

IMAGINATION OR REALITY:  
THOUGHTS ON MYSTICISM AND EXPLORERS IN TIBET.\*

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*"Comme ceux qui partent en voyage pour voir de leur yeux  
une cité désirée, et qui pensent qu'ils peuvent goûter dans la  
réalité tout le plaisir du songe."*

(Proust)

The priest then, all in a frenzy, dances in a fight against the air, displaying a fury quite like a madman in a rage. With charms uttered at the top of his voice, he cuts the air right and left, up and down, with his fist clenched and finger pointed. If in spite of all his efforts the volleys of hail thicken and strike the fields beneath, the priest grows madder in his wrath, quickly snatches handfuls of the bullets... and throws them violently against the clouds as if to strike them. If all this avail nothing, he rends his garment to pieces, and throws the rags up in the air, so perfectly mad is he in his attempt to put a stop to the falling hailstones.<sup>1</sup>

If he fails, he is fined for negligence. Hardworking villagers of southern Tibet who have dutifully paid the annual Hail Prevention Tax expect results. And Tibetan sorcerers frequently achieve them.

Meanwhile across frozen mountain ranges and horrid wastes of incredulity my reader idles, delaying his exploration of Tibet. Demons far more frightful than the most crazed Lamaist inventions gesticulate and whisper powerful mantric curses, like "Superstition", and others I dare not divulge. But, as Ippolito Desideri, brilliant explorer of Tibet, warned in 1725, one must not believe that "a thing out of common must necessarily be false."<sup>2</sup> The explorer is after all one who embraces the unknown, chases after dreams, and delights in the unexpected.

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<sup>1</sup> Ekai Kawaguchi, *Three Years in Tibet*, (London, Theosophical Publishing Society, 1909), p. 275.

<sup>2</sup> John MacGregor, *Tibet, A Chronicle of Exploration*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 59

For explorers, the obvious and chief attraction of Tibet, to this very day, is that it is hard to get to and far away. Geographical and political barriers make it still one of the least known regions on this planet. In fact, at the moment Lhasa is farther away from the world and more secretly guarded than at any time since the 17th Century.

Tibet owes its seclusion to sheer altitude. The rugged plateau of Tibet, large as Western Europe, rarely dips lower than 12,000 feet, except at the edges where it crinkles into the world's highest mountains and deepest canyons. Inside Tibet nomads and yaks wander amongst vast bog-lands, icy mountain ranges, deserts of shifting sand, and mineral plains splattered with poisonous lakes. Truly Tibet, said Pere Huc, is a "dreadful country"<sup>3</sup>.

Even the bravest early Chinese explorers only passed through the fringes of already mythical land. Sung Yun, writing c. 518 A. D. expresses the awe of all those who followed him:

From this spot westward the road is one continuous ascent of the most precipitous character; for a thousand *li* there are overhanging crags, ten thousand fathoms high, towering up to the very heavens. . . . After entering the Tsung-ling mountains, step by step, we crept upwards for four days and then reached the highest part of the range. From this point as center, looking downwards, it seems just as though one was poised in mid air. Men say this is the middle point of heaven and earth. . . . To the south of this country are the great Snowy Mountains, which in the morning and evening vapours, rise up like gem spires.<sup>4</sup>

Other explorers, like Grueber in the 1660's, wrote of twisting Himalayan trails with toe-holds nine inches wide hung over sheer crevasses 1,500 feet deep.

The desolation of northern Tibet is outstripped only by the sea and the polar regions. Grenard and Dutreuil de Rhins travelled sixty days in the Chang Tang wilderness in 1894 without meeting a soul; Sven Hedin travelled an incredible eighty-nine days in 1908. In some places muskdeer and the delicate Tibetan wild horse (*kiang*) swiftly race over the horizon, but even birds never attempt the absolute boundary of the upper Chang Tang.

Tibet is a land where, due to the altitude, contrasts are fierce and the laws of nature seem deranged. The air is so thin that temperatures between sun and shade

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<sup>3</sup> Sven Hedin, *Trans-Himalaya, Discovery and Adventures in Tibet*, (London, Mac-Millan and Co. Ltd. 1910) Vol III, p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki, Buddhist Records of the West*, (London, Kegan Paul, French, Trubner & Co, 1906), p. lxxxix-xc.

sunburns and frostbite simultaneously. Rivers, swollen by snow melting in the day, ebb and flow like tides, or flow underground. The body is slightly lighter, the lungs gulp more air, the traveller's mind may find itself near a state of trance. Indeed, trance may lead to dizziness and severe altitude sickness.

The sky and earth seem reversed, for the sky turns deep dark and vibrant, while the earth glistens brightly yellow, red, and white. At night, the mountains glower in silhouette, while the moon refracts sheaves of beams through glittering frost mists.

The exceptional clarity of the air lends colours "all the naked intensity of a dream"<sup>5</sup>. The annals of exploration of Tibet are rich with unearthly visions of colour. Lama Anagarika Govinda's account of Pangong Lake (1936) is, according to other reports, by no means exaggerated:

before us stretched a lake like a sheet of molten lapis lazuli, merging into intense ultramarine in the distance and into radiant cobalt blue and opalescent veronese green towards the nearer shore, fringed with gleaming white beaches, while the mountains that framed this incredible colour display were of golden ochre, Indian red and burnt sienna, with purple shadows. Yes, this was the luminous landscape of my dream, rising out of the blue waters in brilliant sunshine under a deep, cloudless sky!<sup>6</sup>

This is because the lake is so saturated with magnesium as to be devoid of any organic life.

Tibet abounds in minerals. Ever since Herodotus wrote of a race of gold-digging ants north of the Himalayas, rumors of gold have lured explorers. For perhaps the chief impetus to explorers throughout history has not been the love of the unknown, but greed. Greed animated the Dzungar Mongols who sacked and pillaged Tibet in the 18th Century, and the English who dispatched pundits to survey the Rudok gold fields in the late 19th Century. And now state prospectors seeking for valuable deposits are the only explorers allowed onto the plateau.

But whatever an explorer seeks, he must seek it in the unknown. And in Tibet, where the contrasts at a pass can be as vivid as turning the leaf of a large picture book, where the landscape seems like one vast hallucination, like the lacustrine north shimmering with 10,000 shards of shattered mirror, where the colours everywhere blind with brilliance, the mind loses itself.

Passing through mountains and lakes, the explorer now meets a greater marvel—the Tibetans. For nothing stirs the soul like man himself. Somehow a few million

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<sup>5</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*, (London, Rider & Co, 1966), p. 64

<sup>6</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *ibid.*, p. 65

nomads in the bitter wilds created under Buddhist influence a magnificent civilization. Tibet is a triumph of the creative spirit of man. Huge castles crown the hills, the world's largest monasteries cluster in remote valleys. It is difficult to describe adequately the Tibetan architecture, which resembles in its severe purity, Mayan and Egyptian temples.

The traveller encounters a Hieronymus Bosch world, a cross between a comic book and a mystery play. Tibet is the very home of the bizarre. He passes human skeletons by the roadside from which the skulls and femurs have been removed to carve cups, drums, and trumpets. He may spend an afternoon hunting anchorites with dogs, as Alexandra David-Neel did in Sikkim about 1912. He meets enigmatic travellers disguised in masks to protect their faces against the sand; hermits immured in rock cells for ten, twenty, thirty, sixty years; trance runners flying over the plain; medieval processions of nobles resplendent in Chinese silks; nomads semi-naked in sub-zero weather; pilgrims making the arduous circuit of sacred Mt. Kailas by prostration, i. e. by literally measuring the ground with their bodies; women smeared for beauty's sake with butter, yak-dung, and catechu, wearing enormous headresses heavy with coral, turquoises, gold, and amber; outcasts cutting up corpses and feeding them to the birds, for in Tibet, as Turner remarked, "Men do not eat birds, but rather are eaten by them."<sup>7</sup>; monks on stilts bearing statues of butter forty-five feet high; a woman slapping one of her five husbands (polyandry is the rule); naked ascetics drying icy wet sheets against their bodies in contests of proficiency at *Tummo* or mystic body heat; monks acquiring merit at the river bank by immersing brass molds into the waters, imprinting the river with endless sacred images; temple reliquaries tens of feet high made of solid silver or gold completely encrusted with glittering precious stones; small children reigning as incarnates over great monasteries. . . .

Every traveller since the Chinese annalists of the T'ang Dynasty has commented on the filth of the Tibetans. One is reminded of Fukuzawa Yukichi, Japanese explorer in the 1860's of the hitherto forbidden continent of Europe, and his astonishment at the filthy habits of Englishmen of all classes. But in Tibet, grease and revolting uncleanliness were almost elevated to a virtue. The infamous city of Pari near Bhutan had accumulated so much refuse in its streets that by 1900 the street level had risen a full story—Pari was literally buried in its own rubbish. Strangely enough, grime seems to have served a purpose; it protected against the chill and the ultraviolet rays of the sun. W. Montgomery McGovern, a Balliol man who disguised himself as a peasant and travelled to Lhasa in 1923, even reports that filth became pleasantly habitual—at the end of his journey he found himself quite unwilling to take a bath.

Banditry was endemic. Perhaps this is why Atisha, in the 11th Century, gave the town near Mt. Kailas the name *Pretapuri*, "City of Hungry Demons". Certainly

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<sup>7</sup> Captain Samuel Turner, *An Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, (New Delhi, Mañjuśrī Publishing House, reprint 1971)

Tibet was a ways in Chinese eyes a land of fear. In 1765 A. D. citizens deserted the capital of Ch'ang-An at the mere threat of Tibetan invasion. The Goloks of wild north-eastern Tibet are still, it is said, not completely tamed.

Explorers have set out for Tibet for almost any reason: Christian proselytizing mineral prospecting, geological study, religious pilgrimage, conquest and glory. But the hallucinatory landscape, and human nightmare disturb the soul profoundly. Explorers everywhere in the world have felt face to face with the mystery of things. But Tibet almost forces the explorer to take another step into a further unknown of the spirit. The story of the last Guibaut-Liotard Expedition of 1940 is an especially haunting account. Guibaut and Liotard set out into Eastern Tibet in 1940 with the typically modern and progressive wish to "submit this country to the discipline of geography."<sup>8</sup> They passed through valleys scented by incense wafting from monasteries perched on peaks, visited spooky Buddhist chapels, were bedevilled by comic-opera brigands. Before long Liotard was killed at a mountain pass by Golok bandits, while Guibaut ended shivering in a desolate wood, agitatedly imagining evil spirits all about him.

For Tibet is pre-eminently the land of demons and spirits. "The people are necromancers," says Marco Polo, "and by their infernal art perform the most extraordinary and delusive enchantments that were ever seen or heard of."<sup>9</sup>

Almost no explorer has not sensed at some point the eerie atmosphere. Sven Hedin describes the ghostly god-room at Linga-gompa filled with innumerable statues sitting quietly in the dust and gloom undisturbed by the scurrying of sacred rats. Others describe the fantastic interior of the Jokhang, the "Holy of Holies" at Lhasa, walls teeming with gods, riding on wind animals, flying through the air, grimacing, gesturing, waving arms and legs carrying a myriad devices, from thunderbolts to skull-cups filled with blood, copulating with naked consorts equally frenzied, all while trampling over a teeming world of cruel and lustful creatures desperately racing round the painful circle of life. Terror and eroticism mingle in a bewitching kaleidoscope of dazzling colours. Who can resist what the horror writer H. P. Lovecraft used to call "a thrill of unutterable ghastliness"? The human imagination enriched by centuries of Buddhist introspection has run riot in Tibet as nowhere else in the world.

Among and above these extravagant images are the symbols of the peace of Nirvana, gently smiling Bodhisattvas wrapt in a profound stillness.

Many explorers have commented on the soul-stirring effect of Tibetan music. The deep bass of the horns, the clash of the gongs, and shrill voice of the flageolets, rise wave upon wave creating a harmony as deep, wide and sad as the sea. One recalls

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<sup>8</sup> Andre Guibaut, *Tibetan Venture, In the Country of the Ngolo-Setas*, trans. Lord Sudley, (London, John Murray 1948), p. 61

<sup>9</sup> Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. William Marsden, (New York, Dell Publishing Co. Inc. 1961), p. 230

the statues of the Tibetan ascetic Milarepa, who sits with one hand held up to his ear, listening to the sound of the earth turning.

Here we have reached a frontier beyond which only a handful of explorers venture. Even F. Spencer-Chapman, the very model of the unflappable British explorer, confesses to a moment of panic when he comes across a mysterious monk in Gyantse fort. Yet he never inquires into this feeling, gateway to a much greater unknown. Why ?

Tibet is (was. . .) an anomalous survival of the past, as out of place in the 20th Century as the coelocanth. Perhaps nothing is so fascinating to man as a glimpse into the past; the religious faith and feudalism which lately flourished in Tibet remind the West of its own Middle Ages. But Tibet was more than that—it was the very link which still connected man to a far more ancient tradition: of oracles and psychic forces alive everywhere, of philosophers and sages in a harsh world where man is still half animal. Travellers often marvelled at the way Tibetans could see in the dark. Half animal—but half god. Surely the choosing of the Dalai Lama must be the strangest political institution ever invented: after the Dalai Lama dies, the oracles are consulted, then monks scour the country searching for the child who is to be the Dalai Lama's new incarnation. They administer various tests until given unmistakable proofs; then the child, who may come from the poorest background, is elevated for life to the highest position in the land. Hundreds of reincarnating Lamas were chosen similarly throughout Tibet.

Tibet was pervaded through and through with religious feeling. Ekai Kawaguchi in 1900 relates how people would listen rapt, with tears in their eyes, to his religious lectures. Grenard wrote in 1894:

They build thousands of temples; make tens of thousands of statues; prostrate themselves; sing hymns; mutter endless prayers; grind out an even greater number by water-power or by hand; say their rosaries; celebrate solemn services; make offerings and give banquets to all the gods and all the devils; wear amulets and relics; write talismans; wave streamers covered with prayers or lucky emblems, which the breath of the wind sends flying through space; pile up numberless heaps of stones with pious inscriptions; turn around all the objects which they regard as sacred: mountains, lakes, temples, heaps of stones; go in processions and on pilgrimages; swallow indulgences in the shape of pills made by the lamas out of relics; drink down without compunction the divine nectar composed of the ten impurities, such as human flesh and worse; practise exorcism, witchcraft and magic, even to obtain spiritual blessings; perform pious

sarabands to drive out or shatter the devil: and thus is Tibet made to spin distractedly, without rest or truce, in religion's mad round.<sup>10</sup>

The past is fascinating, but also repelling. Waddell, pseudo-expert on Lamaism, went so far as to call the Tibetans, "enemies... by reason of their savagery and superstition, of the human race."<sup>11</sup> The Chinese have always viewed the Tibetans as barbarians. Crimes in Tibet were punished by amputation of hands and feet, and the putting out of eyes. Every sort of loathsome disease was rampant. Many explorers turned back from the manifold cruelty, superstition, fanaticism, and misery which faced them. Cruelty, fanaticism, and misery are bad enough, but for modern man, superstition is intolerable.

Csoma de Körös was one who ventured beyond. Even as a child, we are told, his friends could never keep up with him, for having scaled one hill he never tired until he had attempted the next. Although he endured dreadful privations in the Himalayas 1810-1820, he never actually reached Tibet. Yet he was the first to systematically study the vast literature of Tibet, and make it available by means of a dictionary, to the world. His own discovery of Tibet was at least as exciting as the voyages of explorers to Lhasa. He unearthed whole libraries ranging in content from subtle philosophical texts, to grammar, medicine, and astronomy, to the curious music manuscripts looking like squiggly encephalograms.

In his path followed the handful of explorers who made an attempt to penetrate the religion and language of the country: Giuseppe Tucci, Marco Pallis, Alexandra David-Neel, Lama Anagarika Govinda, Ekai Kawaguchi. They travelled to lonely mountain hermitages and talked with the monks they met there, they studied in the religious universities, witnessed religious debates, and discussed with Tibetans the basics of philosophy.

The first thing they discovered was that certain mystic skills, like telepathy, trance-running, artificial body-heat, weather-divining, and oracular prediction were indisputably real phenomena. Heinrich Harrer, the Austrian adventurer who witnessed the last few years of traditional Tibet, was deeply affected by the State Oracle at Nechung. The temple of the Oracle, cloudy with incense and ringing with eerie chords, practically danced with gruesome ghouls and macabre incubi painted over every inch of its surface. The Oracle himself, a gifted young medium of nineteen, flew into superhuman trances, during which he contorted under a heavy crown which two strong men could hardly lift, and twisted metal swords into spirals. Harrer, generally

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<sup>10</sup> F. Grenard, *Tibet*, trans. A. Teixeira de Mattos, (London, Hutchinson & Co., 1904), p. 311

<sup>11</sup> L. Austine Waddell, *Lhasa and Its Mysteries*, (London, Methuen & Co., 1905), p. 160

antipathetic to the occult, could find no explanation for the tangible and intangible evidence of magic forces.

These things have been commented upon by so many observers that one has practically no alternative but to accept them as truth. Kublai Khan actually arranged a comparative demonstration between some Lamas and Christian Nestorian priests. Afterwards he informed the Polos that he chose Lamaism over Christianity because it was richer in miracles. Kublai Khan's beliefs may not qualify as evidence, yet one meets with numerous accounts throughout a millenium in which explorers in Tibet describe apparently miraculous episodes. The great explorer Abbé Huc wrote in 1846 that it is quite possible the Tibetans are "in possession of very important secrets, which science alone is capable of explaining, but which very possibly science itself may never discover."<sup>12</sup>

Tibet devoted itself for many centuries to mysticism and developed extremely sophisticated techniques under Buddhism, which teaches the illusory nature of all things and the world-creating power of mind. In addition, the fervent faith, or rather fanatical devotion of the people of Tibet created the psychological conditions in which seeming miracles like faith-healing may take place. Meditation fostered an intuitive openness to the universe, and practice in one-pointed mental concentration. Harsh surroundings and a fascination with death prevented the Tibetans from averting their eyes from the uncanny, ugly, or perverse.

It is related that when the first airplane appeared at the Tibeto-Chinese border town of Tachienlu, in the 1930's, the Chinese reacted with astonishment, but the Tibetans accepted it calmly as merely another manifestation of the miraculous world around them.

Alexandra David-Neel once asked a Lama why it is that Tibetans do not eventually become incredulous. He replied,

(Incredulity) is one of the ultimate objects of the mystic masters, but if the disciple reaches this state of mind before the proper time, he misses something which these exercises are designed to develop, that is, fearlessness. Moreover, the teachers do not approve of simple incredulity, they deem it contrary to truth. The disciple must understand that gods and demons do really exist for those who believe in their existence, and that they are possessed with the power of benefiting or harming those who worship or fear them. . . . However very few reach incredulity in the early part of their training. Most novices actually *see* frightful appritions.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John MacGregor, *op. cit.*, p. 236

<sup>13</sup> Alexandra David-Neel, *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet*, (London, John Lane The Bodley Head Ltd. 1931), p. 146-7



We have only begun to explore the human unconscious, and the paradoxical laws of causality. The Tibetans point the way to these mysteries, and to the poetical and spiritual truths beyond them.

Indeed, what are we to make of this farrago of refined mysticism and crude superstition? For the ways of the occult are haphazard and obscure at best, and the material usefulness of magic, minute. A Hail-Prevention priest in trance can hardly compete with a storm-seeding airplane; all the mumblings and mutterings of an enigmatical oracle can never rival the accuracy of a Government White Paper. And the rewards of the supernatural are very small in relation to the arduous labors required to produce them. *Lungompa* trance runners underwent a spartan regimen including up to twelve years spent meditating in solitary confinement. Reliable telepathic powers, and *tummo* body heat likewise come only after years, or decades of concentrated religious routine. The Buddha, it is said, once encountered an ascetic who had mortified himself for sixty years and thus learned how to walk on water. "What a waste," said the Buddha, "when you can cross the river on the ferry for a penny!"

Many Tibetan masters regarded such practices as actually harmful to the sincere seeker after truth. They viewed mystic technique simply as "method" (as opposed to "wisdom"), a useful gateway to the divine, not an end in itself.

One could say that these as yet dimly understood phenomena stand in the same relation to our scientific world, as relativistic and quantum effects stand to Newtonian physics. On the ordinary human plane such effects are swamped: quantum unpredictability, while crucial at the atomic level, seems to have nothing to do with the apparently regular laws of cause and effect which operate in our daily lives. It is only recently that these regular laws have been recognized as crude manifestations of far-reaching cosmic mechanisms which still elude the scientist.

Likewise the occult dwindles almost to nothingness before the clear gaze of modern enlightenment. But may it not be, indeed, that the spiritual, while weak, is at the very root of being?

The explorer stops here, if he has not expired somewhere along the way already. But having once been seduced into the realm of the spirit there is no turning back! For Tibet, the last civilization on earth over which the shadow of mystery still lingered, has vanished in one generation as suddenly as the morning mist. Only in the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan do the last wisps of the mirage persist. The very mountains and lakes, seemingly eternal, dissolve before dynamite and tractors. The Tibet described here is now merely a memory in the minds of the last Tibetans who grew up in the tradition, and aging foreign explorers. It exists only as a figment in the thoughts of armchair explorers at Oxford, essay writers and readers; Tibet is nothing but a world recreated by imaginations, as real as dreams and conjured spirits.

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