

MILLENARIANISM IN TIBETAN RELIGION*

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People in crises sometimes tend to develop millennial dreams and to strive for their realization. There can be no doubt that refugees are people in crisis. We may therefore ask if there are any millennial notions, or movements, among Tibetan refugees.

Using two typical beliefs and practices as illustrations I want to show that millennial ideas are, indeed, not unknown to Tibetans. These are: a) the notion of there being some hidden regions in the Himalayas to which one can escape in dangerous times; and b) a trance-like ceremony which enables the practitioner to attain the paradise of Buddha Amitābha. These ideas are not completely new, but it seems that, during the critical time of Tibetan exile since 1959, they have taken on a new form so that we can speak of some sort of collective revitalization of traditional myths or dreams taking place today.

That Buddhists, especially Mahāyāna Buddhists, believe in the existence of paradises is attested in numerous writings, works of art, and in the oral accounts of believers. These paradises, states akin to nirvāṇa, are points from which the ultimate goal, the final liberation from the cycle of suffering, can more easily be attained. The most famous of these paradises is that of Buddha Amitābha, called Sukhāvātī.¹

Mahāyāna Buddhist conceptions of paradise are reminiscent of those of other millennial movements. Many terms exist for the special socio-religious movements which in this paper I call millennial movements: they are referred to, for instance, as "chiliasm," "cult

* I am grateful to Kathleen Shore for translating my German text into English.

¹ For a Tibetan description of Sukhāvātī see, for instance, Schwieger (1978), which contains further references. The paradise is described in extremely ornate florid language in the *Sukhāvātī-vyūha* (Tib. *Bde ba can gyi zin bkod pa*), in Müller (1894). [Bibliographical data for this and other works cited will be found on pp. 255-6.]

movements," "eschatological movements," *Heilserwartungsbewegung*, "revitalization movements," "crisis cults," or "millenarianism," etc.² I prefer the latter term with the understanding that millenarianism is not confined to movements which have been influenced by Christianity and so stem from the idea of the 1000-year reign upon which the Christian concept is based. Besides those movements which aspire to a 1000-year or perhaps eternal stay in a state of bliss, I include as millennial collective endeavors to attain a paradise-like state even temporarily. To enlarge the terminology yet further, I extend the term to "paradise movements."

One difference between millenarianism and Buddhistic conceptions of paradise is, nevertheless, that most millennial movements claim that salvation lies in this world, in this life, whereas Buddhists believe that paradise can only be attained in the hereafter, that is after death. However, at least in Tibetan religion, conceptions of terrestrial paradises or paradise-like states, which I would like to illustrate using the following examples, are not unknown.

The attainment of Amitābha's paradise through the 'Pho-ba ceremony

References can occasionally be found in Western literature about Tibet to the ceremony called *'pho-ba*. It is conducted shortly after death for the welfare of the deceased, and is concerned with the transference of consciousness through the "aperture of Brahma, situated on the crown of the head at the sagittal suture where the two parietal bones articulate, opened by means of the yogic practice of *pho-wa*."³ The consciousness travels immediately into the pure land called *Bde-ba-can*, the paradise of Buddha Amitābha. Almost completely unknown is the fact that the *'pho-ba* ceremony is conducted not only for the welfare of the deceased in a manner similar to the *Bar do thos grol* rite, for example, but by the living for their own benefit as well. This is mainly done by specialized monks.⁴

² See also La Barre (1971), p. 11.

³ Evans-Wentz (1967), p. 170.

⁴ According to what I am told by Tibetan informants traditional *'pho-ba* texts for lay people also exist, though *'pho-ba* ceremonies for larger groups of lay persons were very seldom performed; so, for instance, every sixth year at 'Bri-khuñ monastery.

As far as I am able to tell, a kind of revitalization or popularization of this *'pho-ba* rite took place among Tibetans in Swiss exile after their migration there in 1980. Some of the Tibetans living in Switzerland have formed a group with a view to practicing *'pho-ba* on a regular basis. Thus Amitābha's paradise has become the focus of a salvation-practice for lay persons, with attainment actively being pursued by these people.

It is not the concern of this paper to describe *'pho-ba* meditation in detail.⁵ It is a highly complex practice which, when it is correctly executed, places great demands on the person meditating. This rite is nonetheless mentioned here inasmuch as *'pho-ba* represents a technique whereby a paradise, in this case that of Amitābha, can be attained immediately. To this extent, at least, its goal resembles that of a millennial movement. Secondary manifestations of this ritual are also reminiscent of characteristics of millennial movements: some participants in this rite—most are women—fall into trance-like states which are accompanied by rhythmic hyperventilation, moaning, whimpering, or loud sobbing, and less often by movements of the arms. For anyone accustomed to the quiet atmosphere of Buddhist meditation these seances are alien and extraordinary.⁶ The fact that this cult gains importance during the critical time of exile leads me to see yet another connection to the movements referred to by some authors as "crisis cults." I shall return to this point later.

It must not be forgotten that the *'pho-ba* rite as practiced by the living for their own sake is not concerned with a final attainment of paradise during *this* lifetime; it is only a rehearsal of the entrance into paradise, which becomes realized at the time of death. It can be

⁵ See, for instance, Evans-Wentz (1967), pp. 261ff. I have also received oral and written information from Ayang Rinpoche, etc.

⁶ The extraordinary effect that the *'pho-ba* exercise can have on the practitioner is indicated in a text translated by Dawa Samdup for Evans-Wentz (1967), p. 266: "Manifest thy humble fervent faith till the very hairs of thy body stand on end and tears course down thy cheeks..." A Rñin-ma-pa monk reported that he had never been able to observe any of the aforementioned phenomena among monks who practiced *'pho-ba* in Tibet. Occasionally, though, a monk fainted, he said. Michael Aris told me that he observed an outbreak of religious hysteria in the village of Uchu, Paro valley, Bhutan, while the Rñin-ma-pa bla-ma Pad-rgyal gliñ-pa bestowed the *'pho-ba luñ* on the villagers, mostly blacksmiths. About three-quarters of the villagers present were affected.

called a "limited" entry into Amitābha's paradise, being limited to the time during which the *'pho-ba* ritual is taking place.

The search for paradisaic hidden countries

During talks with Rñin-ma-pas, I first heard about regions in the south of ethnic Tibet which appear to be kinds of earthly paradises. I could find little information about these hidden countries (*sbas gnas* or *sbas yul*) in Western literature on Tibet.⁷ By questioning Tibetans and partly by consulting a Tibetan text, I tried to accumulate additional information about these paradisaic hidden countries.⁸ The following, certainly very incomplete, picture emerged: there are different kinds of hidden countries; in some, a visitor can remain for an indefinite period, whereas in others the time is limited to several years. Moreover, the hidden countries are divided into three categories: external, internal and secret. The best known *sbas yul* are Padma-bkod, Sikkim and Mkhan-pa-luñ, in Nepal.⁹

To be able to see and enter a hidden country, certain conditions must be met. Profound faith is essential. Only believers who are convinced of the existence of the *sbas yul* and who set out without reservations can expect to be successful in their search for the hidden country. Further, people who want to reach a hidden country must also have acquired great merit and have freed themselves from attachment to food, wealth and family. They must overcome ignorance and accept the help of a guidebook, otherwise the *sbas yul* cannot be reached. Another important stipulation is that until the time is ripe, no attempt should be made to enter the *sbas yul*. The time to enter is given in secret oral instructions and passed on by a spiritual leader. Care must be taken, however, that instructions not fall into the hands of unscrupulous teachers who deceive people. Also any empty talk about the hidden countries must be avoided.

A hidden country should be approached from one of the four cardinal points, depending on the time of the year:¹⁰ in autumn from

⁷ See Bacot (1912), Aris (1975 and 1979), Reinhard (1978), and Bernbaum (1980).

⁸ Namely, *sbas yul 'bras mo ljoñs kyi gnas yig phan yon dan bcas pa no mtshar gter mdzod*, translated with the help of Lama Lodroe, Dahortsang, Rikon.

⁹ There seem to be two Mkhan-pa-luñ (or Mkhan-pa-ljoñs), one in Bhutan and one in Nepal. See Aris (1979), p. 80.

¹⁰ This and the following descriptions refer to the *sbas yul* of Sikkim.

the east; in winter from the south; in spring from the west; and in summer from the north. Even when these conditions and rules are observed, the path to the hidden country is arduous and resembles a test. There is, for example, at each cardinal point a gate with so-called curtains, obstructions that must be overcome before the *sbas yul* can be entered. Additional hindrances are snow, disease, wild animals, thirst, and malicious local deities and spirits. These obstacles can be overcome, however, with the help of numerous rituals, or by burning certain substances, taking pills, reciting prayers, making offerings and piling up stones, etc.

The descriptions I was given of these hidden countries do not constitute a completely uniform picture. In any case they are paradise-like regions where aging is halted and life is pleasant. According to one tradition there are caves in the *sbas yul* which are supposed to be full of *rtsam pa* and grain, and there are also caves with springs from which milk flows inexhaustibly. We are told that fruits such as apples and peaches in the *sbas yul* are at least twice normal size and that different crops are not planted, but grow of their own accord. In the hidden countries there are many different treasures (*gter*) of material goods, including salt, turquoise, dharma and wealth, weapons, seeds and medicines. One place stores agricultural instruments, at another frying pans, grinders and many earthen pots are hidden. There is abundant meat so long as no injury is done to the animals living in the hidden countries.

Other characteristics of these realms are as follows: in the center of a forest there is a blue stone with the footprints of Guru Rinpoche. Just to see that stone is enough to cure diseases caused by the *nāgas*—madness, paralysis, etc. These diseases, once cured, never recur. In a huge cave there are several objects which bestow superhuman powers: a skull wrapped up in a blue cloth contains materials for attaining greater speed, and by putting a little of that material under the sole of the foot, one becomes fleet-footed and can go wherever one wishes. There is also a whip made of *ba*-wood to which the hand of a *Rākṣasa* is tied. By holding this whip one becomes invisible to gods, spirits, or human beings. Finally, there is a mirror wrapped in red cloth. After washing it with the milk of a red cow and gazing into it all major and minor continents of the universe, etc., can be seen. Whoever succeeds in reaching a hidden country is freed from the suffering of hunger and thirst. Everything good increases: one's life-span, happiness, good fortune, and wealth. In the

sbas yul not only worldly, but also spiritual, needs of believers are satisfied. For example, the hidden country of Sikkim, which is compared with holy places like Bodh Gaya, Potala, Ri-bo-rtse-lña, Lcañ-lo-can, Uḍḍiyāna, Indra's palace and Sukhāvati, has lakes which bestow clarity of the mind and caves in which enlightenment is attained. In this hidden country *bodhicitta* increases, clarity of mind is developed and ignorance and the power of the five poisons diminishes. It is even said of the *sbas yul* of Sikkim that it is the "seed of Sukhāvati." Happiness comes spontaneously there and spiritual attainment occurs automatically. Even the bugs on the bodies of those striving to get into this hidden country will be reborn in Sukhāvati. The power of this hidden country is so great that just by hearing its name great merit during countless lives is accumulated, and just by seeing the place freedom from passage into one of the three unfortunate realms is gained.¹¹

A person may leave a hidden country, but afterwards, having done so, reentry is impossible, as the following story illustrates:

One day after stalking and shooting at an animal, a hunter, not finding his prey, set out in search of it. He happened upon a cave and, penetrating into the deeper recesses, finally came upon a kind of paradise. The hunter became very peaceful and without realizing it he stayed in this hidden country for twelve years. Upon remembering his family, however, he left. At the entrance to the cave he found his bow and arrows, which in the meantime had rusted. He himself, however, was no older than he had been on the day on which he had entered the cave. When the hunter reached the village, he saw how the inhabitants had aged and learned that some had even died during the time

¹¹ Similar descriptions can be found in Reinhard (1978), pp. 19-20, and Bernbaum (1980), pp. 63ff. Another paradise no less wonderful is that of Sambhala, which will not be discussed here, but which is supposed to lie to the northwest of Tibet. Both the description of the complicated path to and the structure of Sambhala reveal certain similarities with reports on the hidden countries. See Grünwedel (1915), Oppitz (1974), Damdinsüren (1977), Bernbaum (1980). The Bon-pos believe in the existence of a similar mythological country, called Ol-mo-lun-riñ. According to a personal communication from Samten Karmay, several groups of Bon-pos have gone in search of this country.

he had been away. The hunter told the people about his experience and they, upon hearing this, demanded that he lead them to the hidden country. In spite of the most concentrated efforts to find it, however, the paradise remained hidden.¹²

**Similarities with millennial movements:
the importance of the "crisis" and of the leader**

Reference is made at various points in anthropological literature to the fact that the millennial movements originate from crises, prompting some authors to refer to them as "crisis cults."¹³ To what extent does this apply to the Tibetan hidden countries? Or, to put it another way: is there any evidence to suggest that crises, to which large groups of Tibetans have been exposed, might lead them to search together for one of the "promised lands"?

It is interesting to note that the *sbas yul* are first mentioned in Tibetan texts at the beginning of the 14th century. This was the time of the Mongol patronage of Tibet, a time of political, and to some extent of religious, deprivation. Further, it seems that during the Dzungar war in the early 18th century, another critical event in Tibetan history, there were, as a Tibetan informant told me, serious attempts to reach one of the hidden countries.¹⁴ Bacot, too, tells of a concrete, historical crisis-event which led to a collective search for a hidden country. According to him a thousand families are said to have set out in search of the holy land of Padma-bkod in the first years of the Sino-Tibetan conflicts of the beginning of the present century.¹⁵ Also following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959 and during the critical time thereafter, according to what Tibetan refugees told me, the idea of the *sbas yul* once again gained currency. This seems verified, for example, by the fact that refugees consciously chose an escape route which passed through the region in which the most important *sbas yul* lie. Refugees belonging to the Rñin-ma-pa school also report that before and during the flight they paid particular attention to whether their leader, Bāud-'joms Rin-po-

¹² Oral communication. See also Bernbaum (1980), p. 72.

¹³ See Weston La Barre (1971); and Peter Gerber (1980), pp. 61ff.

¹⁴ For this information I am indebted to Tashi Tsering, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala, India (1982).

¹⁵ Bacot (1912), p. 11.

che, would declare that the time had come to look for one of the hidden countries. When the refugees finally reached India and the crises abated, interest in the *sbas yul* correspondingly declined. Bdud-'joms Rin-po-che is said to have declared after this flight to safety that India was also a sort of hidden country.¹⁶

Even in exile, however, Tibetan thought of the *sbas yul* never completely disappeared. Above all, during the first difficult years of exile when the idea was still so vital, a large group of the faithful followed a *bla ma* to Sikkim in order to enter a hidden country on at least one occasion.¹⁷ At the spot designated by their spiritual leader they waited in the hope that boulders would open, admitting them to the *sbas yul*. Due to adverse climatic conditions and an avalanche, however, many people died and the disillusioned survivors retreated. Later they argued that they had been led astray by a false *bla ma*.¹⁸

Still, the idea of the *sbas yul* has not completely vanished. Even today the Rñin-ma-pas continue to think it is possible that their leader will one day declare that the time has come to go in search of the hidden country. I am convinced that should the call come, many Rñin-ma-pas and perhaps even adherents of other schools would join him. The dream of the hidden countries remains very much alive and could still be activated, possibly by an existential crisis.

The millennial dream has not only been passed down orally, but is preserved in written form in prophecies attributed to Padmasambhava, as the following example shows:

O great master! When the age of the five degenerations comes benevolent ways cease, harmful ways increase, bad omens occur in all the lands, great changes occur, and fighting breaks out in China, Mongolia and Tibet instigated by the Lalos [irreligious people]. What possibilities are there to find suitable places, both big and small, for the practice of Dharma, in order to attain the full enlightenment of Buddhahood? And by what methods can one get to these

16 According to Bernbaum (1980), p.70: "When Tibetans were fleeing from the Chinese takeover of Tibet in the 1950s, a lama tried to lead a band of refugees to the safety of this valley [Padma-bkod] ..."

17 According to Tashi Tsering from Dharamsala, this *bla ma* was Brtul-žugs gliñ-pa.

18 Oral communication. See also Bernbaum (1980), p. 68.

places?

Guru Rinpoche replied: Listen, faithful Lord, with your father, mother, sons, and whole entourage. I shall explain the methods for getting to the holy places...¹⁹

Another passage in the same text about the *sbas yul* of Sikkim names the so-called visible signs, whose appearance is a signal for the faithful to go in search of the *sbas yul*:

When Tibet is overrun by the Lalos, when the main holy places of Gtsaŋ are destroyed... when the golden roof of the Bsam-yas monastery falls down, when the great stūpa Tsaŋ-traŋ in Khams collapses, when the tip of the stūpa in Yer-pa bends, when the great centers of Dbus burn down, etc.

All of the incidents listed here represent crisis situations (wars, fires, floods, etc.) or are, as is the case of the destruction of the holy buildings described above, considered by the Tibetans as clear indications that critical times are approaching.²⁰ This is all indicative of the fact that the Tibetans themselves regard the paradise myths of the *sbas yul*, hidden countries, as particularly vital in times of crisis and danger, when the faithful are more likely to try to realize these myths.²¹

Tibetans have told me that current practice and popularization of the *'pho-ba* ritual mentioned earlier is also connected with a state of crisis, namely with the world political situation. To justify extending the *'pho-ba* ritual to lay persons it is said that we are going through bad times with still worse ones to follow. They refer to the enormous, rapid changes in the world: nothing is like it used to be, there are great suffering, numerous wars, famines, etc. Amitābha's paradise, once a remote goal only attainable through clerical intercession, has, as a result of the feeling of deprivation, become a very urgent goal. Under the supervision of a *bla ma* it still requires great personal

¹⁹ See n. 8 above.

²⁰ The same text also mentions the "four external signs"—earthquakes, floods, fires and strong winds—and the "four internal signs"—fighting among beings, fighting between brothers, destruction of temples and monks not abiding by the rules.

²¹ See also Reinhard (1978), pp. 16,17 and 23; and Bernbaum (1980), p. 66.

effort to attain it, but it is now placed well within the reach of a faithful lay person. Although the Tibetan texts leave no doubt as to the difficulty and danger of attaining consciousness transference when not practiced by someone "who has been long on probation and been found worthy,"²² lay persons are nonetheless now allowed to conduct the *'pho-ba* exercise in view of these very critical times, thus gaining a clerical privilege.

A great many, if not all, millennial movements are led by personalities said to be charismatic, who command the absolute trust of the members of the movement, who are prepared to follow him or her unconditionally, if he or she so request. The cult-movements mentioned here are not conceivable without strong leadership: in the case of the *'pho-ba* rituals the *bla ma* has the function of a traditional Tibetan spiritual leader, that of an instructor and spiritual guide during the ritual. In the case of the *sbas yul* the *bla ma* is more than a spiritual leader. He also functions as Padmasambhava's envoy, or at least as his spiritual successor; he is both a prophet and a leader who actually, not just figuratively, leads the faithful to the paradisaic land.

Summary

These two examples show some of the characteristics of millennial movements or at least their beginnings among Tibetan refugees. The phenomena we see here are based on traditional millennial dreams or myths which are the indispensable bases for millennial movements, and are apparently activated whenever the faithful feel threatened; i.e. when they experience deprivation, and when there is a leader who recognizes the acute need for a millennial life and tries to canalize these wishes and to realize them through collective actions. These millennial dreams and actions among Tibetans have hardly been noticed until now because they have been neither very spectacular, nor very disruptive. This may be because of the secrecy of certain of these ideas, although I think it is also because of the quite common, but incorrect, notion that Buddhism and Hinduism do not give rise to millennial ideas and movements.²³ Finally it should be noted that

²² Evans-Wentz (1967), pp. 254 and 257.

²³ How the notion of a hidden country came to provide a mythic formula accounting for the origin of Bhutan is shown by M. Aris (1978), p. 82. This indicates that millennial myths and movements developing out of them can, under certain

millennial actions and the myths on which they are founded are particularly pronounced among the Rñiñ-ma-pas, who within Tibetan society and religion rather remain on the periphery. This would support the thesis that millennial ideas are likely to exist among people who are in some way politically, ideologically, religiously or economically deprived, or who at least feel that they are.

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circumstances, acquire a political meaning. See, for instance, Talmon (1962) and Mühlmann (1961).

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