

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 protoclanes 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