

Kha-che and Gya-Kha-che/ Muslim Communities in Lhasa (1990) Corneille Jest. Published in Tibetan Journal Autumn 1995

On the large avenue which links the city of Lhasa to the monastery of Drepung one is surprised to see an impressive gate in Tibetan style surmounted by a dome flanked by two small turrets similar to minarets--a sign of the presence of Islam.

The gate gives access to a large garden bordered by walls; water meanders between rows of poplars and willows. In the centre of the garden stands a group of buildings, one of which is a mosque; nearby there is a graveyard.

Habibullah Bat welcomes me: he is a tailor and the teacher of the Koranic school. After a friendly welcome he begins to tell me about the place's origin:

It is in this garden called the Kha-che ling-ka "the garden of the Kashmiri" that the first mosque was built. A Saint, Pir Yakub, who came from India, was praying on the Gyambo Utse, a ridge overlooking Lhasa to the North-west (Gaborieau 1973). The Dalai Lama watched him each morning with his field glasses (sic). One day he called Pir Yakub, asked him about his faith and had long theological discussions with him. He recognized in Pir Yakub a Saint and asked what would please him. The latter requested land to build a mosque and bury the dead according to the Muslim ritual. The Dalai Lama gave a large marshy land located to the west of the Potala where the Muslims could build a mosque and lay out a garden. From a place designated by the Dalai Lama arrows were thrown in the direction of the four quarters to demarcate the site, thus the name of Gyamda was given to it. Pir Yakub died in Lhasa and his tomb is still to be seen in the Kha-che ling-ka. The act of donation has unfortunately disappeared. Habibullah Bat, who is in his 60s (born in 1928), is a member of a small community living in Lhasa and traces his ancestors to Ladakh and Kashmir.

THE KHA-CHE

At the end of the 16th century, after the annexation of Kashmir by the Moguls, Muslim traders came to Ladakh and developed relations with Tibet (Petech 1947,1977; Snellgrove and Richardson 1968). The Muslims from northern India and Nepal, called Kha-che in Tibetan, controlled part of the trade between

India and Tibet. The major centres in India were Lahore, Agra, Patna, Srinagar, and Leh; in Nepal they were Kathmandu and Kuti. In the past, products such as amber from the Baltic sea reached Lhasa, while musk collected from the musk deer ended up in Europe. Sining in Western China and Kathmandu on the south of the Himalayan range were two major poles of this trade. The Muslim merchant communities could be compared with those established in Central Tibet by the Newars of Kathmandu (Jest 1993).

Most of the Kha-che lived in Lhasa, in the vicinity of the Jokhang. There were also Kha-che in the important administrative centres such as Gyantse, Shigatse, Lhartse, and Tsetang (Das 1902; Chapman 1938). The major trade items were saffron or tsepran; Indian silk and brocade from Kashmir; and musk, gold dust and medicinal herbs from Tibet.

At regular intervals caravans were organized to different destinations and the Kashmiri traders participated up to 1949 in the caravan lo-phyag, which came every third year from Ladakh to Lhasa (Radhu 1981). In the past hundred years the trade increased through Kathmandu and Kalimpong; both became the outposts of an important network of major trading centres such as Calcutta.

Habibullah Bat recalls the way of life and social position of the Kha-che in Tibet before 1950:

The Kha-che had adopted a number of Tibetan traditions. It was common for a Kashmiri to marry a Tibetan who had then to become a Muslim (the contrary did not happen). Men were dressed in long Ladakhi robes, their head-dress was usually a turban or a Ladakhi felted hat with flaps. Women were dressed like Tibetan women but wore a scarf. A chief, the Kha-che go-pa, was in contact with the Tibetan authorities. He also had to judge all offenses and chaired a council, the panchayat, which advised the community according to the Koranic law. The Kha-che held an important position in Tibet as is shown in the fresco painted in 1957 in the Summer Palace (Norbu -; lingka) of the Dalai Lama. H.H. the Dalai Lama is represented surrounded by members of his family, high dignitaries and important representatives, among them two members of the Kha-che community (Petech 1973).

In Tibet the Kha-che were considered as Indian citizens, thus having the status of foreigners. In case of a mixed marriage the son was considered as an Indian citizen and the daughter as a Tibetan; she had to pay a yearly tax of one srang.

Each year the government of Tibet made a donation to the Muslim families in need. Under the 13th Dalai Lama Thubten Gyamtso (1875- 1933), the government established rules concerning the rights and duties of the Kha-che.

The Kha-che are Sunni and the religious duties are observed: the five daily prayers, the fast during the month of ramazan, the festivals of id-ul fitr and id-ul zoha, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The first mosque located in the Kha-che lingka was built on the land given to Pir Ya.kub and was enlarged in 1755 A.D. A new mosque was built near the old one in 1989 with donations from 25 families. At the beginning of the 20th century a mosque was built in the centre of the old city of Lhasa, for reasons of "commodity" comments Habibullah Bat. The mosque stands to the south of the Jokhang, near the mansion of the Kun-bzang-che family. A monumental porch is surmounted by a dome, gumbat, and two turrets. Over the door is an inscription in Urdu and Tibetan (lha-sa kha-che lha-khang chung).

The buildings occupy an area of 450 square meters. To the left of the entrance are the ablution fountains. The technique of construction and general layout is Tibetan. The prayer hall is oriented East-West. Four rows of square pillars support the ceiling and flat roof. The pillars and beams supporting the ceiling are elaborately painted; the pillars support small cross-beams. The room has a floor of beaten gravel stamped and polished to resemble marble. The mihrab is built in the western wall (direction of Mecca). Restoration took place in 1985, financed by the Kha-che who migrated to India.

Most of the Kha-che stayed in Tibet until 1959. After the political events of March 1959 almost all of them (192 families in 1959) left Tibet as they were not sure of their future, the trade being disrupted and their Indian citizenship not being recognized by the Chinese authorities. It was easy to find shelter in Nepal (Kathmandu) or in India (Kalimpong and Srinagar).

However, according to Habibullah Bat the poor members of the Khache community returned to Lhasa in 1962, accepting their fate. Fifty-six families

were living in Lhasa in 1990. With a deeply religious mind, since May 1980 they have been able to practice their religion and carry on their trades (tailoring and making of traditional Tibetan hats in brocade [tshe-ring skyin-khebs). The young ones, educated and speaking Tibetan and fluently, are employed in the provincial administration.

TI-IE GYA KHA-CHE

One cannot omit to mention here the Chinese Muslims established in Tibet. The Gya Kha-che, as they are called in Tibetan (Hui in Chinese), are living in Wa-pa-ling, to the east of the Jokhang in the old part of the city. Their ancestors came from the Chinese provinces of Gansu, Shan.xi, Qinghai, Sechuan, and Yunnan. It was at the beginning of the 18th century, during the reign of Emperor Kangxi, that Chinese Muslims settled in Lhasa (Snellgrove and Richardson 1968). Some of them are also descendants of soldiers of the Chinese army that fought against the Gurkhas in 1793 (Ahmad 1970; Fang Jianchan 1989.) They were given a site to build a mosque and, in Dodi (east of Lhasa), a location for a graveyard. They were butchers and gardeners, activities which are still practiced today. In 1990 the community numbered more than 2,000 persons. The first mosque was built in 1716 A.D. This mosque was destroyed in 1959 and rebuilt soon after. Around two courtyards are distributed different buildings-a minaret standing on its own ground, a Koranic school, and a prayer hall rectangular in shape (22.6 by 12.6 meters). An entrance porch in Chinese style gives access to this compound.

Islam resisted the atheist propaganda during the period of 1966-1975. Since 1980 Islam can be practiced in the open and the religious buildings have been restored and beautified. The pilgrimage to Mecca is again permitted by the Chinese authorities and one or two members of the Kha-che community, supported each year by the government of Pakistan, are able to complete the journey to the holy shrines.

Both the Kha-che and Gya Kha-che have recovered their dynamism. The Gya Kha-che community has preserved its cohesion while keeping its distance from the numerous Chinese Muslims who have recently arrived and do not hesitate to do business in the remotest places of Tibet (Gladney 1991).