

CHAPTER TEN

LHASA, CITY OF PILGRIMAGE

Katia Buffetrille

Of the pilgrimages that took place in Lhasa in the 17th century, we know little. Johannes Grueber, a Jesuit of Austrian origin, and his companion, Albert d'Orville, a Belgian missionary, who wanted go back to Europe by sea and were unable to do so because of the Dutch blockade of Macao, decided to return home overland. On the way, they stopped in Lhasa where they stayed for two months. They were the first Europeans to visit Lhasa; that was in 1661. They left no account of their journey across Tibet, but Grueber, back in Europe, gave his notes and his sketches to Athanasius Kircher, author of the famous *China Illustrata*, published in Latin in 1667. This was the first visual account the West got of this city which the missionaries called by the peculiar name of Barantola.

The 17th century was a transition period in Tibet, since, for the first time, a Dalai Lama, in this case the Fifth, became the spiritual and temporal head of the country.

In 1638, Gushri Khan, head of the Khoshut Mongols, came on pilgrimage to Lhasa. It is then that he met the Gelukpa hierarch. Very impressed by the latter, he offered his assistance to the Gelukpa in their fight against the princes of Tsang province, which supported the Karma Kagyupa religious school. The Mongol chief, after having won the victory in 1642, gave temporal power over Tibet to the Fifth Dalai Lama.

The hierarch, like his prior incarnations, initially lived in the palace of Ganden Phodrang inside Drepung, one of the three large Gelukpa monasteries, located a few kilometres west of Lhasa. But it seemed to him that this was no longer an appropriate place from which to govern the whole of Tibet. He had to decide on a site where the government could be set up. The choice of Lhasa stood out for two reasons: first, it was an ancient holy site of the Tibetan Empire (7th–9th centuries) and, second, the three large Gelukpa monasteries

were nearby. In 1645, construction began on the Potala Palace and the Fifth Dalai Lama was installed there in 1649.

Lhasa's Attraction to Pilgrims

Lhasa, already considered to be a holy site since it was home to the temple containing the most sacred statue of the Buddha in Tibet, the Jowo, saw its holy character more enhanced at this time, by the presence of the Dalai Lama, whom pilgrims venerated, and still venerate, profoundly. Johannes Grueber confirms this veneration: "There are two kings in this kingdom; the first of whom, called *Deva*, devotes himself to maintaining the law in all affairs that are dealt with in the kingdom . . . The other lives a life of idleness in his palace, as in a solitude, withdrawn from the world, exempt from worldly matters and free of all care, and is not only worshipped by the inhabitants of the place as a deity, but as well, all the other kings of Tartary, who are his subjects, voluntarily undertake pilgrimages to go to offer him their adoration, by means of a great number of donations and costly presents, which they give him, as to the living and true God, whom they call eternal and heavenly Father."

The pilgrimage is, in fact, a very old element in Buddhism. But at present, no one knows if the tradition of pilgrimage in Tibet, and in other Tibetan-speaking areas, is prior or subsequent to the introduction of Buddhism. Nevertheless, it constitutes one of the major activities of lay people. It seems that, from the introduction of Buddhism, one of the pilgrim's essential rites consisted of circumambulating holy persons, monuments or places that they wanted to honour, keeping the object of their veneration on their right. On the other hand, the Bönpo, adherents to Bön, the religion that Tibetans consider to be the pre-Buddhist religion, circumambulate in an anti-clockwise direction. The Tibetan term for pilgrim, *nekorwa* (*gnas skor ba*) means "one who goes round a holy place"; it therefore emphasizes the most important external character of the pilgrimage. Through this action, Buddhist pilgrims gain merits and atone for their sins.

Pilgrims from all Horizons

At the beginning of the 18th century (1716–1721), Father Desideri, a Jesuit of Italian origin, describes Lhasa as a very populated town, inhabited not only by Tibetans but also by many foreigners: Mongols, Chinese, Muscovites, Armenians, Kashmiris, Hindus and Nepalese, all merchants who have made their fortunes. The activities of the Christian Armenians, who came from New Julfa, a suburb of Isfahan in Persia, the Muscovites, who were Orthodox Christians from the Russian Empire, the Chinese, perhaps Muslims from the Gansu region, the Muslim Kashmiris and the Indians who came from India, were certainly connected essentially with trade. On the other hand, many must have been Mongols, Nepalese and Tibetans for whom trade was not the sole motivation for their coming to Lhasa or their visits to the temples and monasteries. Pilgrimages brought them to the various holy places of the Lhasa valley.

The Mongols had had a first contact with Buddhism in the 13th century. At that time, Khubilai Khan, the first sovereign of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1261–1368) was converted to Tibetan Buddhism and he had as chaplain a Sakyapa hierarch, Phagpa. Buddhism was practised by the court, but it did not become, at that time, the state religion. The real conversion of the Mongols dates from the 16th century. In 1578, Sonam Gyatso, third abbot of Drepung monastery, met the head of the Khalkha Mongols, Altan Khan, not far from Lake Kokonor, in the present-day province of Qinghai. The religious hierarch gave teachings and an exchange of titles took place. Sonam Gyatso received that of Dalai Lama ("Master vast as the ocean") and was considered to be the Third Dalai Lama, his two previous incarnations having received this title retroactively. The Mongol chief was named "King according to the Law". He promised the conversion of his people to Buddhism of the Gelukpa school, gave countless gifts to his religious master and made numerous donations to the different Gelukpa monasteries.

Therefore, although they had only recently been converted to Tibetan Buddhism, the Mongols had every reason to go to Lhasa. This could have been for strictly religious purposes: the religious influence of the Dalai Lama on the converted Mongols was already very strong at this time and the goal of every Mongol religious was to go to the capital of Tibet to study under the tutelage of a Tibetan master. But they could also combine economic and religious activities,

and Mongol merchants took advantage of their stay in Lhasa to visit the various holy places.

In the 17th century, it is likely that the Nepalese of whom Desideri speaks were Newar merchants or artists. The presence of Newar artists in Tibet is already attested to in the royal period (7th–9th centuries). Originating from the Kathmandu Valley, the Newar craftsmen were renowned for their skill in wood sculpture, painting and silver- and gold-smithing. Some of them were settled in Lhasa and, being Buddhist, they made, like every other Buddhist pilgrim, the ritual circumambulation of various religious monuments, and giving numerous donations. As Father Huc, whose account dates from the first half of the 19th century, recounts: “They never fail, on days of great solemnity, to go to prostrate themselves at the feet of the Buddha and to offer their adoration to the talé (dalai)-lama.”

The Pilgrim's Route

The fervour of 17th-century Tibetans must have equalled, indeed even exceeded that of Tibetans of the 20th-century. It is said that one day, while the Fifth Dalai Lama was sitting at the top of the Potala, he saw the goddess Tara, the Compassionate, making the ritual going-round of the palace behind an old man. He summoned the latter and asked him if he knew that Tara was accompanying him. Frightened, the poor man answered no but that he had learned by heart the prayer dedicated to Tara and that, for forty years, each day, he made a circumambulation reciting this text. He was asked to say it before the Dalai Lama. The man did so, but made so many mistakes that he was required to learn the proper text by heart. Again, he complied. The next day, while making his daily going-round, his mind concentrated on a perfect recitation, Tara did not appear. He was then given permission to recite again the text that he knew and he repeated his circumambulation, freed from all constraint, his mind focused solely on Tara, the object of his devotion: she appeared again, walking faithfully behind the old man.

Tibetan pilgrims came from the central provinces but also from the distant regions of Kham, to the east, and from Amdo, in the north-east of Tibet. In his biography, the Fifth Dalai Lama reports the presence of many Khampa and Amdowa in Lhasa, although he does not describe them as pilgrims.

Thus, one went round the Potala, but also around the Jokhang, the temple whose foundation is attributed to Songtsen Gampo (7th century), and which holds the statue of the Jowo. The Fifth Dalai Lama, moreover, wrote a pilgrimage guide for this temple, thus demonstrating the importance he attached to it.

We can imagine that, just like today, pilgrims who arrived at the Jokhang prostrated themselves several times in front of the square-Hands, palms together, on the top of the head, then at throat level and finally the heart, they then lay down, stretching themselves out to their full length, arms outstretched, forehead touching the ground, then, pushing up with their hands, they got back up and started again, placing their feet at the place where their head had rested, until they had made the required number of prostrations. They then went into the first court of the temple, crossed it after having again prostrated themselves and began to follow the inner circumambulation route which begins at the north-west corner and goes round the central temple. The pilgrims stopped in each chapel and left their offerings. This could have been a bit of clarified butter which they poured into one of the monumental chased gold or silver lamps that were in the sanctuary, or a ceremonial scarf. It could also have been an offering of gold or silver to the monastic community. Next, they continued on their route without neglecting to turn the prayer wheels lined along the way, always murmuring the mantra “*Om ma ni padme hum*”, the sacred formula addressed to Avalokiteshvara, which led Johannes Grueber to think that the Tibetans worshipped a goddess called *Manipe* whom he described as having nine heads and to whom the pilgrims “make gesticulations and extraordinary fuss, repeating several times these words: *O Manipe mi hum!*”

At the end of the ritual circuit, the pilgrims arrived in front of the massive portal which gives access to the central temple.

In the Holy of Holies

There, the multitude of pilgrims formed a line that stretched continuously. Squeezed up against one another, murmuring sacred formulas or turning a prayer wheel, they waited to enter the sanctuary. The air was filled with smoke from incense and juniper fumigations. The line advanced very slowly but each step led towards the goal so much desired. Finally, the pilgrims crossed the threshold and,

moved by an even greater fervour, gazed, filled with wonder, at the statues of the deities in the open chapels along the passage, shown in their peaceful or wrathful form. Then they emerged into the central hall immersed in a soft half-light. Only a few rays of light filtered through from the skylight and permitted them to make out the central statues. The pilgrims, still squeezed together, began to make the circumambulation. They went from one chapel to another, offered a bit of clarified butter; hands pressed together, eyes wide, they pressed their foreheads against the statues of all the venerated masters and protective deities in order to receive their blessings. Little did the beauty of the statues, the quality of the sculpture or their age matter to the pilgrims. The statue is in itself an object of veneration; the material manifestation of the deity, it possesses power and sacredness.

At last, the pilgrims arrived in front of the inner sanctum containing the Jowo. This statue of the Buddha at the age of twelve years, which is said to have been made at the time of the Buddha himself, by Vishvakarman, the craftsman of the gods, is the object of veneration by all Tibetans. Brought by Wencheng, the Chinese wife of King Songtsen Gampo, it was first placed in the Ramoche Temple, built especially to accommodate it, but, following various political vicissitudes, it was moved to the Jokhang. It was possible to circumambulate the Jowo, and the pilgrims, who could finally see it and even touch its pedestal, then knew a moment of communion with the Divine.

Leaving the inner sanctum, each one prostrated before the Jowo; then the pilgrims continued on their way, climbed the stairs to the first floor, where, there as well, they visited the chapels and, coming back down, they reached the end of the ritual circuit, happy for the many merits acquired for their next life.

Where Piety and Trade Meet

They then reached the *Barkhor*, the intermediate path of circumambulation that encircles the Jokhang temple. Some pilgrims moved along the route prostrating themselves, others walking; but no one, said Desideri, was allowed to ride on horseback in this street, even were he the king. Even today, the merits acquired in making a pilgrimage on horseback are far fewer than those obtained if one walks.

As the Jokhang was the most important place of pilgrimage in Lhasa and, for this reason, that which attracted the most people, it was also the place where an important market took place. At the beginning of the 18th century, Desideri went to this market, which was held from three o'clock in the afternoon until the evening, and where everyone could find everything he or she wanted. It was so crowded that it was difficult to move forward. So already at this time, the *Barkhor* was very busy. The dress, jewels and other accessories revealed, of course, just like today, the origin of the pilgrims who, on this occasion, had donned their finest attire: nomad women from Amdo wearing a pelisse trimmed with a border of bright colours, hair plaited in 108 braids decorated with heavy silver cabochons; proud Khampa, sword slipped under the belt, hair braided, interwoven with red or black cotton forming a crown around the head and held by a silver barrette decorated with coral and turquoise; women of Lhasa in their dark coloured dresses and aprons of vivid colours. The stalls went on one after another and offered a thousand wonders to be seen. The pilgrims all wanted to bring back something from Lhasa, the Holy City, for themselves, but also for him or her who had not had the chance to come. It could be a book, as books are sacred in Tibet, since they represent the Speech of the Buddha and therefore possess in themselves something divine; it could be a reliquary in which pilgrims would put the statues of their protective deity or a talisman that would protect them and which they would carry on their chest; but it could also be a simple stone or a handful of earth picked up at the foot of the Potala or the Jokhang; if pilgrims had the chance to take part in a public ceremony of blessings given by a high-ranking religious, they could then hope to obtain, for themselves and those close to them, these pieces of red protective string that one wears around the neck.

Because of its importance as a city of pilgrimage, Lhasa was therefore a crossroads of various cultures. Inhabitants from different countries, from various provinces, nomads, farmers and city dwellers mingled there. But one could also come across a bard singing the great epic of Gesar, his white, three-pointed hat on his head, spreading the story of the hero's valiant deeds; sometimes it was an itinerant storyteller, a *manipa*—holding in his right hand his parasol-like prayer wheel covered with bracelets and cloth given by devout persons—who recounted the life of a saint and showed the audience the different episodes of the saint's life on a painting. But the pilgrim

could also meet a “ghost from the beyond”, a *delog*, one of these storytellers who, after having been in hell and come back, recounted their experiences. They delivered various messages that they had been given by the Lord of the Dead, but sometimes also by the damned; they therefore urged the audience to practise religion.

In Samye

Many of those who came on pilgrimage to Lhasa probably also went to the three large Gelukpa monasteries—Sera, Drepung and Ganden—but they did not forget to go to Samye, the first monastery founded in Tibet in the 8th century by King Trisong Detsen. This religious centre, though situated some distance from Lhasa, attracted a great number of pilgrims coming to central Tibet to perform their devotions at various important holy places. Furthermore, the circumambulation of this monastery, according to one old text, brings as much merit, if not more, than those derived by going to Bodhgaya, the holy place in India where the Buddha attained enlightenment. Desideri expresses surprise at these pilgrims who come from such distant provinces and sometimes even foreign countries. Still today, Samye is an important place of pilgrimage for those who go to Lhasa.

Samye monastery is situated about 150 kilometres south-east of Lhasa, not far from the north bank of the Tsangpo River, in a landscape of sand dunes. To get there, pilgrims had to cross the blue waters of the river, which was sometimes made difficult by the many sandbanks. But the coracles, these boats made of yak skins stretched over a willow frame, made the crossing possible. Once on the other side, the pilgrims walked a few hours and finally, wide-eyed, they caught sight of the golden roofs of the central temple. Immediately they prostrated themselves, then slowly approached the wall surrounding the monastic complex.

While it is true that Samye is a monastery of moderate size, compared to the large Gelukpa monasteries around Lhasa, which came much later, it has great symbolic value. Its construction represented the triumph of Buddhism over the native religion that preceded it. This did not take place without difficulty, tradition tells us. At night the deities of the ground destroyed what the men built during the day. Every Tibetan knows that every space is inhabited: in the rivers, there are the *lu*, in the mountains, the *nyen*, and the *tsen* are just

about everywhere. If one does not propitiate them, they are offended and send various calamities. So, Trisong Detsen invited the Indian saint Padmasambhava. He came to Tibet and, using the strength of his magic powers, conquered all the deities of the ground and the mountains, turning them into protectors of Buddhism; in this way, he made the founding of Samye possible.

The monastery was built on the model of a mandala, “a geometric projection of the world”, to use the definition given by Giuseppe Tucci, a figurative construction of the universe as conceived by Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies.

At the centre stands the main temple, three storeys high, opening to the east, representing Mount Sumeru. On the four sides, corresponding to the four cardinal directions, four temples represent the four main continents and, between them, eight temples correspond to the eight minor continents. Four *chorten* of different colours—white, red, blue and black—mark the four cardinal points. Each of them was built by one of the king’s ministers. Just as the universe is encircled by a ring of mountains, the monastery is surrounded by a circular wall. Outside, beyond the walls, the king’s three wives each built a temple.

Pilgrims visited the temple, performed their devotions. Perhaps they then climbed the hill opposite the central temple to offer a juniper fumigation. From here they were able to contemplate this mandala-monastery whose plan would have been inspired, according to the texts, either by the great Indian monastery of Odantapuri, or by that of equally great Nalanda.

On special occasions, pilgrims came in great numbers, including people from Lhasa. This was the case, once a year, when the Samye oracle was consulted. Desideri had the opportunity to attend this ceremony and he gives a brief description: “A multitude of people, from distant provinces as well, assemble on the appointed day to hear the predictions and witness the marvels. The oracle makes his way, with great pomp, to a raised spot, where, standing before the gathering, he raises his eyes to the sky, murmurs some unintelligible words and, with an imperious gesture, points to the sky. Immediately, there appear from the east, visible to all, hieroglyphs that slowly move towards the west, then disappear. One mysterious phenomenon after another appears: a sword, a sheaf of wheat, a writhing snake or some other recognizable image. Slowly, they rise in the sky and then disappear. The oracle explains the meaning of

each apparition, deciphers the hieroglyphs and predicts what will happen, good or bad. The spectators describe the hieroglyphs and the way they appeared and moved and disappeared, transcribe the interpretations which are then spread across the kingdom." Desideri recounts this without displaying excessive surprise, which could be seen odd, coming from a Jesuit missionary who, though having a very open mind, considered Buddhism to be an erroneous religion. But he cannot hide the admiration he feels for the Tibetans' faith; this faith, which, for hundreds and hundreds of years, takes them on the most difficult pilgrimage routes, in defiance of all dangers.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE HOURS AND DAYS OF A GREAT MONASTERY:
DREPUNG

Ngawang Dakpa

Drepung monastery was, from the 17th century, Tibet's most important politico-religious centre. Basing myself on texts of the time as well as my own experience as a monk in this high place of Buddhism, I would like to offer here a *tableau vivant* of day-to-day life in Drepung, a life that has hardly changed over the course of the centuries up to 1959, the year when the Chinese seized Tibet.

Drepung is located a few kilometres west of Lhasa and was, before 1959, the largest monastic university in Tibet. Belonging to the Gelukpa order, and thus the school from which the Dalai Lamas stemmed, it was founded in 1416 by the great master Jamyang Chöje Tashi Palden. Although the official figure for the 1950s is 7,700 monks, this monastery had in fact more than 10,000 monks at that time. Perfectly representative of the Gelukpa monastic universities in central Tibet, Drepung held the supreme position of importance in Tibet as politico-religious centre from the 17th to the 20th century. And it is from his residence of Ganden Phodrang in Drepung that the Fifth Dalai Lama led central Tibet before being installed in the Potala, in Lhasa.

"The Heap of Rice"

The name Drepung means "heap of rice" and is the translation of Dhanyakataka, the name of a very famous Buddhist stupa in South India where the Buddha taught the *Kalacakra Tantra*. When one arrives at the foot of the monastery, the collection of white buildings squeezed together on the side of the mountain does in fact conjure up a pile of grains of rice.

The founder of the monastery, Jamyang Chöje (1379–1449), originally from Samye region, was the son of Lhaje Zhonu, a famous