) Jest, Corneille. "Kha-che and Gya Kha-che Muslim Communities in Lhasa." Tibet Journal. Vol. XX, no. 3, 1995
- 9) Jest, Corneille. Tales of the Turquoise - A Pilgrimage in Dolpo. Mandala - Book Point, Kathmandu: 1985

10) Kache Phalu's Advice on the Art of Living (Kha-che Pha-lu Namthar)
trans. Dawa Norbu, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives: Dharamsala,
1987

11) The Koran with parallel Arabic text (trans. N.J. Dawood). Penguin,
London: 1994. Vol. XX, nos. 2&3, Feb. & Mar. 1995

12) Miller, Beatrice Diamond. "Is there Tibetan Culture(s) without
Buddhism?" in Anthropology of Tibet and the Himalaya (ed. Ramble,
Charles) University of Zurich, Zurich: 1993

13) Mingzhen, Sun. "Moslems on the 'roof of the world'" Ta Kung Pao,
Thursday, June 9, 1983

14) Moevus, Claude. "The Chinese Hui Muslim Trade in Tibetan Areas."
Tibet Journal, Vol. XX, no. 3, 1995.

15) Munkress, Susan. Newar Traders in Tibet. A Case of Caste
Complexity. ISP, Fall 1988

16) Naik, Yusuf. "Memories of My Father, Abdul Ghani, in Tibet." Tibet
Journal, Vol. XX, no. 3, 1995

17) Radhu, Abdul Wahid. Caravane Tibétaine. Paris, 1981

18) Sheikh, Abdul Gani. "Tibetan Muslims," Tibet Journal, vol. XVI, no. 4,
1991

- ✓ 19) Siddiqui, AsadUllah. "Muslims of Tibet," Tibet Journal, vol.XVI, no. 4, 1991
- ✓ 20) Tsering, Tashi. "The Advice of the Tibetan Muslim 'Phalu:' A Preliminary Discussion of a Popular Buddhist/Islamic Literary Treatise." Tibetan Review, Vol. XXIII, nos. 2&3, Feb. & Mar. 1988
- ✓ 21) Zickafouse, Debra. The Tibetan Muslim Community in Srinigar. ISP, Spring 1988