



Review Essay

Muslims on the Roof of the World—David G. Atwill’s *Islamic Shangri-la*

ISLAMIC SHANGRI-LA: INTER-ASIAN RELATIONS AND
LHASA’S MUSLIM COMMUNITIES, 1600 TO 1960

By David G. Atwill
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Muslim communities and cultures have had a huge influence on the development of Tibetan culture in areas as diverse as music, language, cuisine, and commerce, but they have been underrepresented in historical studies of Tibet that remain largely enamored with Buddhism. David G. Atwill’s *Islamic Shangri-La: Inter-Asian Relations and Lhasa’s Muslim Communities, 1600 to 1960* is a valuable and welcome addition to the small but growing body of scholarship that examines the history of Islam in Tibet and the unique community known as the *Khache*, or Tibetan Muslims. The title of this book does not represent the full scope of its coverage, which considers the history of Islam in Tibet from the seventeenth century onwards, with particular emphasis on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and how Muslim Tibetans fared in the geopolitics between China and South Asia during the Cold War. This emphasis means that Tibetan history is connected with broader events in South and East Asia and the Middle East during this period, making *Islamic Shangri-La* a wonderfully global history of identity and connection.

This global focus is possible due to David G. Atwill’s training. A widely published scholar in the history of Islam in China, Atwill enriched his rigorous Sinological training with support from a Mellon Foundation’s New Directions Fellowship to learn Tibetan language in order to explore Islamic history on the Tibetan plateau. This training and focus led Atwill to carry out archival and ethnographic research in locations as diverse as Delhi, Kalimpong, Kathmandu, and London. This multi-sited research has allowed Atwill to actualize his goal of pioneering “a thick transregional history of the Tibetan Muslims written against the grain of state-based national histories of Asia’s past” (5).

In Chapter 1, “Boundaries of Belonging,” Atwill begins by outlining the important role Tibetan Muslims have long played

in Lhasa societies. He uses a 1936 soccer match between players that included British imperial officials from the British Diplomatic Mission, Tibetan aristocrats, Ladakhis, Sikkimese, and a team called the “Lhasa Mohammedans” as a launching pad for thinking about Tibetan social divisions and where the *Khache* fit within them. He rightly points out that the presence of these myriad groups rebukes representations of Tibet as isolated, and that historically, Mongolians, Nepalese, and Kashmiris had long played important roles in Tibetan societies. However, *Khache* present what Atwill calls “a paradox of indigeneity” (3), as unlike these other groups, they were not foreigners, but through intermarriage, language use, and cultural ties became accepted as ethnically Tibetan alongside their Buddhist compatriots. Their presence demonstrates that historical Tibet was a diverse and complex place. Complicating their position in histories of Tibet is the scarcity of historical resources referring to the *Khache* before 1900. The earliest mentions of the Islam in Tibet date to the eighth century (5), but it appears that few Muslims resided permanently in Tibet before the late sixteenth century. By the seventeenth century, there are a number of sources available that confirm their presence in the capital and their importance as “key brokers promoting Tibet’s inter-Asian ties” for the Government of the Dalai Lamas (7).

Confusing the situation is that when *Khache* have appeared in histories, they have often been misrepresented as foreign “perpetual non-natives” due to their religious difference. The term *Khache* appeared in the fifteenth century to refer to Kashmiri Muslims, and the term was soon taken up to refer to other Muslim groups with Chinese and Central Asian origins (6). While in early modern Tibet *Khache* were central players in fostering economic ties with other parts of Asia, confusion about their status has also emerged from events of the twentieth century. During the massive political changes that took place in Tibet in the 1950s, a number of *Khache* used their historical connections to Kashmir to claim Indian citizenship so they could leave Chinese-controlled Tibet. Their decision to do so demonstrates how “questions of ancestry and citizenship were imperfect solutions to the question of national identity in a Himalayan context” in the twentieth-century new order of decolonialization and reterritorialization in Asia (11–12).

After this first chapter, Chapter 2, “Confronting the Unexpected,” provides more depth of detail about Lhasa’s Muslim landscape and oral and written histories related to

the Khache, as well as the development of the term Khache. Atwill discusses the four mosques that are all in central areas of Lhasa's sacred landscape, connections between the communities of these mosques and others on the Tibetan plateau, and their division between the two major Tibetan communities. Khache with South Asian heritage are known as the Barkor Khache, and those with Chinese heritage are known as the Wapaling Khache (25). This is a starting point for Atwill's consideration of the complexity of pinpointing Tibetanness based on ethnicity, religion, or political territory. The chapter is thought provoking for its presentation of these questions from a non-Buddhist center point and provides a helpful overview of these debates in Tibetan studies scholarship along with important correctives to erroneous monolithic representations.

Chapter 3, "How Half-Tibetans Made Tibet Whole" provides an important explication of the position of Khache in the debates and struggles over the political status of Tibet over the centuries. Here, Atwill's overview of events in China during the Republican period and how they impacted China's treatment of Tibet is informative and rendered all the more original by his framing of discussions through a consideration of questions of identity, citizenship, and ethnicity as they were consolidated in the process of nation state building. The chapter focuses on the Khatsara (half-Nepalese) and half-Chinese (Koko) groups in central Tibet. These communities were named after derogatory terms in Nepali and Chinese that indicate anxieties about mixed-race parentage, particularly as it related to legal claims (37). Atwill's exploration of these themes and communities is enlivened by vivid case studies, including the famous female Sino-Tibetan diplomat and writer Liu Manqing, who is often represented as Sino-Tibetan and who referred to herself as Han (48), but was the daughter of a Wapaling Khache father and Kham Khache mother, which gave her important ties to different communities.

Chapter 4, "Himalayan Asia" takes up events in the 1950s, after the entrance of Chinese military forces and the implementation of the 17-Point Agreement between China and Tibet. It positions Tibet and the Himalayas, most centrally Nepal, as crucial to Sino-Indian relations of the period and considers the Cold War geopolitics around the Bandung Conference in 1955. This chapter is admirable for its attempts to outline historical events in the 1950s without polarized perspectives that veer between narratives of Chinese liberation or oppression, instead opting to illustrate Tibetan agency and autonomy and to position events within broader histories of the decolonization period in Asia. For many Khache, this period was seen as a period of opportunity for developing trade, especially because Khache traders were still allowed to import luxury goods that were scarce or banned in other parts of China (70). Wapaling Khache also profited as linguistic and cultural brokers through their Chinese connections (71-72). In public discourse, Khache were referred to monolithically by the Chinese government as "Hui,"

the term used for Muslim communities in parts of China, which consolidated propaganda emphasizing unity between ethnic groups in "liberated" Tibet (68), but the new PRC state spent a lot of time and energy trying to win Khache support. Their success in trade afforded Khache autonomy in surprising areas. An interesting example discussed by Atwill was the pilgrimage that forty-one Tibetan Muslims made to Mecca independent of state funding (71). But this period was not to last, as treaties with India and Nepal and the negotiations that were part of the Bandung Conference led to changes in conceptualizations of citizenship. Passports became required to leave or enter Tibet's border (89), which led to less mobility for traders and was accompanied by concerns over broader changes in Tibet.

These changes came to a head with the significant turmoil of 1959, which signaled the end of Tibet's limited autonomy and the Dalai Lama's journey into exile in India. Chapter 5, "The Tibetan Muslim Incident of 1960," is one of the most valuable standalone chapters in the book, because it considers the lasting repercussions of Tibet's political status and the Cold War on Khache communities. The tensions that led to violence in the days around the departure of the Dalai Lama and the sudden implementation of new currency regulations that saw foreign and Tibetan currency outlawed in favor of Chinese currency left the Khache to decide for political and financial reasons whether they would be identified as Chinese, Tibetan, or Indian. Wapaling Khache were aligned with China; Barkor Khache appealed to their Kalimpong relatives to be seen as Indian. The legacy of the Bandung Conference of 1955 was powerful in this period, as Nehru used China's own decision to include overseas Chinese in discussions of Chinese citizenship because they were "once-a-Chinese-always-a-Chinese" in his argument for Khache to be classified as Indian (107). Atwill's fascinating discussion of ongoing negotiations between the Chinese and Indian States and Khache is rich with detail and offers insight into the complex processes of citizen making that took place during this period. Eventually, members of both the Barkor and Wapaling Khache were allowed to depart for India to seek out new opportunities there as the heavy influence of the PRC state closed around Tibet.

The final chapter of the book, Chapter 6, "Prisoners of Shangri-La," examines the fate of Tibetan Khache communities since 1960. The details in this chapter are also fascinating, as some Khache did end up with family in the familiar trade center of Kalimpong but others were not so lucky and found that their new homes, which included Kashmir and Saudi Arabia, led them to encounter new challenges. The title of the chapter reflects its theme: the way Khache have been marginalized by and suffered because of the powerful articulation of identity that inextricably connects being Tibetan with being Buddhist. As Buddhist Tibetans have remained Tibetans and given resources as refugees, Khache have been denied this identity for their decision in 1960 to become Indian citizens, which has

in turn provided them with alternative types of privilege not enjoyed by other Tibetan refugees in South Asia. At the same time, other Tibetans have consciously rejected Indian citizenship (although it has also never been offered to them publicly) as a way to assert their loyalty to Tibet. Atwill provides a nuanced and moving overview of the complex politics of identity and negotiations around representation in contemporary Tibetan communities. This chapter provides valuable historical context for understanding the significance of meetings between the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Muslims of Kashmir that have taken place since 2012.

Islamic Shangri-La is a deeply important and overdue work that will be of immense value to many audiences, including scholars and students of Tibetan, Chinese, and South Asian history, Islamic history, the intersection between religion and trade in transnational networks, and connections between religion, citizenship, and the nation state. It is written in an engaging and accessible manner that means it could be read by college students at all levels, as well as popular audiences, and features

helpful, clear maps. Atwill has used a rich variety of sources including newspaper articles, memoirs, and diplomatic reports to populate the book's pages with engaging case studies that connect individuals to broader events. These narratives allow for the reader to understand the deeper import of the difficult decisions faced by Khache and the entanglements of their current situations. The chapters work well as standalone considerations of central themes and important periods in Tibetan and Chinese history, and the book provides timely historical context for understanding border disputes between India and China. Hopefully, the appearance of *Islamic Shangri-La* will encourage more research into fascinating transnational Tibetan Muslim communities, and work in religious studies on practices, lineages, and tradition within these communities would make for truly productive discussions of Tibetan religious diversity and Islam in and beyond Asia. Happily, this book is downloadable free of charge at Luminos, courtesy of the University of California Press, which should give it the wide readership that it deserves.