

SUMMARY

A. Socio-historical Survivals and Syneretism in the Religion of the Sherpas

The discovery in 1965 of genealogical documents for all the Sherpa clans has proved Kham in eastern Tibet to be the country of origin of the Sherpas (Oppitz, *Geschichte der Sherpa*,—*Beiträge zur Sherpa-Forschung*, vol. I). From the beginning of Tibetan history to the present day, Kham has always been a center of resistance to the political and centralist claims of the government in Lhasa and to the sovereignty claims of the reformed Gelugpa sect. Kham was not only the center of orthodox Nyingmapa tendencies within Tibetan Buddhism, but also the most important area where the pre-Buddhist Bon religion of central Asia survived. When the proto-clans of the Sherpa emigrated from Kham and moved southwards to their present-day habitat in Nepal, they brought with them age-old forms of belief and rites and these have survived there the present day, whereas in Tibet up to proper these components of archaic religious views gradually lost their separate identity during five centuries of political and religious power struggles. It is true that in modern times the Tibetan Nyingmapa sect from its border monastery of Rongphu on the north side of Mt. Everest has constantly sought to missionise those Sherpa living across the border and thus win them back to orthodox Lamaism, but these efforts have met with little or no success. On the other hand, since the 15th—16th century, the Sherpa have come into contact in their new settlement areas with Tibeto-Burman speaking hill-tubes in whose religious beliefs vigorous vestiges of the pre-Aryan cults still survive, like certain fertility rites, forms of the mother cult, and belief in mountain deities. In addition, old Persian and old Vedic concepts have also found their way into beliefs of the Sherpa, via Indian Hinduism. The religion of the early Turkish tribes of central Asia and Buddhist apostles from early India also influenced Sherpa ideas, while they were still in their Tibetan home. However, in spite of all these various influences, the basic beliefs of Sherpa religion drawn from the Bon religion can still be clearly distinguished.

B. Popular Beliefs and Pure Doctrinal Religion among the Sherpa

Whereas in Khumbu, the area situated near the Tibetan border passes, Tibetan influences have had more marked effect, in the remote Solu region, which is where the vast majority of the Sherpa people have settled, the primitive form of religious beliefs and ideas has survived until the present day. These religious ideas are still fostered and passed on by lay priests. Although these lay priests are hardly able to read the sacred writings of Mahāyāna Buddhism as practised in Tibet, they are at home with the ancient rites stemming from the Bon religion. In modern times, several monastic communities of the Nyingmapa school have been founded. The orthodox monks have succeeded in obtaining a degree of influence over the cult of the dead. However, popular conceptions of the soul of the dead are once again rooted in a pre-Lamaist and ancient form of religion. Certainly pure-Lamaist religious views and the popular conceptions have entered into a very close union, but the pure-Lamaist influence is mainly restricted to certain external cultic forms.

C. The Sources and their Assessment

The fieldwork of the year 1965 together with the supplementary research carried out in 1967 forms the basis of this study. The object of our research were the popular rites and the customs of the Solu-Sherpa. A few religious texts in the possession of lay priests were acquired, and then identified and translated with the help of Tibetan priests and scholars. Various Thang-kas which clearly did not represent a Tibetan import but which are closely related to the popular beliefs prevailing among the present-day Sherpa were analysed and interpreted by way of experiment.

MANIFESTATIONS OF RELIGIOUS VIEWS IN SHERPA RITUAL

Introductory Considerations: Geographical Environment and Religious Beliefs in the Land of the Sherpa

The Sherpa habitat is situated between tropical valleys at 1400 m (4595 ft.), and the eternal snowline on Mount Everest, Makalu and Gauriśankar. The intermediate zones of evergreen alpine forest and subtropical rain forest represent the actual settlement area proper. Mountain peaks visible from afar and often reaching a height of 7000—8850 m (22,965—29,035 ft.) rise up from fields of eternal snow and ice and above glens which are often precipitous and covered with dark montane jungle. Popular Sherpa beliefs regard the jungle as inhabited by malign spirits hostile to man. On the other hand, south of the water-divide of the great Himalayan heights, monsoon rains fall during certain parts of the year. These rains represent a natural phenomenon which the Sherpa, whose home was originally in eastern Tibet, finds completely inexplicable; systematisation of popular attempts at explanation led to a cult of vegetation powers, which is still of great significance today in the popular religion of the Sherpa. The dependence of economic life (primitive at agriculture medium altitudes and pastoral on the alpine meadows) on the climatic periods caused the vegetation powers to become tutelary deities of the clan communities of the Solu-Sherpa. The veneration of old mountain divinities stems from the original Tibetan home of the Sherpa. In their new settlement area, which is primarily characterised by possessing the highest mountain peaks on the earth's surface, this aspect of the popular religion was particularly emphasized.

I. Nature-Spirits in Myth and Cult

A variety of myths about local, tutelary vegetation powers, supra-regional heaven-gods, and also malignant demonic powers have arisen out of the interaction of concepts drawn from the ancient Bon religion, from primitive, South-Asian fertility cults, and from orthodox Tibetan Buddhism. The cult of these nature-spirits and -gods represents the essential sphere of activity of the lay priest of the Sherpa known as the „lama”. The belief in "Lu", local spirits of water and spring which are conceived as of female sex, is the determining feature in the daily life of the Sherpa of Solu. The basic element of present day folk-religion among the Sherpa is formed by the tabu prescriptions covering the water sources and by the magic ritual to conciliate the "Lu" which have been transformed into

hostile nature-spirits by infringements of these tabus. In contrast, popular conceptions of the ancient celestial-gods, taken over from the Bon religion, are today extremely vague. Popular practices used to ward off the negative influence of evil nature-spirits are much in evidence. These are embodied in an ancient religious text which must have been composed in Kham, the original Tibetan home of the Sherpa.

II. Sherpa Shamans

The institution of the Minung, which still functions today among the Solu-Sherpa, has always stood in marked contrast to the prescriptions of the Tibetan Buddhism. For this reason, it is generally concealed from the foreign observer. The Minung is a genuine shaman who approaches the spirits systematically, is possessed by them, and then fights off negative influences in a trancelike state, but who can also cause harmful effects. The detailed description of the activities of the Minung, of his requisites and his religious ideas shows that the Bon-priest of ancient Tibet lives on in him. Shamanism, sacrificial blood-cult, and even death-magic characterise the practices of the Minung, who, however, also stands in close relationship to the cult of the vegetative powers and of the mountain divinities.

III. Mountain-spirits and Mountain-gods, their Nature and Cult

The various beings of this group of suprahuman entities are numerous. Inferior jungle-spirits infesting forested mountain heights fill the Sherpa with fear. Earlier research into tree- and rock-dwelling nature-spirits in the ancient Tibetan Bon religion had already revealed connections with Tibetan mountain-gods. The religion of the present-day Sherpa provides much evidence in support of this theory. However, influences from pre-Indo-Germanic India are also to be seen. A further group of mountain deities serve the Sherpa as local tutelary deities whose sphere of influence is restricted to the clan territories. The next group of mountain goddesses, conceived as not locally restricted in their power, are identified with the inaccessible Himalayan peaks of 23,000 and 26,000 feet. These are the most sacred mountains of the Sherpa Tseringma (Gaurisankar), Mijul Langsangma ("the divine mother of human habitations enthroned on the peak" — Mt. Everest) and a further series of the highest Himalayan mountains dealt with in the body of the text. Here the folk-religion merges into the pure doctrinal religion, for several written cultic prescriptions in respect of these mountain-deities exist. They are religious texts which certainly reflect popular concepts but already bear signs of the influence of Buddhist ethics. Tibetan theology completely takes over, when these snow-covered mountains of the Himalayas are then identified in the text with the Dharmapālas of Tibetan Buddhism. The description of the masks of the most important mountain-divinities and of the method of their manufacture concludes this chapter.

IV. Gomba and Priesthood

The Gomba of the Sherpa is not a monastery like the Tibetan „gönpa" but a village temple which forms the focus of community life in the village. Here all those more or less

magic practices are performed which together make up the popular religious cult. The most important gomba-buildings in the region of the Solu- and Pharak-Sherpa are listed in a table. The architectural layout of the gomba shows, on the one hand, the influence of Tibetan models and, on the other, points to its function as cultic centre of the village community. The sculptural decoration embodies the most important cult objects of orthodox Nyingmapa Lamaists, but also figures of popular Sherpa belief. It is remarkable to find e. g. Tjerinje, the Tibetan Dhyáni-Bodhisattva Chernresig, identified with the Hindu god Vishnu, and the Lamaist mystic Padmasambhava with the Hindu Siva. A monographical treatment of the large village gomba at Junbesi in Solu describes the wall-paintings there and interprets them according to popular conceptions prevalent among the Sherpa and also according to their Tibetan iconographic significance. The description of the cultic instruments of the lay priests shows that these are to a large extent requisites drawn from the pure religious rituals from Tibet but, at times, with a different significance. A cult object that the Sherpa themselves consider an idol of Siva and belongs to their most valuable possessions turns out to be, in fact, one of the self-portraits ascribed to Padmasambhava. — Wealthy families among the Solu-Sherpa have private gombas, which are at times of the same size as the village community-temple.

V. Dumje Festival and Gebchi-Ritual in the Service of Vegetation Powers

The most important of the religious community festivals among the Sherpa is the Dumje. The research carried out by FÜRER-HAIMENDORF had already brought information about the course of events during this festival among the Khumbu inhabitants with their strong admixture of Tibetan immigrants. There the festival corresponds in most respects to the well-known Tibetan rite. In contrast, however, the Dumje as celebrated among the Sherpa of Solu is an old fertility rite, or, to be more exact, rain-making magic. The various rites which are celebrated in the course of the four days of the festival bear hardly any resemblance to those in use among the Tibetans and the inhabitants of Khumbu. The central figure of the Dumje festival, the course of which is described in great detail both by word and pictorial representation by the members of the Lama clan, is the "Black Hat sorcerer", who is, in this case, equated by the Sherpa with Padmasambhava. The purpose of the Dumje rites is, according to the unanimous testimony of the lay priests, to invoke rain for the crops. The Linga-casrifice offered in the course of this feast by the Solu-Sherpa also differs in form and content from the rite of the same name in Tibet and Khumbu, because part of the figure in human form is consumed by the Black Hat sorcerer.

The gebchi, which is carried out on the third day of the festival by the Sherpa of Solu, is a rite to ban evil spirits, which are identified in this case with the "Lu".

A comparison of the course of the festival with the rites of the same name in Tibet and Khumbu reveals the extent to which the beliefs and tenets of the Bon religion still influence the popular religion among the present day Sherpa. The central figure is the Black Hat sorcerer, a personage drawn from the Bon religion. Lamaist ideas have either degenerated into more primitive forms or have been adopted only as external forms stripped of pure-Lamaist content. The mask dances, the sword dances and the dances of the Black Hat sorcerer are here merely part of a magic ritual to banish those powers which could inter-

fere with the rains needed for the crops. The gebchi, too, merely serves to exclude such possible dangers which could prove a menace to the harvest. Lamaist mantras are used as rain-bringing magical formulas.

VI. Concepts of the Soul and the Ritual of the Dead

Popular views concerning the human soul provide us with a profound insight into the original religious beliefs of the Sherpa. In addition to a concept of the soul (Pēm) which has certainly been influenced by Lamaism, there is also a belief in the shadow-soul or Chendi, which is regarded as being, of its nature, a wicked spirit. Numerous prescriptions to be observed in daily life serve to ward off the negative influences of the Chendi. Within the framework of the popular ritual of the dead, the concept of the reanimation of a corpse plays an important part. The religious text Nima Kimdu is used by the Sherpa in their ritual of the dead to ban the influence of the Sadag earth spirits.

VII. Religious Eclecticism on Sherpa Thang-kas and Tsaglis

Five Thang-kas in the possession of Solu- and Pharak-Sherpa and an almost complete collection of Tsaglis are here published and examined for their cultural content. For the average Sherpa a Thang-ka has the value and efficacy of an amulet. Positive effects are expected from the objects represented on the Thang-ka. Here again, we can see what importance the Bon-religious concepts have for the present day religion of the Sherpa. The high-god Kundu Sangbu, who has been taken over by Lamaism from the Bon religion, is, according to one version, a type of supreme being for the Sherpa. Here quite clearly ideas linking non-reformed Lamaists of Tibet with the figure of the Dhyāni-Bodhisattava Samantabhadra play a smaller rôle than more down-to-earth notions. In the popular religion of the Sherpa, Kundu Sangbu is quite simply *the* god; associated with him is his spouse, the earth-mother Mabtsüpa.

On the Thang-kas, ideas drawn from the popular religion of the Sherpa are mixed with representations known from Lamaist iconography. Often, however, figures taken from Lamaism are combined with the simple ideas of the common people, since not even the names of the corresponding Tibetan gods, like Dhyāni-Buddhas etc., are known. On the other hand, we also find figures which played a part as religious teachers in Tibetan social history. But this can be shown only by iconographic interpretation and has no foundation in religious views held by the Sherpa of today. Animistic features of the Sherpa religion also find expression on the Thang-kas, when, for instance, the Lamaist female figure, Dharmapāla, is represented in the form of the Sherpa mountaingoddess Tseringma. Fascinating, too, is the frequently occurring figure of the demonic god Sapdü, who originates in a world of religious ideas lying outside Tibetan Buddhism.

Still more light is thrown on the sources of the religious ideas of the Sherpa by the discussion of a total of 99 Tsagli cultic diagrams. Symbols much used in Lamaism play a big role here, too, like the series of Tua Ritu (Tibetan: Tupa Ritu), the Tashi Seghe (Tibetan: Tashi Sehje), the Tashi Tadge, and the Gassi Nadyu. But in contrast to the members of the various Lamaist sects in Tibet, the Sherpa has no abstract ideas which he

connects with these; for him these images are merely representations of gods or sacrificial offerings, e. g. food for the gods.

Of special interest are the Tsagli representations of such deities who are not only important for the presentday Solu- and Pharak-Sherpa but also in the rites of the Bon-po in the east Tibetan province of Kham. These are the Thangma, goddesses with animal heads, who are grouped in many subdivisions. Among these are the lion-headed Singdong Rigna and the Gomage, who act as the instruments of the will of the former, and various others.

VIII. Cultic Texts of the Sherpa

Of the religious texts in use among the Sherpa 28 were acquired. These may either be described as original or as departing from the Tibetan texts of the same name in such a way as to suggest that their evaluation would be interesting, because they can be regarded as variations typical for the Sherpa. Certainly the point is expressly made that these texts written in Tibetan have hardly any significance as far as the popular Sherpa religion is concerned, since they can be read by only very few of the lay priests. They rather represent a link between the popular faith of the Sherpa and the pure Lamaist religion of east Tibet in the orthodox variants of the Nyingmapa groups. Many lay lama use these texts today as collections of magic formula. Since these texts are generally of great antiquity, they can be regarded, too, as a reflection of the cultural and religious situation prevailing in the Kham region of half a millenium ago from which the proto-clans of the Sherpa emigrated. It is no mere coincidence that these texts nearly all stand in a relationship to those areas of the Sherpa popular religion to which the various chapters of this book are devoted: the cult of the tutelary vegetation powers, the warding-off of malign influences, the service of the mountain-gods, the fertility rites of the Dumje or the exorcism of earth-spirits during the rites of the dead.

Perhaps two of these texts can be seen as genuine Sherpa creations. The one is Nangha Chä, regulating the cult of the mountain-gods; in it local gods are named that are identical with high mountains in the present-day habitat of the Sherpa in Nepal. The other text is Chiangur, a morning prayer, for which there exists no known Tibetan model.