

20 February 2008

By: Stefan Anitei, Science Editor



Tibetan monks of the sect of the Yellow Hats
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7 Things About Tibetans

Dalai Lama and Lamaist Buddhism

1. Tibet is a large territory (about one third that of the US) comprising a large part of the Himalaya mountain chain. It is the highest country in the world, most of the territory being located at altitudes of 3,000-4,000 m (10,000-13,330 ft), while the mountain peaks overpass 8,000 m (26,660 ft). It would be a cold, wild and uninhabitable territory but, because of its location at the same altitude with Sahara, the plains and the valleys offer conditions for practicing agriculture, while the mountain slopes are covered with pastures for the livestock. In fact, Tibet has a great climate variety and life styles. The rough terrain of Tibet meant the only connection between various regions was made by fragile slate hanging bridges over swift rivers or very high passages, of difficult access, or glaciers that could be crossed only during certain periods of the year. That's why transport was a laborious task and many times on the shoulders of the carriers, as vehicles and animals could not be used at such altitudes.

2. Despite the shield of the huge Himalaya, along its history, the country experienced various invasions from India and China, countries with the greatest cultural impact on the Tibetans. Tibetans are extremely religious people, and their religion, brought from India, is Lamaist Buddhism, which requires various magical practices, like ritual dances executed by masked lamas, symbolizing divinities or demonic beings. These dances are aimed to present to people the myths connected to various gods and explain their genealogies. The music accompanying these dances is played on special instruments, like very large trumpets made of bamboo tubes, which must be leaned on the ground, or large beautifully adorned drums, bells and bronze or silver cymbals. The Lamaist Buddhism means the Tibetans recognize a hierarchy of the priests (lamas), whose supreme leader is Dalai Lama (Great Lama), which resides in Lhasa. The Lamaist Buddhism has a deep philosophical and moral content. Men tend to perfection and fusion with Buddha. Besides this religion, pre-Buddhist habits and traditions persist in Tibet, and they are connected to an array of superstitions, worshiping, black magic, demonic rites and others. Lamaist Buddhist believe in the power of pray; to pray more rapidly, the gates of the temples have wheels and pray cylinders, paper boxes containing paper rolls with written formulas and prayers, and each time the believer rotates these wheels, each turn is considered a prayer.

3. Using stone, Tibetans built large monasteries for Buddhist monks and nuns, fortresses, cities, palaces, temples and houses. Lhasa, the capital, has various traditional edifices of 10-12 levels. The houses look like fortresses, having very few openings to the exterior. All the rooms open to an inner courtyard. On the first level, the livestock is hosted; on the intermediary level the dwelling of the people is situated, and the last level comprises a chapel. The temples are really magnificent and adorned with beautiful sculptures and reliefs. The houses may also be made of adobe. Nomad Tibetan shepherds use skin tents during their movements and for the winter they go to the better protected valleys. Livestock possessing city dwellers use these tents, too, during the summer, when they follow the animals on the mountain pastures.

4. Tibetan people resemble those of northern China. They are rather tall (1.7 m or 5.6 ft in height), with a moderately wide and high skull, marked cheekbones, prominent nose and almond shaped eyes. Linguistically, the Tibetans are related to the Burmese, Himalayan tribes and ... Chinese.

5. The Tibetan society comprised three classes: farmers and shepherds, nobles and clergy. Only the lower class of farmers and shepherds worked, and this was really burdensome, as priest, monks and nuns made almost 25 % of the population. In order not to divide their possessions, the Tibetan farmers and the shepherds created a peculiar matrimony system: a woman could marry several brothers (one of the few known cases of polyandry amongst humans). This way the goods

of the parents were not divided. The sons of all the brothers lived together in the house, working in common and increasing the patrimony; generally the older sons followed the path of priesthood, and some girls went to serve in the temples. Tibetan women were richly adorned, wearing nice silk and wool clothing and all kind of silver, copper and gemstone jewelry. 6. Until the Chinese annexation, Tibet was a feudal state. Several great lords possessed large land areas, divided into plots cultivated by leaseholders, which returned, in change for these products, taxes, lending in case of war. Craftsmen could keep the land in leasing, in exchange for their products: fabrics, metal tools, ceramics, or music playing. Temples and monasteries had enormous land surfaces and did not pay taxes or levies to the nobles or to the king. In reality, each monastery was like a feudal lord: monks did not work and the monastery had numerous serfs serving the monastery, working the fields and taking care of the livestock of the monks. Monasteries were extremely rich, as besides fields and livestock, they were involved in trade and loaning, in addition to being paid for religious, magic or foresee services. Some monasteries were important art and study centers, but not all the monks followed the study of the art; low clergy wandered from one point to another to offer their services to the remote villages. It was said that Tibet was a theocratic state, fact that was certainly true, as in the last centuries, the chief of the central government, residing in Lhasa, was Dalai Lama, believed to be the reincarnation of a Buddhist saint. In the small feudal states, dependent on the central government, the ruler was not a lama, but a king coming from the nobles, but the high public offices were accomplished by the priests. The power of the Lamaist church was strengthened by the habit of sending the older sons of the family, no matter if rich or poor, to the monasteries. In 1910, Lhasa had 50,000 inhabitants, of which 20,000 were monks. 7. The most useful animal for the Tibetans is the yak, an animal related to the cattle but much better adapted to the harsh climate and conditions of the Tibet plateau. The yak wool is used for making mantles and blankets; the yak milk, meat and fat are a base of the Tibetan diet. The Tibetan tea is made mixing tea with yak butter (which gives a wool scent to the beverage). The yak is much better adapted than the horse for transporting loads across the Himalayan passages. Still, the most numerous Tibetan animals are the horses, followed by yaks, sheep and goats. Tibetans also exploit the wood of the mountain slopes, used mainly for heating during the winter. Some Tibetan tribes practice agriculture during the winter and, during the summer, they leave the fields under the care of the women, while the men go with the herds to the high land pastures. Because of the altitude, light is intense, and, despite the scarce rains, the water coming from melting ice (under the form of creeks and rivers) abounds. The Tibetan farmers create terraces on the slope of the mountains, which are irrigated with water brought through canals and ditches. Tibetans also knew the soil fertilization (using ash resulted from the burned dung of the livestock). The land was worked using plows driven by oxen or yaks. Due to their farming practices, the Tibetans achieved good crops of barley, rye, wheat, oats, millet and rice, but they also cultivated pomegranate trees, cherry trees, water melons and a special type of grape vine.