CHAPTER 3

Islamic Culture in Tibet

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Abstract

Islamic and Tibetan cultures first emerged ca. the 7th Century AD. By the 13th Century AD, Islam had spread into the whole area of Tibet. It was inevitable that both cultures confronted each other at times, while at other times they remained peaceful and interacted with each other. This chapter delves into history to consider this topic. Muslims who entered Tibet not only brought along with them their goods, but also their faith in Islam. As a result of the interaction between Islam and Tibet, Muslims came to be indigenized, while the cultural traits of Islam permeated Tibetan culture. In the following the author describes various aspects of Islamic culture in Tibet, namely investigating the ethnic name of Muslims in the Tibetan language, as well as material culture, technological culture, the Muslim community, education and intellectual culture.

Keywords

Islam – Tibet – Islamic Culture

Islamic and Tibetan cultures first emerged ca. the 7th Century AD. In the 13th Century AD, Islam extended its influences to the edges of the Qinghai Plateau. It was inevitable that both cultures confronted each other at times, while at other times they remained peaceful and interacted with each other. So what has taken place since the 13th Century? This chapter focuses upon investigating the consequences after these exchanges in the present-day Tibetan Autonomous Region.

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The spread of Islam in Tibet has relied mainly upon the immigration of Muslims. The first introduction of Islam in the region of Dbus-gtsang was recorded as early as the period of the Fifth Dalai Lama. Muslims at that time moved into Tibet from the Kashmiri region and Northwest China with the distinctive cultural origins of these two different places. The present-day mosque located at Balang Street, in Lhasa, features artifacts that the settlers of Kashmir left, whereas the great mosque in Hebalin, Chengguan District of Lhasa, serves attendants with ancestral origins in China.

The exchanges between Islam and Tibet resulted in a two-pronged effect. On the one hand, the Muslim immigrants became indigenized after generations of settlement, thereby creating a unique Islamic culture in its own right; on the other, Islamic culture, by all possible means, permeated Tibetan culture, thus enriching the latter in both content and form.

The following describes how Islam permeated Tibet.

1 Nomenclatures of Muslims in Tibet

In Tibet, Islam and Muslims are generally called Kla-klovi-chos (the barbarians or infidels), Kha-che, (Kashmiris), and mgo-dkar (the white heads). Later on, Kachee (or Kha-che, which literally means Kashmiri) became a general label for Muslims without regard to their origins.

According to previous studies, the earliest terms used to address Muslims in Tibetan language were Kla-klovi-chos and Kha-che in relation to the mythical kingdom of Shambhala as recorded in Tibetan history and literature. According to Bsod-nams-grags-pa, for instance, when the 10th descendent of Shambhala came to rule, there was a record of a small region in India called Ma-Gta-Dha with registries of Kla-klovi-chos, and there is a general agreement among the present-day scholars that Kla-klovi-chos refers to Islam; Kla-klovi