

Those Tibetans Don't Float Through the Air But They Surely Can Outwit Chilling Northerners

Returned Scholar Does Some Debunking, but Country Is Fascinating

(Editor's Note.—Life in remote Tibet is described here by a young Xosha (Aria) lawyer who is one of the few white men ever to penetrate the interior country. The writer is a graduate of the University of Arizona and is preparing a thesis on Buddhism and Tantra for a doctorate in philosophy at Columbia University based on his observations and discoveries.)

— BY THEOS BEKNARD.
(Copyright, 1937, by NANA, Inc.)
NEW YORK, Dec. 28.—A day in Lhasa is not intriguing; it is not exciting; it is not hair-raising. A day in Lhasa is calm, but it is far from uninteresting.

The people of Lhasa sleep as we do; eat more or less as we do; converse as we do, and enjoy the same things which we enjoy. True, I think the average Tibetan spends fewer hours than does the average American; and, perhaps, he eats more, or at least he eats often. But, from our point of view, there is nothing of the unusual or extraordinary in the life of the average Tibetan. Much more of his life is occupied by things religious than is the life of the average American, but then he is not a member of a Rotary Club or a fraternity; his education is not secular; and his Government is not a democracy in the strict sense of the term. Religion plays the same part in his life that all these secular institutions do in ours, and more.

While I did not have any weird ideas about Tibetan life when I entered Tibet, I was nonetheless impressed with the simplicity and matter-of-factness of Tibetan living.

My trip to Gyantse was suspiciously planned so that I arrived there on a famous feast day, and my appearance, plus my knowledge of the significance of this feast day, so ingratiated me to the Tibetans that my researches and my conversations with the lamas were both easy and immensely profitable. That which I found and learned during my days in Gyantse would alone have made my whole journey up to that point profitable, but I discovered I could find more literature and meet even better informed Buddhist scholars in the capital, and for this reason I sought permission to go to Lhasa.

Finally His Permission. This permission finally was granted to "Bernard of America," as the telegram read, by the Kashag, or Central Cabinet of Tibet. According to the telegram, which I received in Gyantse, I was to be permitted to visit Lhasa for three weeks. Subsequently, I was granted permission for an indefinite stay in Lhasa, as well as permission to visit a number of other Tibetan cities.

A description of a typical day in Lhasa might serve to picture the simplicity of Tibetan life. While a houseguest of Tsarong-Shape, I used to arise daily at 4 P. M. I would be brought tea by one of my servants, and, after drinking this, I would discuss the program for the day with my lamon, who was acting as my secretary. My lamon was, as a matter of fact, my teacher, guide and interpreter (until I had sufficiently mastered Tibetan to get along without one).

Following the conference with my lamon, I would study and read until about 8 o'clock, when I would have breakfast with my host, Tsarong. For breakfast we would have thukpa, a sort of thick soup; sha gumba, a de-



The Potala, an architectural gem of Asia, is the largest building in Lhasa and the palace of the late Dalai Lama.

licious dish made up chiefly of finely ground dried yak's meat, and tsampa, parched barley flour. All this would be washed down with Tibetan tea, imported from China. This tea, after being boiled for several hours, is churned with butter and salt for taste, and is quite good if the butter is not too many years old.

Tea as in Mayfair. After breakfast, I would converse a while with Tsarong and then return to the room which served as my study. There I would meet with various lamas and with them would pore over manuscripts and documents which I had been able to buy or which were given to me as presents.

Although I would have had one or two cups of tea during the morning, by 1 o'clock I was always hungry and ready for my simple lunch with Tsarong. After lunch, we would converse a while, or I might take a nap for an hour or two.

More conferences with lamas would be followed by 4 o'clock tea, a decidedly English function. Tsarong had a beautiful English silver tea service and we had English tea, imported from India, and the same sort of cookies and cake that one might have at 4 o'clock in Mayfair or on Park avenue.

Tsarong is, incidentally, one of the wealthiest men in Tibet; and his outlook is as cosmopolitan and his horizon as wide as that of any man. His home is relatively comfortable, even by our standards, and life with him was anything but narrow and restricted. His English wireless set

brought in Calcutta and London broadcasts daily, and with him I was able to keep up with the outside world quite as well as I might in London or in New York.

Following my 4 o'clock tea, I would study again until dusk, when I walked with Tsarong in his garden, which has in it apple trees from America, and other Western trees and plants which grow there quite as well as in their native habitat. The vegetable garden was filled with as fine cabbages, cauliflower, beets and tomatoes as I have ever seen.

Listen to Radio. After our walk we would have dinner and spend the evening either in reading and study, or in listening to the radio. We could enjoy musical programs together and the news broadcasts I translated for Tsarong. Once a week there was a fifteen-minute broadcast in Tibetan from Nanking, and for these broadcasts a number of people would gather at Tsarong's radio. Other evenings Tsarong and I would spend discussing photography and cameras. He himself has taken some fine photographs and is an accomplished photographic technician.

At 11 o'clock we had our nighttime tea again, and by midnight I would retire. These were simple days, yet no moment in them was devoid of interest.

Ritual days, like our Sundays, were spent entirely at a temple or in a monastery. On these days, I usually would arise earlier, as the ceremonies were held at such monasteries as

Repong, a few miles out of Lhasa. My boys were up at 3 to saddle the horses, and, after the inevitable and necessary early morning cup of tea, we were out to the monastery. The ceremonies would commence at sunrise, and consisted of prayers, chants and devotional tours to the shrines about the monastery.

It is impossible to describe adequately the atmosphere of these early morning 200-odd religious ceremonies. The music which accompanied them was unlike any music I know, and yet there was nothing primitive about it. I have not space here to describe the significance of each of the steps in the ritual ceremony, but what is important is the sincerity of the participants. It was impossible not to feel this and, for a very large measure, not to partake of it.

Nothing Mysterious—Na? The ceremonies would be interrupted about 8 o'clock for a brief breakfast, and would be resumed immediately after this, continuing for the rest of the day, interspersed only occasionally by cups of tea. The last part of the ceremony consisted of a devotional tour around the whole monastery—a distance of about a mile. The ride back home at dusk would be followed by a simple supper and the evening would be spent much as would any other.

There is nothing in the Tibetan religious ritual which is mysterious or inexplicable in Western terms, though, to the uninitiated and uncritical, some of the Tibetan Buddhist phenomena would seem nothing short of miraculous. Much is made in the popular works on Yogi of the so-called feat of levitation. I have met many lamas who believe it possible for a human body to float through the air from peak to peak, but, during my stay in Tibet, I saw no such floating bodies.

I have, however, seen lamas apparently make their bodies lighter and suddenly spring several feet into the air without visible muscular effort. This phenomenon occurs at certain religious rites during which one lama enters a sort of trance and makes an oracular utterance. This individual may be in this state for several hours, during which time he may leap from the ground by some sort of muscular spasm a number of times. After the ceremony, this lama is taken away, in an exhausted state, and it usually takes him several days to recover from it.

Fragal Liquid Diet. The act of raising bodily temperature by concentration, or thumo, as the Tibetans call it, I have seen practiced. I myself have seen a lama, dressed only in a simple robe, raise his body temperature to a sweating fever heat in a room wherein the temperature was not higher than 50 degrees. I have observed other effects of a very rigorous physical discipline, and, to a certain extent, practiced this discipline on myself not without results.

I visited a hermit who has spent twenty years in a cell, no larger than a telephone booth, without once lying down. He lives on a diet of yak's milk and is as vigorous in appearance as any other 70-year-old man I have ever seen.

I lived in Tibet on a very frugal liquid diet, and found myself able to get along with little or no sleep for several months. Nor did I suffer any loss of physical alertness during this time, and, on the contrary, I never felt better in my life.

I must emphasize that such of these practices as I have here described are practiced by the Tibetans only as a means to an end, that of arriving at a state of perfect contemplation; they are but by-products of a philosophical process and are to be appreciated only in terms of the total framework of reference of the Tibetan Buddhist. To the Tibetans themselves, these practices are relatively incidental in comparison with the important totality of their philosophical outlook.

I have not described the special days on which were held banquets, or the days when we were honored guests of a Tibetan who would have a three or four day party for us. Nor have I described the special excursions which I made to some of the most renowned lamasteries and monasteries of Tibet. All this would require a long-extended discussion, and much of it could not be presented separate from the philosophical and religious picture of which it is a part.

It was this picture which I went to Tibet to view and understand. Parts of it—in the form of manuscripts, full texts of the Kangyur and Tengyur, documents, records of discussion with learned lamas, and a photographic record of the whole experience—I have brought home with me. Through these I shall redigest and assess my experiences in the hope of being able to say and write some things truly definitive about Tibet and about the religion inseparable from it.