

## RESEARCH NOTE

### ANIKO: IMAGE WEAVER

Thomas L. Guta

It has been remarked that in Nepal as in India there were no artists, only art. To this it may be added there were no arts without the iconic. That is, only art freed from the ego-grip of creator/creation was worthy of consecration and therefore veneration. However, on these selfless, inherently anonymous works of art from the sub-continent names sometimes occur. For example, on several Gupta sculptures the name of the Mathuran artist Dina is inscribed; but this is rare, more often we would find the name of a patron or dynasty. In these pages I hope to shed light on a single unexplored facet of Aniko's genius through literature and artefact and by doing so reflect on the role played by his fellow Newar artists.

#### The Literature

Had Aniko stayed in Nepal we would never have heard of him for there is no record in the land of his birth (1245) and all literary references originate in Mongolian or Chinese. Still, it must be said, more has been written about him than any other artist in his field, a field which spans a couple millenia and the entirety of Asia. The basic oft-quoted source is chapter 203 of the Yuan Annals (*Yuanshi*) and contains 460 Chinese characters of biographical data. His name and work is also mentioned in the Yuan Encyclopedia; although this large work is no longer extant, a portion of it relating to Aniko (the *Yuandai huasuji*) survived because it was widely used as a textbook on art materials. Aniko's funeral inscription was also found in Hasiang village of Yuan Ping district, west of Beijing. These three references have occupied scholars from S. Levi to the present.

P. Pelliot, the eminent Mongolian scholar and Yuan specialist, was intrigued by the name of Aniko. His research led him to the opinion that the cognomen was neither a Mongolian pseudonym nor proper Newari but Hindi (not Sanskrit) and a variant of Anango, one of the 84 *mahasiddhas*. Pelliot knew that there must be other references to Aniko but he was unable

to locate them. It was left to M. Ishida to follow up on Pelliot's unpublished lead and in a single find double the data available on Aniko. By chance, he came upon a stone-rubbed reference and published it with Japanese translation in 1941. This text (the Shindoshi) of more than 2200 characters led L. Petech to declare Ishida's gloss on the chief source of Aniko. Unfortunately, it seems this text was never reprinted, nor translated into a European language and so it remains largely inaccessible. It relates some personal experiences and activities of the artist not included in other sources which I would summarize here especially as they concern this discussion.

But first one similarity among all the accounts the mention of Aniko's royal Nepalese ancestry. This glaring improbability need not be accepted at face value nor rejected out of hand for it tells us more about social institutions than artistic traditions. It was not an uncommon defacto assignation to legitimize marriage to royalty, in this case a Mongol princess.

At the age of three when taken to a stupa something awakened within Aniko and his parents were shocked when he inquired as to who was the architect and how it had come to be made.

By the age of eight his knowledge of Sanskrit exceeded that of his teachers and he was able to recite from memory an entire econometric text after a single reading. In nearly no time he mastered the three aspects of image making: designing, moulding and casting. While still a teen he saw an advertisement for employment in Tibet. There were no other qualified applicants so he simply volunteered. A group of craftsmen with Aniko in the lead arrived at Sa.skya in 1261. It was here Aniko met another prodigy, Phags.pa, only ten years his senior. After two years with the work complete Aniko expected to return to his waiting wife and family in Nepal but during the consecration ceremony something unexpected happened: Aniko renounced the world and took the robes of a monk. From the upbeat Dhags.pa he received empowerments and became an exceptional student of the mantrayana with a gift for chanting.

Phags.pa, clearly taken up with his precocious disciple, insisted that Aniko accompany him to the Mongol court. The exploits of these two young men at the court of the Kublai Khan are by now legion. In the Newar Phags.pa had a candidate whose devotion to Dharma was total, whose artistry consummate, someone who could play a significant role in the eyes of the court who was neither family member nor Tibetan. On the other hand, Kublai Khan by this time a self-styled chakravartin, sought to internationalize his regime and counterbalance inordinately large number of Chinese in the bureaucracy. When the foundation stones to the new capital

were laid in 1267 subjects from all nationalities were summoned to take part in the work. Aniko was simply the right man in the right place at the right time.

Aniko became seriously ill and at the edge of death, still entertaining notion of a return to Nepal, he had a dream. In it four *dakinis* took care of him, fed him and then told him he could go. Aniko awoke cured of his malady and from that time onward never looked back. Thereafter his fortunes in the court further increased as the emperor made numerous offerings and, in the tenth year of the dynasty, he was given complete authority over all artists working in metal. Then at the behest of the empress, Aniko's Newar wife was called from Nepal. Upon arrival she was made multiple offerings of gold which she promptly refused. This was unheard of, still when the empress insisted Aniko's wife went on a hunger strike. Such was her integrity and determination. Kublai then ordered Aniko to return his robes and revert to lay status. Thereupon he was made Controller of the Court of imperial Manufacturers and other titles. At the installation Aniko's ten accomplishments at the court were enumerated.

The first six of this list include his mastery in gold, jade, terracotta and the like. The last four mention four specific textile artist embroidery and three types of weaving namely damask, brocade and tapèstry. It appears that Aniko learned as much as he taught for during his residence at the Yuan court. He became a master of silk and not in some far-flung backwater but at the epicenter of the culture during the pinnacle of its technical expertise. After all, it was the chief medium and material of China: paintings were brushed on it, tributes paid in it. Yet somehow Aniko, by going back to his roots, managed to breath a new life into these most ancient forms, a new direction to set Kublai Khan's recently acquired army of artisans marching.

### **The Artefact**

With his armies firmly in control across Asia, Kublai Khan could well afford to eschew the equestrian and patronize the more sedentary arts. At the fore of this eclectic movement were Tibetans: they were his ally, preceptor, mentor and even prime minister. To understand Aniko's favour and influence at the court in which he worked we will have to gain a perspective of the Tibetan connection in the context of the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

This dynasty corresponds to the later diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet. Certainly in terms of the art of this period Tibet acted as the conduit for the ancient traditions of India to enter the Central Asian slipstream. The earliest known *thangkas* (gauche on cotton) were painted at this time (late 11th, 12th and early 13th century) and were first published and explained by G. Tucci. He thought they were "Nepalese" in inspiration. H. Karmay referred

to these paintings as the "plate E group" but, following P. Pal's lead, suggested they were heavily influenced by Palla India. P. Pal published several more of this style and sought to name this the "Kadampa" style. Not to be outdone, J. Huntington labeled them of the "Shar mthun Bris" school and thought they had less to do with Nepal and more to do with India. Whatever their differences, on a good day all of these authorities would probably agree in varying degrees to an "Indian inspiration/Nepalese expression" theory, which is quite enough for our present purpose.

Two more *thangkas* in this style have been published in Bod.kyi.thang.ga (sic) in 1984 but remarkably they are not paintings at all but silk tapestries. This pair woven in identical size and technique early in the 13th century proves conclusively that from the earliest times Thang kas were woven as well as painted. The question is: where were these *thangkas* woven?

Before attempting an answer, allow me to describe more fully the second of these two tapestries for by doing so we will be better equipped to assess Aniko's future impact on the weaving arts. The central image is that of Chandramaharoshana alone in standard Newar pose bearing sword and garotte. The Buddhas of the five families are found in the upper register while Avalokiteshvara, Tara and Ushnishavijaya adorn the central portion of the lower. At either end of the lower register Mahakala and Sri Devi are found. Above them in overlay are two action dakinis. Flanking the central figure beneath the upper register are two lamas, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092-1158) and most probably Acarya Sonam Tsemo (1142-1182). The upper inscription contains mantra; as for the lower, it dedicates the merit and offers it to one Jetsun Dragpa Gyaltsen (1147-1216) whose relationship to the two aforementioned lamas was that of son and younger brother respectively. Therefore, this tapestry can be dated before 1216. About a century before Aniko's tenure had ended.

Just as with those *thangkas* of the "kadampa" style this tapestry shows clear parallels to the Pala Sena schools which were on the wane at that time in India. The proportions of the Buddhas, their expressions, the dip in the upper eye lid, the lilt at the corners of the mouth, their thrones and garments as well as the crowns on the deities and the stylized lotus border all point to India. Never the less the proportion of the central figure, the rendering of the face, his lotus as well as the surrounding floral background and flame mandorla are all indicative of Nepal. Here again these tapestries conform to a Newar expression of an Indian inspiration for a Tibetan patron; to this we might add the Chinese material(silk). But this doesn't answer our question -- or to paraphrase Aniko -- "Who was the weaver and how did it come to be woven?"

As to the origins of tapestry, specifically silk tapestries, it should be noted that it is the sole textile technique found in China that the Chinese themselves admit did not originate there. Zuang Chou, a 12th century scholar states categorically in his *Jilei Pian* that tapestry was woven in China only in the Northern Song (960-1127). Compared with the highly evolved forms of brocade weaving tapestry employs a plain weft weave on a relatively primitive loom; it is a wonder why the Chinese did not discover this technique earlier. But as the contemporary Song writer Hong Hao in his *Songmo Jiwen* mentions tapestry was introduced into China from the west by the Uighurs. A. von le Coq's finds in Turfan seem to indicate that by the 10th century the Uighurs had the technical ability to carry out large compositions. As to where they obtained this weave, both A. Stien's and P. Pelliot's researches make it clear that Sogdians, known weavers of woolen tapestry, inhabited Turfan and other Uighur centers in the late Tang. In other words, whilst the material travelled from east to west the technique moved from west to east.

The Uighurs, a Turkish tribe, lived on the western borders of China in the Tang- and early Song dynasties, when Tibet experienced the downfall of the Yarlung empire and the persecution of Buddhism, the Tanguts, ethnically and culturally akin to Tibet, became the dominant power in the Northeast. Tibetans fled there with their dharma and established temples and monasteries similar to the situation today in Kathmandu. In 1031 these Tangut peoples effectively drove many Uighurs and probably Sogdians as well from East Turkestan and Southern Mongolia into China proper. The Tanguts founded their empire while the Chinese discovered tapestry.

It was here, a thousand miles from where the "Kadampa" *thangkas* were being painted that an alternate related style was being created for the Lamaist market. Hundreds of *Thangkas* and other artifacts were recovered by P. Kozlov from a stupa in Khara Khoto at the turn of this century. The similarities between the Khara Khoto and the "Kadampa" groups have been noticed by all and here again in Khara Khoto a silk tapestry of the same style was found. Generally when silk tapestries are found their provenance is assumed to be China, as was the case with this tapestry. But P. Kychanov discovered in his researches a reference in Tangut texts, to studios weaving the tapestry technique in Hsi-hsia. So, in all probability they were Tangut weavers using a Uighur technique with Chinese materials for Tibetan patrons following a Newar pattern of Indian inspiration.

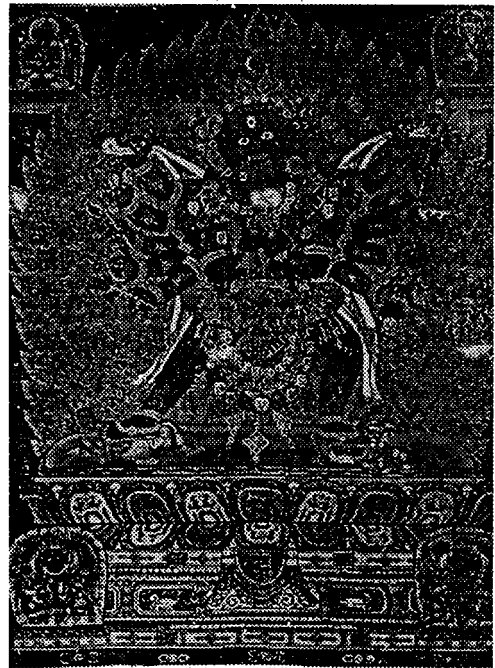
Having done the leg work, trailing as we have the various schools of art from India and Nepal through Central Tibet to Central Asia, at the same time unraveling the technique of tapestry as it wound its way through Sogdian, Uighur and Tangut hands while the material left China and

traversed the silk route, we cannot fail to notice all these paths converging in the kingdom of Hsi-hsia in the Sang. After a brief flowering of culture and art this kingdom, we will do well to remember, was wiped off the face of the earth by Ghengis Khan in 1227. Now perhaps we can look and see for ourselves the provenance of the last *Thangka* which I now submit.

### Two Silk Tapestries



*Pre-Aniko*



*Post-aniko*

This silk tapestry though woven in the same technique and flawless finesse as the previous examples is more square in dimension and format, more dynamic in terms of color. The central image is Chakrasamvara with yum Vajravarahi. He has twelve arms and four faces and treads on two prostrating gods. At the bottom corners are two four-armed Dharma protectors, black and red; at the base of the throne is the Ranjana script version of the seed syllable *hūm*; in the upper corners are Vajradhara Buddha and the black hat lama Karmapa. In terms of variety of tapestry techniques used, quality of dyes employed, execution of design and state of preservation this tapestry from the Yuan dynasty is without known comparison. The pattern of the figures down to the smallest detail was specially adapted to tapestry by someone aware of every aspect of the medium and not simply transferred from a painting. It is assigned to the Yuan because all its features

are Newar: the thickness of the limbs, the round faces and wide eyes, also the crowns, ornaments and implements as well as the flame mandorla, lotus and throne. This piece contrasts with its immediate ancestors in the Song in its sense of perspective (the lower figures set before the throne/the upper beyond the flames), volume instead of an outlined second dimension, and chiaroscuro besides the single flat color. All these qualities lend a dramatic and cosmopolitan vitality to the image. This is heightened by the empty deflowered field and simple vajra/triratna border which though not nearly Newar is neither mannered after the Yuan Chinese. As with the classical proportions and elements of design the color palette with its deep rich tones betray an intimacy with pure Newar prototypes. All of the above points not so much to the Yuan style as it developed in Aniko's workshops through his progeny but rather to the hand of the master himself.

It is as if all the centuries of hard-earned stylistic blends never happened, as if the miles of mimicked sketchbook figures and formulae were forgotten by the wayside, the patron's long suffered soliloquies were finally switched off and the image weaver left to his own devices. Naturally this *Thangka* bears no inscription. The lama at the top right corner is a good likeness of the first Karmapa, Dusum Kyempa as he appeared late in life (1110-1193). His successor, Karma Pakshi (1204-1283) spent six years in China during Aniko's tenure at the Yuan court.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen from literary evidence that Aniko was not only acquainted with but had attained mastery of the weaving arts traditionally associated with China. Like his brothers in the arts he was able to work in a number of styles and media. As a number of old Newar sketch books illustrate they had no difficulty imitating their Chinese or Indian colleagues. The fantasy that Indian artists were at work in Tibet is one that Tucci implied, Pal entertained and Huntington maintains to this day. There is not a shred of evidence either literary or artefactual to back this up. As a matter of fact, there is more evidence to suggest that Newars were at work in Magadha. The "Kadampa" style of Central Tibet as well as the related styles of Central Asia are not products of the Palla-Senna school but a Newar memory of it for the burden of proof, overwhelming and irrefutable, is that Newars were involved at every stage of Tibetan art from the earliest times to the present. And when these Newar adept returned from their foreign sojourns they had no problem reverting to their own native forms just as easily as to their own mother tongue. That is, with the exception of Aniko for he never returned.

### **Postscript**

Thomas L. Guta came to Nepal from the US in the late 1980s and decided to embark on a research project to compile a biographical work on the famous Nepali artist, Aniko, which very few Nepalese have ventured. During the preliminary survey he visited famous museums of USSR, China and Mongolia as well. After coming to the determination that the project could bear fruit, Tom as we lovingly called him registered at Tribhuvan University for his Ph.D. degree under my guidance. He began to delve in the Aniko project and also continued developing an in-house Ayurvedic clinic as part of making a moderate living Bouddha. In the autumn of 1992 he was coming from his home in the US with his Japanese wife and three young kids. He was carrying a computer to program the Ayurvedic medicines he had collected in Nepal and India. He, his family of five and the entire people he knew and loved did not even imagine what lay ahead of them on the fateful day of on July 31, 1992. His carrier, TG 311 Airbus crashed against the cliff of Ghopte Bhir. All the passengers and crew on board perished in an instant. His mother and sister recalled later that what was left of the family and their belongings at the wreckage was a part of the computer key board and a shirt of one of the kids. The Guta family's deep love for Nepal thus ended with their lives in the slopes of the hills but our love to them only deepened after the most saddening event. This article he had left at my disposal is therefore a flower he tended himself and I now present it in the loving memory of him and his family. Adieu Tom!!

**- Prem Khattry**