

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.