

## **Advent of Islam in Tibet: An Overview**

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### **Abstract**

The story of the Tibetan Muslims is a unique and interesting story that has blended different cultural strains to forge a distinct identity that has been kept alive even in the face of adversity. What is interesting to know is that Islam arrived almost thousand years ago in Tibet, a region that has always been synonymous with monolithic Buddhist culture. How the first Muslim settlers reached Tibet and how both the communities Buddhists and Muslims lived in harmony is an interesting as well as a hot debate for the academic pursuits since decades. This paper elaborates the emergence of Islam in Tibet in detail.

There is no documentary evidence available that exactly corroborates when Muslims first came to settle in Tibet. But the existence of Tibet appears to be known to the Muslim world from earliest period of recorded history. Several Arab scholars like Ibn-e- Khaldun, Al-Yaqubi and Tabari have mentioned Tibet in their various writings and refer to the land as Tibet or Tibbat or Tubbat. Several central and west Asian rulers had relations with Tibet during medieval era. Caliph Umar is said to have sent Salah- Bin- Abdullah-Hanafī to Tibet for religious and philosophical teaching to the local people. The Abbasid rulers of Baghdad maintained their relations with Tibet during 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is also believed that a delegation from Tibet and China requested the caliph Umar bin Abdul Aziz to send Islamic missionaries to their countries. Tibet was also not free from the conquering Mongols of central Asia. Mongolian conquerors had

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contact with Tibet since early times. It is to be mentioned here that Tibet was subject to various cultural influences as it was a frontier region between central Asia, Kashmir, Ladakh and so on. There were diverse historical influences on Tibet's population Muslims, Hindus, Jains, Christians and so on, besides the Buddhists.

The Abbasid rulers also maintained some links with the Tibetan rulers. Quoting from *Fut-hulBuldan*, a historian says that when Mamun became caliph (813-33), he entered into relations with the rulers of Tibet and its neighbouring territories. During Al-Mamun's rule, the ruler of Tibet accepted Islam. As proof of his conversion, he sent the golden idol which he used to worship to Khurasan. The idol was fixed on a table studded with gold. Mamun sent it to Makkah and informed that Allah gave guidance to the ruler of Tibet.

To the north of Kashmir in Skardu or little Tibet, there has been a Muslim population for over three centuries, but the tradition regarding the first introduction of this faith here are very conflicting. To the north east, Islam is encroaching upon Buddhism, and has been carried by the Kashmiri merchants into Tibet. In all the Chief cities, settlements of Kashmiri merchants are to be found, in Lhasa they number about a 1000, they marry Tibetan women who often adopt the religion of their husbands, but active efforts at conversion cannot be made from fear of the authorities. Islam moreover has made its way into Tibet from Yunan in China from Persia.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Arnold in his book *The Preaching of Islam*, published in the early part of this century says, "Islam has also been carried into Tibet proper by Kashmiri merchants. Settlements of such merchants are to be found in all the chief cities of Tibet they marry Tibetan women, who often adopt the religion of their husbands". As trade caravans from Ladakh and Kashmir used to visit Tibet, it could be concluded that those Muslim preachers who came to Kashmir with Sayyid Ali

Hamadani and who propagated Islam in Ladakh and Baltistan, some of them must also have entered Tibet through these routes. In the Lhasa there are high rise graves and such other ancient monuments which the Tibetan Muslims regard as the graves of their ancient sages who introduced Islam there.

Islam spread in Tibet from two directions. Moving from Arabia through Persia and Afghanistan, it reached China through the ancient silk route in Central Asia. From Ningxia and other points in China it moved into eastern Tibet (Amdo). Chinese Muslims, known as Huis, eventually settled in Siling, and the Kokonor region generally, and from there they carried on trade with central Tibet. Though many of these merchants remained permanently in the eastern Tibet, where large pockets are still to be found, some, like their brethren from the west, eventually moved to Lhasa, where they preserve their religion and customs in a small and tightly knit community to the present day. The Lhasa Muslim community is composed of Chinese, Kashmiris, Nepalese, Ladakhis. They are divided into two quite distinct sub communities: those of the Chota (small) Masjid, who are principally of Kashmiri origin (through those of Nepalese, Ladhaki origin are also affiliated with this group), and the Bara (Large) Masjid, who are primarily Chinese. Each group had its own ruling council and leader with administrative ties to different ministries of the Tibetan government.<sup>2</sup>

Islam also spread from the west: from Turkestan Baltistan and Kashmir into Ladakh and principally through Ladakh to Western Tibet and Lhasa. It appears that Baltistan was conquered by Muslim forces around the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Originally Tibetan Buddhists, the Baltis were converted to Islam. In the late 16th century, during the reign of the Ladakhi king JamNamgyal, the Baltis, under the leadership of Ali Mir, invaded Ladakh and burnt all of the religious books threw some into the water, destroyed all of the temples, whereupon they again returned to their own country. Although it disappeared throughout substantial portions of Central Asia,

Buddhism was revived and thrives in Ladakh until the present day. However, in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century the reigning king, Namgyal, was forced to convert to Islam (and to build a mosque in Leh) as a condition for receiving the help of the Moghul ruler of Kashmir to fend off the invading Mongols. His heir, however, continued the sponsorship of Buddhism. Later Ladakhi kings would at times show an interest in Islamic culture of their own and today there is a good Muslim community in Ladakh.<sup>3</sup>

Tibetan Muslims trace their origin from various immigrant groups of four main regions Kashmir, Ladakh, China and Nepal. Muslims were known as Khacche among the Tibetans, which in fact is derived from the Ladakhi word Khachur. Gradually marriage and social interaction of immigrant Muslims with the local Tibetan population led to an increase of Muslim population around Lhasa, the capital of Tibet and other adjoining areas. The Tibetan Muslims are popularly known as Lhasa- kache. Most of the castes among Tibetan Muslims are Wani, Qazi, Baba and Bhat. The Kashmiri names for different ritual prayers are Subah for *Fajar*, *Pesheen* for *Zuhar*, *digr* for *asr*, *sham* for *magrib* and *khuftan* for *Isha*, the timings in Tibet have these very Kashmiri names. In Kashmir at the time of marriages or other feasts, the system is to offer food in a large, engrave copper tray, which is shared by four persons simultaneously. This system was in vogue among Tibetan Muslims also. Worshipping graves and tombs of dead saints is very common among kashmiris. When somebody has his wish fulfilled, he distributes yellow rice or Tehr as the Kashmiris call it, Tibet too has many such Dargahs associated with the names of various former Muslim saints, which people used to visit to pray for the fulfillment of their wishes. They would bring from there yellow rice as holy Prasad called Man-jama. There was no large scale conversion to Islam in Tibet. Actually, Islam had been carried to Tibet by merchants and traders, especially of Kashmir and Ladakh; they married Tibetan women who often adopted the Islamic religion of their

husbands. As a matter of fact, settlements of Muslim traders are to be found in all the main towns and cities of Tibet.

In Tibet Muslims are popularly known as kache. The earliest Muslim settlers to Tibet were from Kashmir and Ladakh which were known as kache-yl to Tibetans. Tibetan Muslim community which has been in existence for over 600 years doesn't have recorded history, except in Urdu. In 12<sup>th</sup> century a hardy band of 25 Kashmiri traders crossed Nepal and headed towards Tibet. They married Tibetan women and permanently settled in three different areas of central Tibet, named Lasha, Shigatse and Tsetang. Centuries later, the expanded Tibetan Muslim community approached His Holiness 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama for a place for construction of a mosque and also for burial ground. Tradition, as preserved in the collective memory of the Tibetan Muslim community has it that 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama offered them a vast area for their institutional and social needs. Thus a large tract of land was owned by the Muslims and the place became known as GyangdaLinka.<sup>4</sup>

After migrating from various territories over the span of more than two centuries, at least four distinct Muslim communities inhabited central Tibet: the Nepalese, the Gharibs, the Gya-Khache or Hopalingpas and the Khache. The Nepalese Muslims constituted a small community who originated from Kathmandu, numbering eight to ten families settled in Lhasa and Tsetang, remaining subjects under the jurisdiction of the Nepalese consulate in Lhasa<sup>5</sup>. As an impoverished servant group, the Gharibs (an Urdu term meaning poor) served as policemen and security guards for the heads of the wealthy Khache community<sup>6</sup>. The Gya-Khaches settled in the area of Lhasa known as Hopaling where they worked as butchers, vegetable farmers, or merchants. The Tibetan government granted the Hui Muslims land for their own religious institutions. While carrying on their livelihoods, they came to mix their Hui traditions with Tibetan culture by adopting local vernaculars, staple foods, and customs<sup>7</sup>. Among all the city's

Muslim enclaves, the Lhasa Khache were the most well-integrated into Tibetan society with their affluent and influential community consisting of three castes: a) the za'ida who were born in Tibet, b) the Ladakh Khache who migrated from Ladakh and managed trade caravan between Leh and Lhasa, and c) Singh-pa Khache, Hindu or Sikh converts to Islam who descended from Dogra prisoners captured during the Tibet-Dogra war.<sup>8</sup>

It is the Lhasa Khache to whom the Tibetan Muslims in Kashmir look for their ancestral origins. According to oral histories preserved by members of the Srinagar community, the Khache first emerged in Tibet beginning in the 12th century as various groups of Kashmiris fled to Lhasa during periods of famine and political turmoil in the Kashmir. Their ancestors viewed Tibet as a safe-zone.<sup>9</sup> Once they arrived in Lhasa, inter-marriage occurred between Kashmiri men and Buddhist women who would subsequently be converted to Islam. The community began to grow in number, becoming a population of two "mixed races," Kashmiri and Tibetan. Being a Khache thus meant descending from a Kashmiri paternal line and Tibetan maternal line.<sup>10</sup>

After integrating into Tibetan society, the Lhasa Khache Islamicized facets of Tibetan culture while they simultaneously Tibetanized their religious practices and traditions. Based on such examples, Cabezón observes that the culture and customs of the Khache provided "glimpses of two worlds simultaneously: the Muslim and the Buddhist, the Tibetan and the Arabic."<sup>11</sup>

The Khache also became well-integrated members of Tibetan society who received patronage from Lhasa's ruling elite. From at least the seventeenth-century, they gained the direct aid from the central Tibetan government when the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617–1682), ascended to power and granted the Tibetan Muslims support in the form of various exemptions and entitlements. The Lhasa Khache enjoyed tax exempt status, thus allowing them use to their

surplus income for their community's welfare. They were also not expected to bow before lamas or other dignitaries, nor were they required to remove their head coverings in front of such dignitaries and they were excused from restrictions on eating meat during Buddhist holy months.<sup>12</sup> Such exemptions indicate that Lhasa's religious and political authorities recognized and respected the Tibetan Muslims as a separate religious community. Besides Kashmir and Ladakh, Islam made its way into Tibet also from Yunnun. A good number of Muslim, were from China, particularly from Suthan, and Harilam. These places are also known as Sulling or Hilling which was the small town in China in the north of Tibet and famous for its agricultural products. The people of that origin are called as Hu-Hu or Hui or Siling.

The Muslims are allowed to decide their own cases. For this purpose, the Muslim community would annually elect a five-member committee called Punch. One of these elected persons was nominated by the Tibetan government to be the leader of the committee, and he was addressed as Mian by all Muslims. This committee adjudicated on all issues pertaining to Muslims, and the Tibetan government never interfered with its functions. Even when a Muslim was found involved in some case of theft or quarrel, he was invariably handed over to this committee.<sup>13</sup>

The arrival of Muslims was followed by the construction of mosques in different parts of Tibet. The fifth Dalai Lama provided land for the mosque. Before 1959, there were four mosques in the capital Lhasa, two in Shigatse, and one in Tsethang and a few in Silling. Each mosque had a mosque committee who looked after their respective mosque. This committee, headed by the Imam of the mosque, arranged all the religious functions in a year. Every Year, the Muslims celebrated the two Eids with great pomp and show. The Eid prayers were offered at the mosques in the morning. Special feasts were prepared at home to which many Buddhist brethren

and friends were invited. Besides daily prayers, special prayers were also offered at the mosques for the whole night on the other religious occasions like *Shabe- Barat*, *Shabe- Qadr* and *Eid- Miladun- Nabi*. During the holy month of Ramadan, the Muslims used to gather at the mosques for Iftar at the sunset which was arranged by the mosque committee. The mosques were maintained well and were the centers of the Muslims social life in Tibet.

As the Muslim community grew, Madrasas were set up in which children were taught about Islam, the Quran and the method of offering Namaz. Urdu language was also a part of the curriculum. There were two such Madrasas in Lhasa and one in Shigatse.

In Tibet, the interaction between the Buddhist and Muslim Tibetans in their day to day economic, social and cultural life and even in ceremonial affairs was in vogue. Due to close association and integration with the locals the Muslim Tibetans shared many cultural traits with their Buddhist neighbors. However, at the same time, they also maintained a clear social boundary and religious and cultural identity through their own social and religious institutions. Further, the Muslims contributed to the growth of Tibetan culture and civilization by virtue of economic and cultural roles played by them in the Buddhist land of Tibet.

At last I mentioned that the process of Islamization in Tibet has been an area of research in universities through out the world. However, much introspection is needed to look into the circumstances that favored the setting of Islam and Muslims in this region.



## References and Notes

<sup>1</sup>AbubakarAmeeruddinTibbatiNadvi, *TibbataurTibbatiMusalman* (Tibet and Tibetan Muslims, Urdu) Lucknow: NadwatulUlema, 1979. pp.55-56.

<sup>2</sup>Prince Peter, “*The Moslems of Central Tibet*”, pp.234-235, stated that Chinese Muslims were responsible to the Ministry of Agriculture, since they originally arrived in Lhasa as result of war, and were given to this office as agricultural workers. The Kashmiri Muslims were responsible to the Ministry of Finance, since they originally arrived in Lhasa as traders.

<sup>3</sup>See Luciano Petech, *Mediaeval History of Nepal* (c.750-1482), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Rome: IsMEO, 1984), pp. 124-127.

<sup>4</sup> Butt Masood 1994 “*Muslims of Tibet*” in Tibetan Bulletin, Oct-Nov (1988), pp 8-9 & 16.

<sup>5</sup>Marc Gaborieau, Introduction to *Récit D’un Voyageur Musulman Au Tibet* by Khwajah Ghulam Muhammad (Paris: Labethno, 1973), 22. Gaborieau does not date the origins of this community.

<sup>6</sup>Little is known about this group. Their ethnicity and geographical origins have not been determined.

Gaborieau classifies them as a distinct Muslim enclave in Lhasa, because they had their own administrative council headed by their own leader (the gharib ‘go ba) For further description of this community see KhwajahG\_ulamMu\_ammad, *Récit D’un Voyageur Musulman Au Tibet*, ed. and trans. Marc Gaborieau(Paris: Labethno, 1973), 131-136.

<sup>7</sup>For a fascinating discussion on the blending of Hui and Tibetan culture see Claude Moevus, “*The Chinese Hui Muslim Trade in Tibetan Areas*,” *Tibet Journal* 20, no. 3 (1995): 115-123.

<sup>8</sup>I am basing this tripartite breakdown of the Khache community on Marc Gaborieau’s article in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition., s.v. “Tubbat.” 578.

<sup>9</sup>Abu Bakr Amir-Uddin Nadwi, *Tibet and Tibetan Muslims*, trans. Paramanda Sharma (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2004), 51.

<sup>10</sup>It may however be the case that some intermarriages could have taken place with women in Ladakh, Nepal, and other parts of South Asia who were then brought back to Lhasa. Nevertheless, according to oral histories, the ethnic origins of the Khache can be

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traced to in the inter-marriages of Kashmiri Muslim men and Tibetan Buddhist women.

<sup>11</sup>Cabezón, “*Islam in the Tibetan Cultural Sphere*,” 22.

<sup>12</sup>Nadwi, *Tibet and Tibetan Muslims*, 54-55.

<sup>13</sup> Butt Masood 1994 “*Muslims of Tibet*” in Tibetan Bulletin, Oct-Nov (1988), pp 14-15.