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The Dancing Lamas of Everest: Cinema, Orientalism, and Anglo-Tibetan Relations in the 1920s

PETER H. HANSEN

IN MARCH 1925, THE CAREER CIVIL SERVANTS of the India Office in London became film critics. Several mandarins left their offices in Whitehall for the cinemas of the West End to see John Noel's silent film *The Epic of Everest*. Although the film reaches its climax when George Mallory and Andrew Irvine disappear into the clouds near the summit, the India Office officials were there to judge the depiction of Tibet. Much of the film was devoted to the expedition's contact with Tibet. Before each screening, a group of Tibetan lamas—Buddhist monks—performed music, chants, and dances. The official program claimed this was “the first time in history that *real* Tibetan Lamas have come to Europe” and added, “The ceremonies of the lamas, their deep chanting, the blasts of their great trumpets, the beat of their drums and the clashing of their cymbals in the weird and fantastic music will convey to the people in England a feeling of the mysticism and romance of Tibet.”¹

The Tibetan government had lodged official protests against scenes in the film and the performances of the “dancing lamas.” To the Tibetans, Mt. Everest was a sacred place, and the lamas' dances were sacred ceremonies. Although the British officials who went to see the film for themselves were concerned with the finer points of Anglo-Tibetan relations, the diplomatic controversy over the dancing lamas raises broader issues concerning the intersection of the cinema, “Orientalism,” cross-cultural encounters, and diplomatic policy. After attending a performance, Sir Arthur Hirtzel, the permanent undersecretary of state for India, wrote:

I suppose I must be very thick skinned, but the performance did not shock me in the very least. It was unspeakably boring—more so than most things Oriental—but not, I should have thought, capable, even in its lightest moments, of causing anything more than that smile of kindly superiority which we generally assume when we see or hear of strange customs. The

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¹ Program for *The Epic of Everest* (1924), 4, in L/P&S/11/244, British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, London (hereafter, OIOC). Although only one of the “dancing lamas” was a lama in the literal sense of a senior religious teacher—the rest appear to have been ordinary monks—this article follows the 1920s accounts in referring to the group as a whole as “lamas.”

audience were informed that there was nothing of a religious nature about the dance. I think the whole thing sounds a great deal worse than it looked; and to that extent I sympathise with the Tibetan authorities.

Although he had not yet seen the film, L. D. Wakely, an undersecretary of state, argued that the Tibetans were right to object to a “vulgar and indecent” scene in which a Tibetan man carefully delouses a boy and then appears to eat the lice. “It is as if in some foreign country,” Wakely continued, “a film purporting to show British customs, gave a picture of a man expectorating on the pavement or the floor of a railway carriage, a sight which can be seen any day unfortunately in London, and, to complete the comparison, an unfrocked clergyman performed on a mouth organ during the proceedings.”²

But these reservations were not widely shared in England. The filmmakers, the popular press, and the expedition organizers at the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) were all disposed to see the film and the Tibetan performances as amusing representations of a primitive and backward people. Indeed, this “Orientalist” view of the lamas’ visit has enjoyed surprising longevity. In a recent account, Walt Unsworth misinterprets the “affair of the dancing lamas” by uncritically accepting the view of the filmmakers that the Tibetan dancers were “more curious than exciting and hardly the sort of thing likely to cause a breach of diplomatic relations.” Even a scholarly account of the British Everest expeditions by Gordon Stewart perpetuates this myth. Stewart reconstructs a teleological “master narrative” of Everest and empire that remained unchallenged, he argues, from the 1890s to 1953.³ In fact, Tibetans challenged British representations of the ascent throughout the 1920s, and the “dancing lamas” disrupted Anglo-Tibetan relations for nearly a decade. Like the climbers of the 1920s, Unsworth and Stewart deny any independent agency to the Tibetans. Unsworth suggests that the fiasco was manufactured by careerist British diplomats. Yet these government officials—who shared many of the same “Orientalist” assumptions as the rest of the lamas’ London audience—were able to override their prejudices in order to maintain cordial relations with Tibet.

Diplomatic negotiations and cultural encounters are too often considered in isolation. The “dancing lamas” of Everest controversy illustrates the possibilities, but also the limitations, of recent approaches to the diplomatic history of Anglo-Tibetan relations in particular and to cultural encounters in the empire in general. Diplomatic historians have reassessed the nature of British “power” in the twentieth century, but they still have difficulty incorporating cultural encounters into the institutional frameworks of foreign policy.⁴ Alastair Lamb and other scholars of

² Arthur Hirtzel, Minute, March 14, 1925, L. D. Wakely to Hirtzel, March 12, 1925, L/P&S/10/778, OIOC. Wakely later saw the film in Wimbledon and found only a few things open to objection. See Wakely, Minute, May 27, 1925, L/P&S/10/778, OIOC.

³ Walt Unsworth, *Everest* (London, 1991), 151; Gordon T. Stewart, “Tenzing’s Two Wrist-Watches: The Conquest of Everest and Late Imperial Culture in Britain, 1921–1953,” *Past and Present*, 149 (1995): 170–97. See also Peter H. Hansen, “Can the Subaltern Climb? Tenzing, Everest, and Post-Colonial Culture, 1921–1953” (unpublished essay in possession of the author).

⁴ David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1991), esp. 5–37. For other recent approaches, see Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Patterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, 1991); and Walter LaFeber, “The World and the United States,” *AHR*, 100 (October 1995): 1015–33.

Anglo-Tibetan relations often give prominence to the details of treaties and territorial boundaries—the *Primat der Aussenpolitik*—at the expense of the broader cultural assumptions of policymakers.⁵ Melvyn Goldstein offers a detailed and nuanced account of Tibetan politics, emphasizing the primacy of domestic policy in Tibet's relations with China and Britain.⁶ But traditional approaches like these to foreign or domestic policy reinforce the stereotype of Tibetan isolation by obscuring the extent to which cultural encounters like the “dancing lamas” redefined power outside traditional frameworks. Anglo-Tibetan relations did not occur only in the realms of high policy in Tibet or Britain or China but were the product as well of what Akira Iriye calls “intercultural relations” between these countries.⁷

Many scholars influenced by Edward Said's *Orientalism* have highlighted the relationship of knowledge and power in the representation of other cultures. Said originally conceived of Orientalism “as a dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the three great empires—British, French, American—in whose intellectual and imaginative territory the writing was produced.” Tibet's long-lasting isolation has made it a tempting target for this sort of analysis. Peter Bishop, Philip Almond, and Thomas Richards provide interesting accounts of Buddhism and Tibet as fantasy objects in the Western imagination—as “Shangri La.”⁸ But these works often fail, as Donald Lopez notes of Said's work, “to consider the networks of exchange that existed between the Orientalizer and the Orientalized, of the back-and-forth that occurred between Europeans and Asians in which Asians were also agents.” In addition, many of these exchanges were, as Charles Hallisey suggests, “not characterized by negation or inversion, but instead seem to represent a kind of ‘intercultural mimesis.’” In other words, the very culture being investigated “influenced the investigator to represent that culture in a certain manner.”⁹ Similarly, recent work in world history and postcolonial studies has also attempted to reconceptualize relations between colonizer and colonized as reciprocal and mutually constitutive.¹⁰ While Said's more recent *Culture and*

⁵ Alastair Lamb, *Tibet, China and India, 1914–1950: A History of Imperial Diplomacy* (Hertingfordbury, 1989); Amar Kaur Jasbir Singh, *Himalayan Triangle: A Historical Survey of British India's Relations with Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan, 1765–1950* (London, 1988); Premen Addy, *Tibet on the Imperial Chessboard: The Making of British Policy towards Lhasa, 1899–1925* (Calcutta, 1984); and Parshotam Mehra, *The North-Eastern Frontier: A Documentary Survey of the Internecine Rivalry between India, Tibet, and China*, Vol. 2: 1914–54 (Delhi, 1980).

⁶ Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989). See also W. E. Shakabpa, *Tibet, A Political History* (New Haven, Conn., 1967); and Hugh E. Richardson, *Tibet and Its History*, 2d edn. (London, 1984).

⁷ Akira Iriye, “Culture and Power: International Relations as Intercultural Relations,” *Diplomatic History*, 3 (1979): 155–28; and Iriye, “The Internationalization of History,” *AHR*, 94 (February 1989): 1–10.

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; rpt. edn., London, 1995), 14–15. See also Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (London, 1989); Bishop, *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism, Western Imagination* (London, 1992); Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge, 1988); and Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London, 1993), 11–44.

⁹ Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago, 1995), 12; Charles Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism,” in Lopez, *Curators of the Buddha*, 33. See also the discussion of mimesis and seduction in Vincanne Adams, *Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas: An Ethnography of Himalayan Encounters* (Princeton, N.J., 1996).

¹⁰ See, for example, Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, “World History in a Global Age,” *AHR*, 100 (October 1995): 1034–60; Gyan Prakash, ed., *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial*

Imperialism is more sensitive to the overlapping and intertwined positions of colonial histories, he once again concentrates on the artifacts of “high” culture, which were by no means the most important products of cultural exchange.¹¹

Recent research on the display of “natives” during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in popular entertainments, exhibitions, and museums identifies more complicated power relations. Many exhibitions displayed indigenous peoples in “native villages” to convey narratives of Social Darwinist evolution, racial superiority, and material progress.¹² These exhibitions reached absurd heights during the Hendon Air Pageants of the 1920s, when the Royal Air Force literally bombed mock “native villages” into submission.¹³ That such brute force was not the most common representation of power, however, is suggested by recent studies influenced by Michel Foucault, Said, and feminism. Tony Bennett suggests that native bodies were part of an “exhibitionary complex,” in which European visitors were instructed in a form of self-monitoring discipline that supplemented the sterner surveillance of Foucault’s prisons. Similarly, Timothy Mitchell argues that exhibitions created a division between reality and its representation that ordered the “world-as-exhibition” and was the intellectual foundation of “Orientalism.” In these frameworks, however, power is so totalizing that the “Other” remains primarily an object of curiosity before European observers. In contrast, Donna Haraway draws attention to the ambivalence of Carl Akeley’s attempt, in his African exhibits of the 1930s at the American Museum of Natural History, to link the art of taxidermy with the politics of eugenics in order to preserve a masculinity

Displacements (Princeton, N.J., 1995); the Forum on subaltern studies in the *AHR*, 99 (December 1994): 1475–1545; and Nicholas B. Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1992).

¹¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993). John MacKenzie’s important research on popular culture and imperialism should supplement Said’s approach, but his recent critique of Said exaggerates the incompatibility of “history” and “theory.” John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts* (Manchester, 1995). See also James Clifford, “On Orientalism,” in Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 255–76; and Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, eds., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia, 1993).

¹² On these exhibitions and ethnographic displays, see, for example, Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978); Robert W. Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago, 1984); and Michael T. Bravo, “Ethnological Encounters,” in *Cultures of Natural History*, N. Jardine, J. A. Secord, and E. C. Spary, eds. (Cambridge, 1996), 338–57; David Jenkins, “Object Lessons and Ethnographic Displays: Museum Exhibitions and the Making of American Anthropology,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 36 (1994): 242–70; Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture, and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven, Conn., 1994); Raymond Corbey, “Ethnographic Showcases, 1870–1930,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 8 (1993): 228–69; Mick Gidley, ed., *Representing Others: White Views of Indigenous Peoples* (Exeter, 1992); Elizabeth Edwards, ed., *Anthropology and Photography, 1860–1920* (New Haven, 1992); Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Exposition Universelles, Great Exhibitions, and World’s Fairs, 1851–1939* (Manchester, 1988), esp. 82–119; John M. MacKenzie, ed., *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester, 1986), esp. 94–112; Brian Mackrell, *Haruru Wikitoria! An Illustrated History of the Maori Tour of England, 1863* (Auckland, 1985); John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester, 1984), esp. 97–120; William H. Schneider, *An Empire for the Masses: The French Popular Image of Africa, 1870–1900* (Westport, Conn., 1982), esp. 125–51. See also Michael Harbsmeier, “Modernity Observed: Non-Western Traditions of Travel Writing and the Experience of Europe in the Nineteenth Century” (unpublished essay).

¹³ See David Enrico Omissi, “The Hendon Air Pageant, 1920–37,” in *Popular Imperialism and the Military, 1850–1950*, John M. MacKenzie, ed. (Manchester, 1992), 198–220. In 1922, RAF planes “machine gunned funny fellows in flowing robes” played by other RAF officers. Omissi, 204.

threatened by decadence. Haraway's feminist reading disrupts the heroic narrative of Akeley's exhibits by attending to the agency of his formerly invisible collaborators, Akeley's wife, secretary, patrons, and African assistants.¹⁴

Together, these approaches to diplomacy, Orientalism, and exhibitions suggest the complexity of Anglo-Tibetan power relations during the affair of the dancing lamas. From the diplomatic negotiations for permission to climb Everest to the Anglo-Tibetan encounter during the expeditions themselves and the performances of the dancing lamas in London, Anglo-Tibetan relations integrated culture and power. Anglo-Tibetan relations were not disrupted by the intervention of "culture" into "diplomacy," for these arenas were, as Said rightly argues, never entirely separate. Tibetans gave permission for the ascent of Everest in the expectation that the British would supply weapons to Tibet and with assurances that the expedition would respect Tibetan religious beliefs. While the British kept their promise to supply arms, their repeated failure to respect Tibetan Buddhism in either London or Lhasa cooled Anglo-Tibetan relations. In addition, the dancing lamas and the Everest film appeared at a time when the cinema and the mass media exerted an increasing influence in Britain and around the world.¹⁵ In response to Orientalist representations of the dancing lamas in these new media, Tibetans defined subject positions for themselves in ways that transformed not only Anglo-Tibetan diplomacy but also internal politics in Tibet. British climbers and diplomats became not just filmmakers or film critics but culture brokers. While Anglo-Tibetan relations were mediated by Orientalism, they were not reducible to it. Indeed, throughout the Everest expeditions and the performances of the dancing lamas, the British and Tibetans were engaged in an intercultural exchange in which each influenced the other in unexpected and ambiguous ways. The dancing lamas of Everest thus illuminate the complex interaction of media, culture, and power.

THROUGHOUT THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, access to Mt. Everest was restricted by Tibet's relationship with China, Britain, and Russia. Most foreigners had been excluded from Tibet since the late eighteenth century, when Tibet recognized Chinese "suzerainty." Less hegemonic than "sovereignty," this Sino-Tibetan rela-

¹⁴ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London, 1995), 59–88; and Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," *New Formations*, 4 (1988): 73–102. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge, 1988); and Mitchell, "The World as Exhibition," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31 (1989): 217–36. Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989; London, 1992), 26–58; and Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," *Social Text*, 11 (1983): 20–64.

¹⁵ See D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988); and Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930–1939* (London, 1984). For recent approaches to history and film, see Robert A. Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, N.J., 1994); John E. O'Connor, ed., *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (Malabar, Fl., 1990); and the Forum on film in the *AHR*, 93 (December 1988): 1173–1227. For related background, see Philip M. Taylor, "Back to the Future? Integrating the Press and Media into the History of International Relations," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 14 (1994): 321–29; Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery* (Oxford, 1994); MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, esp. 40–120; and Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, 1981).

tionship was continually reconstituted by Tibetan lamas and Manchu emperors through the ritual practices of Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁶ As the Ch'ing dynasty weakened during the nineteenth century, its influence in Tibet also waned, and British officials feared that Russia might extend its influence into Tibet. To forestall Russian intrigues, Lord Curzon, as viceroy of India, sent Francis Younghusband to Tibet in 1904 with a well-armed mission that killed hundreds of Tibetans en route to Lhasa. In response, the Dalai Lama fled to Mongolia and visited Peking. The British government later repudiated the treaties with Tibet that Younghusband had negotiated, and it signed agreements with China in 1906 recognizing Chinese "suzerainty" in Tibet. In 1907, an Anglo-Russian accord prohibited further expeditions in Tibet and effectively prevented British mountaineers from approaching Everest before World War I.¹⁷

Tibet's relationship with China remained an obstacle to Everest proposals throughout the 1910s. Chinese troops occupied Lhasa in 1910, and the Dalai Lama, who had only recently returned to Tibet, fled to India, where he began to rely on British intermediaries in dealing with China. The Chinese occupation ended with the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in 1911, and the Dalai Lama returned to Tibet with greater sympathy for his British hosts and a new commitment to reform Tibet's military. In 1913–1914, China refused to sign with Britain and Tibet the tripartite "Simla Convention" that attempted to fix Tibet's borders, establish a degree of Tibetan autonomy from China, and secure British trading rights with Tibet. After Tibetans used British weapons to repulse another Chinese attack in 1917, British officials negotiated a precarious cease-fire on Tibet's eastern border in 1918. However, the cost of maintaining the troops necessary to fight such conflicts—and the need for additional weapons—increased Tibet's diplomatic dependence on the British. Within Tibet, these events also put a heavy burden on Tibetan finances and strained relations between the military and the monasteries.¹⁸

In this context, Captain John Noel lectured in 1919 at the Royal Geographical Society about his pre-war travels in the vicinity of Everest, and Sir Thomas Holdich, the RGS president, officially proposed the ascent of Everest as "the outstanding task which remains for geographers to accomplish." British officials were sympa-

¹⁶ Since lamas and emperors competed on cosmological as well as "political" grounds, for claims to spiritual as well as temporal authority, James Hevia suggests "it may be necessary to reconceptualize sovereignty in terms other than those which map ethnicity and culture over territory." See Hevia, "Lamas, Emperors, and Rituals: Political Implications in Qing Imperial Ceremonies," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 16 (1993): 243–78.

¹⁷ On the Younghusband mission, see, for example, Peter Fleming, *Bayonets to Lhasa* (London, 1961); and works by Alastair Lamb and Parshotam Mehra. For a Tibetan account of an Anglo-Tibetan military clash in Sikkim in 1888, see Michael Aris, "Himalayan Encounters," in *Tibet et Himalaya: Histoire et sociétés: En hommage à Alexander W. Macdonald*, Samten Karmay and Philippe Sagant, eds. (Paris, 1996). On the early negotiations to climb Everest, see Peter H. Hansen, "Vertical Boundaries, National Identities: British Mountaineering on the Frontiers of Europe and the Empire, 1868–1914," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 24 (1996): 48–71.

¹⁸ See Alastair Lamb, *British India and Tibet, 1766–1910* (London, 1986); Lamb, *The McMahon Line: A Study in the Relations between India, China and Tibet, 1904–1914*, 2 vols. (London, 1966); Charles Bell, *Portrait of the Dalai Lama* (London, 1946); and Goldstein, *History of Modern Tibet*, 41–89. For accounts by British diplomats who served in Tachienlu and Chengtu, see Eric Teichman, *Travels of a Consular Officer in Eastern Tibet* (Cambridge, 1922); and Louis Magrath King, *China in Turmoil* (London, 1927). On strains between the military and the monasteries, see Goldstein, *History of Modern Tibet*, 77–88.

thetic, but diplomatic concerns remained paramount. Sir Edwin Montagu, the secretary of state for India, wrote in 1919 to Lord Chelmsford, the viceroy, that “a task of such magnitude and geographical importance, if it is to be undertaken at all, should be intrusted to qualified British explorers acting under the highest geographical auspices in the British Empire.” The viceroy was concerned that any expedition would interfere with British plans to counter a Japanese telegraph proposed for Tibet. British officials were concerned that the postwar extension of Japanese influence into China could threaten the stability of India’s northern frontier. As J. E. Shuckburgh, secretary of the Political Department at the India Office, noted in 1919, “However much one may sympathise with the desire to conquer Mt. Everest, the results of such a conquest would be largely academic and ought not to weigh against a means of minimizing Japanese influence in Tibet.”¹⁹

After revolution and civil war in Russia and China undermined central authority in these states, British officials began to look beyond earlier diplomatic concerns. The Japanese threat to Tibet receded when civil war removed Szechuan and Yunnan from central Chinese control, and Bolshevik victories over the White Russians also made the Anglo-Russian agreement a dead letter. Shuckburgh took a more favorable view of an Everest expedition in 1920, recording, “it has always been the policy of this Office to encourage geographical exploration so far as may be compatible with political exigencies.” British diplomats remained concerned, however, that earlier promises to supply Tibet with weapons might violate an international arms embargo on China. After the Chinese province of Kansu sent a diplomatic mission to Tibet in 1920, Britain decided to send its own representative to Lhasa, Sir Charles Bell, the political officer of Sikkim, who was on friendly terms with the Dalai Lama.²⁰

Meanwhile, the climbers were lobbying hard in London and India for permission to climb Everest. Sir Francis Younghusband, who had led the 1904 British expedition to Tibet and was then RGS president, gave lectures in order to build public support. “Although there was no more use in climbing Mount Everest than in kicking a football about, or dancing,” Younghusband told a London audience, the ascent would “elevate the human spirit,” and give men the feeling that “they were getting the upper hand on the earth, and that they were acquiring a true mastery of their surroundings.” The RGS negotiated with the India Office in London, while Lt.-Col. Charles Howard-Bury, a retired officer and Anglo-Irish landowner, sounded out officials in India, including Bell, the chief liaison with

¹⁹ T. H. Holdich to Secretary of State for India, December 19, 1918, L/P&S/10/777, OIOC; and Add. MSS 63119, fol. 17, British Library, London (hereafter BL); see also Montagu to Viceroy, January 17, 1919, L/P&S/10/777, OIOC. J. E. Shuckburgh, Minute, April 25, 1919, L/P&S/10/777, OIOC. Renewed negotiations with China in 1919 were reputedly cancelled by the Chinese as a result of Japanese pressure. See Clive Christie, “Great Britain, China and the Status of Tibet, 1914–21,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 10 (1976): 481–508; and Ira Klein, “British Imperialism in Decline: Tibet, 1914–21,” *The Historian*, 34 (1971): 100–15.

²⁰ See Shuckburgh, Minutes of May 6, 1920, and May 10, 1920, L/P&S/10/777, OIOC. British diplomats were reluctant to break the Anglo-Russian agreement of 1907 until it was clear the Bolsheviks would defeat the White Russians; they considered the treaty “lapsed” in March 1920. Christie, “Great Britain, China and the Status of Tibet,” 499. On Bell and the Kansu mission, see Lamb, *Tibet, China and India*, 110–13; and letters to Bell from various Tibetan officials and Bell to India, February 21, 1921, MSS Eur. F. 80/57, 202, OIOC.

Tibet.²¹ Bell opposed seeking permission, because several sacred places were in the vicinity of Everest and the ascent would engender suspicion and mistrust among the Tibetans. "The Tibetans will not believe that the explorations are carried out only in the interests of geographical knowledge and science," said Bell. "They will suspect that there is something behind what we tell them."²²

Nonetheless, the Dalai Lama gave permission for an attempt on Everest during Bell's visit to Lhasa in 1920–1921. Bell had explained to the Dalai Lama that "the ascent was expected to have scientific results that would benefit humanity, and that a good many people in Britain wanted Britons to be the first to climb the highest mountain in the world." Preempting Tibetan suspicions of a scientific expedition, Bell assured the Dalai Lama that "no harm to Tibet was likely to result from it, and that His Holiness knew me well enough to realise that I would not say this unless I really meant it."²³ On Bell's advice, the British subsequently kept their promise to supply Tibet with weapons. In Tibet's internal politics, the Everest expeditions thus became irrevocably linked to the fortunes of the military, which, with the Dalai Lama, was attempting to reform the Tibetan state in spite of monastic opposition. In communicating the Tibetan decision, Bell added, "No doubt every care to avoid wounding religious or other feelings will be taken during the expedition." Younghusband assured the Dalai Lama that he would impress upon the expedition "the importance of treating all of Your Holiness' officials and subjects with every possible courtesy and of showing all due respect to their religious feelings."²⁴

THE FIRST EVEREST EXPEDITION became a reconnaissance and included surveyors from the Survey of India, who mapped the surrounding area, a geologist from the Geological Survey, who studied the region's minerals, and finally the climbers, who searched for a suitable route to the summit. Although government departments paid the expenses of the surveyors, their separate agendas dissipated the expedition's singleness of purpose. They also threatened to go beyond what the Tibetans had allowed. Wary of these plans, Charles Bell advised prohibiting all surveying

²¹ Younghusband in the *Times*, June 1, 1920; Patrick French, *Younghusband: The Last Great Imperial Adventurer* (London, 1994), 329. On Howard-Bury's negotiations, see Add. MSS 63121, fols. 97–101, 111, 113, 137, BL; T. S. Blakeney, "The First Steps toward Mount Everest," *Alpine Journal*, 76 (1971): 43–69; Unsworth, *Everest*, 11–29; and correspondence in EE/1/8/1–9, Royal Geographical Society Archives (hereafter, RGSA).

²² Bell quoted in Viceroy to India Office, telegram, July 24, 1920, L/P&S/10/777, OIOC. Before World War I, Bell had been a proponent of extending British influence and military power into Tibet. After the Montagu Declaration of 1917, which promised eventual Indian independence, Bell became an advocate of strengthening Tibetan independence. See C. J. Christie, "Sir Charles Bell: A Memoir," *Asian Affairs*, 64 (1977): 48–62.

²³ Bell, *Portrait of the Dalai Lama*, 243, 245. The India Office allowed Bell to choose when to ask for permission. See also Bell to Younghusband, December 24, 1920, and February 16, 1921, EE 1/8/10, 1/16/3, RGSA.

²⁴ Bell to India, telegram, December 10, 1920; Younghusband to Dalai Lama, January 20, 1921, L/P&S/10/777, OIOC. On the Tibetan context, see Goldstein, *Modern History of Tibet*, 89–110. See also Bell to India, February 21, 1921; India to Bell, May 19, 1921; Bell's final report on the Lhasa Mission, November 29, 1921; and Bell to Tibetan Government, December 12, 1921, MSS Eur. F. 80/202, 204–06, OIOC. Bell had advocated sending arms to Tibet for years. On Bell's visit to Lhasa and on the arms question generally, see Charles Bell, *Tibet, Past and Present* (Oxford, 1924), 170–205; Lamb, *Tibet, China and India*, 110–28; Goldstein, *History of Modern Tibet*, esp. 93–96; L/P&S/10/716–718, and L/P&S/18/B344, OIOC.

except whatever is “indispensably necessary for the ascent of Mount Everest.”²⁵ As a result of these competing agendas, the expedition was a scientific success but a diplomatic failure. As intended, the surveyors mapped, the geologist dug, and the climbers climbed, locating a possible route via the North Col.

But the expedition caused anxiety in Tibet. The expedition’s leader, Lt.-Col. Howard-Bury, noted: “in these out-of-the way parts they had heard vaguely of the fighting in 1904, and they imagined that our visit might be on the same lines. They imagined, too, that all Europeans were cruel and seized what they wanted without payment.”²⁶ The local official in Dingri, for example, wrote to Lhasa to complain about having to supply the expedition: “As the people of this country are poor, I would request that you kindly approach the British (Political Officer) with a view to effecting an early removal of the Sahibs from this place, so that they may not settle down permanently.” The Tibetan government complained that the expedition had shot animals and “dug up rubies and taken them away.” The prime minister of Tibet explained to Bell:

It was agreed between the British and Tibetans that Mount Everest might be explored. But if this is used as an excuse for digging earth and stones from the most sacred hills of Tibet, inhabited by fierce demons, the very guardians of the soil, it is feared that human and cattle epidemics may break out in the country, causing serious loss of life. I would therefore [urge] that you will kindly take the necessary steps to prevent the officials wandering about the mountains in Tibet, and effect their early return.²⁷

By this time, Bell’s place had been taken by Colonel F. M. Bailey, an official who had been with Younghusband in 1904 and served as an explorer in Tibet and an undercover agent in Tashkent. Bailey encouraged the Everest expeditions but relayed Tibetan complaints about shooting, geology, and the survey to Younghusband: “Bell himself was not exactly sympathetic, and told me that he thought it was pretty cool to get permission to climb a mountain and then go and make a map!” Younghusband replied to the India Office that, although the expedition geologist had taken a few specimens, no mining had been done and no precious minerals were taken: “It is possible that the ice-axes of the party may have been mistaken by the Tibetans for mining implements.”²⁸

Since the Tibetans had objected to hunting and digging, the Royal Geographical

²⁵ Bell to Cater, March 8, 1921, L/P&S/10/777, OIOC. See also C. H. D. Ryder (Surveyor General of India) to Younghusband, March 29, 1921, Add. MSS 63121, fol. 105, BL.

²⁶ On the 1921 expedition in general, see C. K. Howard-Bury, *Mount Everest: The Reconnaissance* (London, 1921), quote, 175; Unsworth, *Everest*, 30–68; Tom Holzel and Audrey Salkeld, *First on Everest: The Mystery of Mallory and Irvine* (New York, 1986), 33–81; and T. S. Blakeney, “A. R. Hinks and the First Everest Expedition in 1921,” *Geographical Journal*, 136 (1970): 333–43. Mallory reported early on that the party had shot gazelle, sheep, and a goose. George Mallory to Ruth Mallory, June 8, 1921, F/GM (Mallory Papers, Old Library), Magdalene College, Cambridge.

²⁷ Representatives of Tedong Depon of Tengri Jong to the Tibet Council, undated [1921]; and Prime Minister of Tibet to Bell, September 28, 1921, both quoted in Bailey to India, January 2, 1922, L/P&S/10/777, OIOC. Several translations of the prime minister’s letter were made. See also Viceroy to London, January 10, 1922, MSS Eur. E. 238/11, OIOC.

²⁸ Bailey to Younghusband, December 4, 1921, EE 1/20/13, RGSA. Younghusband to Wakely, February 13, 1922, L/P&S/10/777, OIOC. See also Bailey to Younghusband, January 10, 1922, EE 1/20/26, RGSA, in which Bailey criticized Bell for not taking a stronger stand with the Tibetans; and Arthur Swinson, *Beyond the Frontiers: The Biography of Colonel F. M. Bailey, Explorer and Special Agent* (London, 1971).

Society promised to prohibit all shooting and prevented the geologist from joining the next expedition.²⁹ The 1922 expedition, led by General C. G. Bruce, achieved decidedly mixed results. Although the climbers failed to reach the summit, they went higher than ever before. Seven porters were killed in an avalanche, but the expedition managed not to offend the authorities in Lhasa. In addition, for the first time, the climbers met the head lama of Rongbuk Monastery, located at the foot of Everest. This was Zatul Rinpoche, an energetic and charismatic man who had founded the monastery twenty years before.³⁰

General Bruce and the Rongbuk Lama each left firsthand accounts of their meeting. Their conflicting versions illustrate the complexity of power relations and “Orientalism” in the encounter between the British and Tibetans. (See Figures 1 and 2.) In his expedition book, Bruce reports that the Rongbuk Lama’s “inquiries about the object of the Expedition were intelligent, although at the same time they were very difficult to answer.” Bruce had often been asked similar questions in England: “What is the good of an exploration of Everest?” “What can you get out of it?” and so on.

As a matter of fact, it was very much easier to answer the Lama than it is to answer inquiries in England. The Tibetan Lama, especially of the better class, is certainly not a materialist. I was fortunately inspired to say that we regarded the whole Expedition, and especially our attempt to reach the summit of Everest as a pilgrimage. I am afraid, also, I rather enlarged on the importance of the vows taken by all members of the Expedition. At any rate, these gentle “white lies” were very well received.

After the lama blessed the expedition and wished them success, Bruce continues, “He was very anxious that no animals of any sort be interfered with, which we promised, for we had already given our word not to shoot during our Expedition in Tibet. He did not seem to have the least fear that our exploring the mountain would upset the demons who live there but he told me that it was perfectly true that the Upper Rongbuk and its glaciers held no less than five wild men.”³¹

In his autobiography, the Rongbuk Lama gives a strikingly different account of this conversation. After General Bruce gave him a photograph of the Dalai Lama and a gold brocade with a ceremonial scarf, the Rongbuk Lama asked, “Where are you going?”

“As this snow peak is the biggest in the world, if we arrive on the summit we will get from the British Government a recompense and high rank,” he [Bruce] said.

²⁹ Lönchen Shokang, Prime Minister of Tibet, to Bailey, January 26, 1923, L/P&S/10/777, OIOC. Geology itself was not the problem for the British, as another geologist, Henry Hayden, was given permission to wander in Tibet in 1922; the British government did not want to offend the Tibetans regarding Everest. See London to Viceroy, December 24, 1923, MSS Eur. E. 238/12, OIOC. Compare Unsworth, *Everest*, 75. On the 1922 expedition, see C. G. Bruce, *The Assault on Mount Everest, 1922* (London, 1923); Unsworth, *Everest*, 69–99; Holtzel and Salkeld, *First on Everest*, 88–132.

³⁰ On the Rongbuk Lama, Ngawang Tenzing Norbu Sangbu (1867–1940), aka Zatul Rinpoche, see Barbara Nimri Aziz, *Tibetan Frontier Families: Reflections of Three Generations from D’ing-ri* (New Delhi, 1978), 209–11; and Sherry B. Ortner, *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J., 1989), 130–35, 178–80.

³¹ Bruce, *Assault on Mount Everest*, 45–47. For other accounts, see George Ingle Finch, *The Making of a Mountaineer* (1924; rpt. edn., Bristol, 1988), 290–91; Francis Younghusband, *Epic of Mount Everest* (London, 1926), 105–06; J. B. L. Noel, *Through Tibet to Everest* (London, 1927), 141–47; John Morris, *Hired to Kill* (London, 1960), 165–67.



FIGURE 1: The Lama, Zatul Rinpoche, the head lama of Rongbuk Monastery (seated), listens as Karma Paul, the expedition's translator, brings a message from General Bruce, in Captain John Noel's film *Climbing Mount Everest* (1922). Courtesy of BFI Stills, Posters and Designs, London.



FIGURE 2: The General. General C. G. Bruce, leader of the Everest expedition (seated), listens to Karma Paul translate a message from the Rongbuk Lama in Captain Noel's *Climbing Mount Everest* (1922). Courtesy of BFI Stills, Posters and Designs.

I replied, "As our country is bitterly cold and frosty, it is difficult for others than those who are devoted to religion not to come to harm. As the local spirits are furies, you must act with great firmness."

"Thank you [replied Bruce]. As we shall also come under the lama's protection, we trust you will allow us to collect a little brushwood for firewood. Moreover we won't harm the birds and the wild animals in this area. I swear we have no kinds of weapons apart from this little knife, the size of a side-knife."

After saying this they took their leave. Then from here, according to the custom of the country, I had conveyed to them a carcass of meat, a brick of tea, and a platterful of roasted wheat flour.³²

Nowhere does Zatul Rinpoche mention that Bruce represented the ascent as a "pilgrimage." Nowhere does the general claim to have told the lama that the climbers would receive "recompense and high rank." The general claims that the lama was concerned about hunting; Zatul Rinpoche suggests that Bruce volunteered the promise not to hunt.

These accounts are compared, not to reconstruct what was "really" said but as competing representations in which the lama and the general each claim the subject position of power in their own account. On the one hand, Bruce's "gentle 'white lies'" establish an ironic distance between himself and the lama, a pilgrimage, mountain demons, and Buddhism. Such a rhetorical strategy is an example of the "flexible positional superiority" of Orientalism.³³ On the other hand, the lama *also* claims such a position of superiority when he represents the general asking for the expedition to be taken "under the lama's protection" and the lama reciprocates with rituals of incorporation and gifts of hospitality "according to the custom of the country." Bruce sensed this act of incorporation and was uncomfortable with it. According to the general, the lama told him "that in a previous incarnation I had been a Tibetan Lama. I do not know exactly how to take this." Tibetans often told foreign visitors that they had been Tibetans in a previous life to symbolize their welcome into the community. The Rongbuk Lama may also have made this comment to establish a more complex "lama-patron" or "teacher-pupil" relationship with the general.³⁴

Uncomfortable though he was at the time, as a result of his contact with the Rongbuk Lama and Tibetan Buddhism in 1922 Bruce offered a new explanation of why the British wanted to conquer Mt. Everest when the climbers returned to London. Previously, the climbers had justified the ascent as advancing scientific knowledge, elevating the "human spirit," and as an inspirational contest between

³² Alexander W. Macdonald, "The Lama and the General," *Kailash: A Journal of Himalayan Studies*, 1 (1973): 230, which includes passages from the lama's autobiography in English and Tibetan. See also another translation of these passages in W. H. Murray, *The Story of Everest*, 4th rev. edn. [November 1953] (London, 1953), 208–09.

³³ "Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand." Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

³⁴ Bruce, *Assault on Mount Everest*, 47. Some visitors reveled in the identity of reincarnation as a badge of alienation from their home culture. See Bishop, *Myth of Shangri-La*, 229. Lama-patron and other relationships were negotiated through such rituals, not prescribed by them. See Hevia, "Lamas, Emperors, and Rituals." For an account of the role of the monasteries in negotiating "legitimacy" amid the contradictions between egalitarianism and hierarchy in Sherpa society, see Ortner, *High Religion*.

man and nature.³⁵ Before the 1924 expedition, however, in an article for the *Times*, Bruce mingled the language of science and pilgrimage. “It is possible that certain branches of science may benefit from the experiences of the party, but the dominant note of the whole undertaking, first, last, and foremost, is a great adventure—almost now become a pilgrimage. Did we not explain to the lama of the Rongbuk, the Sang Rimpoché, that it was for us an attempt to reach the highest point on earth as being the nearest to heaven?”³⁶

But Tibetan mountain pilgrimages involved walking *around* the mountain, not climbing up it. While Bruce’s explanation—ascend as pilgrimage—had antecedents in Britain, it was not widely circulated concerning Everest until it was imported from Tibet.³⁷ As the primary public spokesman for the Everest expeditions and films in the 1920s, Younghusband came to embody these dual perspectives and their hybrid origins in Britain and Tibet.

THE ANGLO-TIBETAN ENCOUNTER also deeply influenced Captain John Noel, filmmaker, photographer, and entrepreneur, who joined the Everest expeditions in 1922 and 1924. Noel had been greatly impressed by Herbert Ponting’s films about Antarctic expeditions, and he planned his projects during a period of escalating interest in films of fact and “documentaries.”³⁸ Noel’s first effort, *Climbing Mount Everest* (1922), is less about climbing than the climbers’ encounter with Tibet. Like many similar travel and exploration films of the period, most of this film is an anthropological travelogue of Tibetan life.³⁹ As one intertitle announces, “Visiting the towns of Kamba, Shekar and the Monastery of Rongbuk, we gained many

³⁵ “Mount Everest Expedition,” EE/1/12/1, RGSA; and Younghusband in RGS Circular, January, 1921, Add. MSS 63119, fol. 18, BL. Younghusband also told the viceroy that the expedition would train officers and civil servants for the frontier. Younghusband to Chelmsford, February 17, 1921, MSS Eur. E. 264/16, OIOC.

³⁶ *Times*, January 28, 1924. The *Times* editorial the same day echoed Bruce’s theme of pilgrimage. Noel expanded on pilgrimage as a metaphor in *Through Tibet to Everest*, 140–47. Years later, Howard-Bury suggested that Bell had obtained permission for “a pilgrimage to Everest” from the Dalai Lama. See Howard-Bury to Blakeney, October 3, 1960, Add. MSS 63119, fol. 45, BL. This is probably Bruce’s comment reattributed to the Dalai Lama since it does not accord with Bell’s account of what he told the Dalai Lama. See note 23, above.

³⁷ On Tibetan mountain pilgrimages, see Rinchen Lhamo [Mrs. Louis King], *We Tibetans* (London, 1926), 65–66; and G. A. Combe, *A Tibetan on Tibet* (London, 1926), 166–72. Some visitors to the Himalayas did mimic Tibetan pilgrimages and circumambulate mountains, especially Kailas. See Charles Allen, *A Mountain in Tibet: The Search for Mount Kailas and the Sources of the Great Rivers of India* (London, 1982). The two attitudes of conquest and devotion toward mountains both have a long history. See Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York, 1995), esp. 385–513.

³⁸ On many of these films, see Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (London, 1979), which includes a discussion of Noel’s films, 452–64. See also David L. Clark, “Capt. Noel’s 1922 Conquest of Everest,” *American Cinematographer*, 71 (August 1990): 36–40. On Ponting’s antarctic films and other films of fact before and after the war, see Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1906–1914* (London, 1949), 146–65; and Low, *The History of the British Film, 1918–1929* (London, 1971), 287–90. They were not called “documentaries” until the late 1920s.

³⁹ For a broad range of similar films on early cross-cultural contacts, see Pierre-L. Jordan, *Cinéma Cinema Kino: Premier Contact—Premier Regard, First Contact—First Look, Erster Kontakt—Erster Blick* (Marseille, 1992). These were not often self-consciously “ethnographic” in focus. Rather, these films were in the tradition of scenics, panoramas, travelogues, and expedition films. See Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin, Tex., 1976); and Peter Loizos, *Innovation in Ethnographic Film: From Innocence to Self-Consciousness, 1955–85* (Chicago, 1993). For earlier traditions in photography, see James R. Ryan, “Imperial Landscapes: Photography, Geography, and British Overseas Exploration,

interesting glimpses into the life, manners, and customs of the strange people of Tibet." One of the longest, and by far the most interesting, sequences in the film shows the lamas at Rongbuk Monastery performing "devil dances." When the film appeared in England, it was accompanied by Tibetan music composed by Howard Somervell, one of the climbers, who later became a medical missionary in India.⁴⁰

Noel's first film is descriptive and lacks drama, especially when compared to Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, another 1922 film that largely defined the genre of ethnographic documentary.⁴¹ General Bruce and the Rongbuk Lama are the only individuals who receive much attention until the final climbing scenes. Noel reached the North Col and watched the climbers attain record heights, but shots of wind-blown ridges and tiny climbers on snow slopes contained little drama. The film does not show the avalanche that killed seven porters. The climbers' failure to reach the summit overshadowed the technical breakthroughs of Noel and his team of Sherpa porters—filming at 23,000 feet and developing film under harsh conditions in a tent at 16,000 feet. (See Figure 3.) His film concludes with an advertisement for the next expedition and film. "They will return to this terrific battle with nature, and despite the dangers, the storms and the cold they will win through—They will conquer, and they will yet stand on the summit of Everest—the very topmost pinnacle of the earth."⁴²

When the British received permission to return to Everest in 1924, John Noel again accompanied the expedition. Noel formed Explorer Films, Ltd., with Younghusband as chairman, which paid an astonishing £8,000 for the film and photographic rights. Together with the *Times*' payment of £1,000 for publication of the expedition's dispatches, these syndication rights paid for most of the expedition's £10,000 expenses. Noel also arranged to send newsreel footage during the expedition to Pathé News.⁴³ Although such rights made the expedition financially viable, the Royal Geographical Society lost control over the how the expedition—and Tibet—were represented in the film and in its publicity. Noel publicized his coming attraction before the expedition left England by advertising the film as a struggle between man and nature. According to the *Weekly Dispatch*, the film would feature "Everest as leading lady" and "man's passionate struggle to conquer the

1858–1872," in *Geography and Imperialism, 1820–1940*, Morag Bell, Robin Butlin, and Michael Heffernan, eds. (Manchester, 1995), 53–79.

⁴⁰ *Climbing Mount Everest* (1922). See the viewing copy at the National Film and Television Archive, British Film Institute, London (hereafter, NFTVA). T. H. Somervell, *After Everest: The Experiences of a Mountaineer and Medical Missionary* (London, 1936), 78. The ceremonies at Rongbuk Monastery in 1924 reminded Somervell, a Quaker, of the magic, ritual, and priestcraft of a Roman Catholic service: "in short, East and West are not as far apart as some people think." *After Everest*, 115.

⁴¹ See Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, 2d rev. edn. (New York, 1993); Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991); Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London, 1994); Lewis Jacobs, ed., *The Documentary Tradition*, 2d edn. (New York, 1979).

⁴² *Climbing Mount Everest*, NFTVA. See Noel, *Through Tibet to Everest*, 156–59; Brownlow, *War, the West, and the Wilderness*, 456–59; and Holtzel and Salkeld, *First on Everest*, 95, 133, 143.

⁴³ For the cost of the expeditions, see Add. MSS 63120, fol. 61, BL; Unsworth, *Everest*, 101. The *Times* would have paid an additional £1,000 if the expedition had reached the summit. Syndication rights were always the largest source of support for the expeditions, but such press arrangements caused trouble in India in the 1920s. See L/P&S/10/778 and MSS Eur. E. 238/10, OIOC; and EE 6/1/20–26, RGSA. Surviving newsreels show Noel with his cameras and the expedition's porters in Darjeeling. See G1060–1924, and G1078–1924, British Pathé News Collection, London.



FIGURE 3: “Captain Noel Kinematographing the ascent of Mt. Everest from the Chang La,” 1922. As he films, John Noel is assisted by a Sherpa, who balances the telephoto lens. Courtesy of Royal Geographical Society, London.

dreadful virgin of the snows.” “Everest will be characterised as an inhuman ‘vampire’—a whitened Jezebel of the Himalayas—who contemptuously flings blinding storms and deadly avalanches upon too daring suitors.” In language more typical of the rest of the pre-expedition publicity, Noel told *Bioscope* that his film should be “not merely a stereotyped record of travel but . . . should embody, in the form of a continuous narrative, the romantic spirit of this fight between Man and Nature in her most formidable aspect.” Privately, Noel told Bruce that he planned to make two films, one of the expedition to be shown if the mountain were climbed and another to be used in the event of failure, “dealing with the life of the people in Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan.”⁴⁴

These plans were overtaken by events during the expedition in 1924. General Bruce, who had been featured in all the early news articles, was sent home with an irregular heartbeat before the party reached Everest. Instead of conquering the mountain, Mallory and Irvine lost their lives near the summit. Two of Noel’s publicity stunts on location—driving a Citroën tractor into Tibet and posting letters from the mountain with his own Everest stamp—were dependent on recalcitrant Tibetan mules and yaks.⁴⁵ As the expedition returned to India, Noel put into effect

⁴⁴ *Weekly Dispatch*, February 17, 1924; *Bioscope*, February 21, 1924; Unsworth, *Everest*, 146.

⁴⁵ On the 1924 expedition, see E. F. Norton, *The Fight for Everest: 1924* (London, 1925); Unsworth,

a plan he had considered before leaving London: to bring home a group of Tibetans, Nepalese, or Sherpas to perform with the film. Noel hoped to duplicate the success the previous year of *The Covered Wagon*, an epic western that had been preceded by a "live prologue" of Arapahoes dancing in war paint and headdresses.⁴⁶

Noel's 1924 Everest film also competed with other expedition films and representations of Tibet in London. Several Europeans had recently attracted attention by traveling to Lhasa in disguise.⁴⁷ In addition, a Parsee promoter in Darjeeling planned to present Tibetan dancers at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in the summer of 1924. After pointing out in Parliament that "devil dancers" were being recruited in Darjeeling to perform at Wembley, Lt.-Col. James asked the undersecretary of state for India "whether he is aware that devil dances have a deep religious significance to the Buddhist priests and other Buddhists in Tibet and that the proposed scheme is arousing strong feelings of religious resentment and apprehension."⁴⁸ In response, the India Office expressed its desire to be sensitive to these concerns. Since Wembley "devil dancers" were not "real" lamas, the Tibetan authorities permitted them to go "provided no religious dances were performed." However, the Wembley dancers were dressed in religious masks and cheap imitations of religious robes, used religious trumpets, and performed a parody of Tibetan religious dances. They were also seen at Wembley by Rinzin Dorje Ringang, a Tibetan engineer educated at Rugby and Northampton Polytechnic Institute, who considered their performance an insult to Tibet and Buddhism. As a result, Bailey and other officials arranged that any future visits by Tibetan lamas would be strictly regulated to avoid anything blasphemous or offensive.⁴⁹

Everest, 107–41; Holtzel and Salkeld, *First on Everest*, 179–252. On the Citroën tractor, see Unsworth, *Everest*, 148–49; on the Everest stamp, see *Evening Standard*, February 13, 1924, and many related stories early in 1924 in EE/41(b), RGSA.

⁴⁶ See *The Film Renter and Moving Picture News*, March 8, 1924, in which Noel compares his plans to *The Covered Wagon* (1923); and Unsworth, *Everest*, 149. Lowell Thomas claimed to be the first to have used "live prologues" before his Lawrence of Arabia films, although there were earlier examples. For this and a discussion of *The Covered Wagon*, including a photograph of the Arapahoes, see Brownlow, *War, the West, and the Wilderness*, 378, 447. See also Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, 1994). For related discussion of *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), see Gillian B. Anderson, *Music for Silent Films, 1894–1929: A Guide* (Washington, D.C., 1988), xvii–xviii, xxxix–xli. For related contexts, see Charles Musser, *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880–1920* (Princeton, N.J., 1991); and Hiroshi Komatsu and Charles Musser, "Benshi Search," *Wide Angle*, 9 (1987): 72–90.

⁴⁷ See William Montgomery McGovern, *To Lhasa in Disguise: A Secret Expedition through Mysterious Tibet* (London, 1924); and his film *Mysterious Tibet*. One review thought McGovern's film covered the same ground but was not as good as Noel's *Climbing Mount Everest*; see *Nation and Athenaeum*, January 12, 1924. Alexandra David-Neel also visited Lhasa surreptitiously in 1924. See David-Neel, *My Journey to Lhasa* (London, 1927). See also Bishop, *Myth of Shangri-La*. For another "expedition" film in 1925, see Dean Rapp and Charles W. Weber, "British Film, Empire and Society in the Twenties: The 'Livingstone' Film, 1923–1925," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 9 (1989): 3–17, which recreated Livingstone's life on location in Africa and claimed to be the first British film to use Africans as actors.

⁴⁸ On the Wembley dancers, see L/P&S/11/244, OIOC; and *Hansard Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 5th ser., vol. 170, March 10, 1924, col. 1890. An Everest exhibit also appeared in the India section at Wembley. See EE/31/1, RGSA; and Spencer to Bruce, May 3, 1924, Add. MSS 63119, fol. 63, BL. On the empire exhibition, see MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*; and Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas*.

⁴⁹ See Bailey to Parsons, November 25, 1924, and Bailey to Latimer, October 20/21, 1924, L/P&S/11/244, OIOC; and Lamb, *Tibet, China and India*, 160. On the visit of the Tibetan boys, see

Before *The Epic of Everest* opened in London, Bailey tried to warn the Royal Geographical Society of potential difficulties. Bailey told Arthur Hinks, RGS secretary, that the “lice-eating” scene had caused offense when the film had been shown in India. “The Tibetans say that this is not typical and will give the world the wrong impression.” Later, after learning that Noel’s lamas had been taken to England, Bailey alerted Hinks to the problems caused by the earlier dancers at Wembley. “The Tibetans are very touchy about their religion, and I hope nothing will be done in connection with the Everest Film to offend them. In particular, any dances performed with long trumpets and other instruments which are only used in religious ceremonies, or dances in religious masks or robes will give offense.”⁵⁰ These warnings resulted in only minor changes, however, and the film opened in December 1924 with the lamas supplying the fanfare.

THE POPULAR PRESS WAS FASCINATED by the Tibetan lamas whom Noel brought back to perform with the film. Pathé newsreels showed Noel at the port of London greeting “Six Holy Lamas from Thibet—hermits who live 14,000 ft. up the mountain.” (See Figure 4.) Newspapers described the lamas with many of the stock stereotypes of Orientalist discourse. The questionable legal status of the Tibetans caused comment and some creative reporting. Under the headline “Seven Lamas Come to Town. Escape from Tibet as Bales of Fur,” the *Daily News* reported that Noel had persuaded the lamas “to leave Tibet for the first time. The disguise was necessary owing to the extreme difficulty for a lama to get out of his country.” Several papers reported on their search for housing in London. According to the *Daily Chronicle*, the film company had the following requirements: “As well as being near the theatre, the landlord must not mind sacrifices and religious ceremonies of any kind taking place on his premises.”⁵¹

The lamas’ position as religious leaders also led to ambivalent representations of the lamas as sources of humor or inspiration. “Bishop to Dance on Stage. High Dignitaries of Tibetan Church Reach London. Music from Skulls. Tom-Tom Ceremonies from the Himalayas,” ran the telegraphic headlines of the *Daily Sketch*. “Even now the Lama imagines that the Scala Theatre is a kind of temple,” wrote the *Daily Chronicle*, “and I imagine he will go home with some queer ideas of our religious services if he regards the audience as a congregation of the faithful.” The *Times* reported that on the lamas’ visit to the Houses of Parliament, “it took some time before they could be made to understand that the statues they saw were of statesmen, and not images of the gods of the British.”⁵²

Goldstein, *Modern History of Tibet*, 158–62; and Tsering Shakya, “Making the Great Game Players: Tibetan Students in Britain between 1913 and 1917,” *Tibetan Review*, 21 (January 1986): 9–14, 20.

⁵⁰ Bailey to Hinks, November 18, 1924, EE/24/2, RGSA; L/P&S/10/778, OIOC; and Unsworth, *Everest*, 150. Bailey to Hinks, November 25, 1924, EE/24/2/2, RGSA, and L/P&S/11/244, OIOC.

⁵¹ G1143–1924, *Epic of Everest*, British Pathé News Collection, London; *Daily News*, November 29, 1924; *Daily Chronicle*, November 28, 1924. Bailey noted: “It is of course quite untrue that there was any secrecy after they reached India, not that they came in bales of anything.” F. M. Bailey to Florence Bailey, January 1, 1925, MSS Eur. F. 157/185, OIOC.

⁵² *Daily Sketch*, December 2, 1924; *Daily Chronicle*, November 28, 1924; *Times*, December 17, 1924. This is not to say, of course, that we can infer from these reports that the lamas actually thought they



FIGURE 4: The Dancing Lamas of Everest. Gana Suta Chempo, the head lama, is second from the left. Lhakpa Tsering, the Sherpa who also traveled to London, is on the far right. Courtesy of British Pathé Plc., London.

Alongside such Orientalist humor were images of the lamas as inspirational mystics. During the nineteenth century, British scholars had defined Buddhism as a textual object under their control. By studying its ancient texts, these scholars aimed to recover the “essence” of Buddhism that preceded its “decline” into contemporary practices. Tibetan Buddhism was represented by the British as a peculiarly degenerate form of Buddhism known as “Lamaism.” As the word made flesh, the dancing lamas of Everest generated intense interest among adherents of a variety of religions in Britain, from Buddhism to theosophy to mainstream churches.⁵³ Earlier in 1924, British Buddhists had sent their own mission to Tibet. Although the group was stopped at Gyantse, William McGovern continued to Lhasa in disguise. In London, the archbishop of Canterbury, who received the dancing lamas in an official visit, said “the visit of the Lama to England,” was “a unique thing in the story of the world.”⁵⁴

Expressions of sympathy for the lamas could also take the form of Orientalist condescension. The *Sunday Express* noted that the lamas “will perform on stage some of the ceremonies of their religion to the accompaniment of their own weird musical instruments.” To this the writer added, “I cannot imagine anything more likely to kill the romance and mystery of Tibet than this ill-conceived idea of bringing some of the holy men of Buddhism to play in a masquerade of their religion on a London stage.” The main objection, however, was not over offending the Tibetans but killing an Orientalist representation—“the romance and mystery of Tibet.” The *Referee* defended the Everest Committee as “a body of such dignity and responsibility that it ought to be immune from insinuations of sensationalism.” The *Referee* noted that, in response to criticism, the Tibetans “will not perform any religious ceremonial on the Scala stage. What would be the sacrilege if they did? The people who go to see the Everest film will not be in search of illicit sensation. They will go as a matter of interest and to pay tribute to a very heroic adventure.” But the film’s publicity emphasized the sensationalism of the lamas over the heroism of the climbers. According to the *Daily Mirror*, “looking exactly like Christmas decorations [the lamas] created an enormous sensation.” Their hats, robes, and instruments “convinced the cab-driver that they were ‘all dressed up for some advertising stunt.’”⁵⁵

The lamas’ appearances in London were well orchestrated. Many newspapers carried the same photographs, used the same quotations, and emphasized the same

were looking at the “gods of the British.” For a discussion of related issues, see the debates between Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, N.J., 1992); and Marshall Sahlins, *How “Natives” Think: About Captain Cook, For Example* (Chicago, 1995).

⁵³ Almond, *British Discovery of Buddhism*; and Lopez, *Curators of the Buddha*. See, for example, Laurence Austine Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet; or, Lamaism* (London, 1895), based on research among Tibetan Buddhists in Sikkim. On Waddell, see Lopez, 259–63. For related British contexts, see Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England* (London, 1989); and Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁵⁴ French, *Younghusband*, 338. McGovern (see note 47, above) had been a member of the British Buddhist mission. See also L/P&S/10/1013, OIOC.

⁵⁵ *Sunday Express*, November 23, 1924; *The Referee*, November 30, 1924; *Daily Mirror*, December 2, 1924.



FIGURE 5: “Holy Men Visitors from Tibet See London’s Zoo.” *Daily Mirror*, December 4, 1924. Courtesy of Mirror Syndication International.

details—as if taken from the same press release. Upon seeing London, the lamas were said to exclaim, “City of Devils,” “What a big Bazaar,” and “Ah Yamchen” (how wonderful). A few individuals received special attention in stereotypical terms. The head lama “occasionally makes a guttural but dignified comment on the strange sights that London unfolds,” and he possessed an “inscrutable, Sphinx-like stare.” The one Sherpa brought to London, Lhakpa-Tsering, was a “Tibetan Napoleon-porter-and-man-of-all-work [and] one of the three porters who last saw Mallory and Irvine alive.”⁵⁶ In their most striking publicity stunt, the Tibetan lamas visited the London Zoo. One photograph of the visit shows the lamas reaching over the fence to pet a camel, while the caption explains that the lamas also visited the llamas at the zoo. Another photograph shows a zookeeper in the center of the frame holding out a fish. (See Figure 5.) In the right foreground, two sea lions reach up to catch the fish. Directly opposite them in the left foreground, a cluster of five

⁵⁶ Stories on the dancing lamas appeared in nearly every paper on December 2, 1924. For a book of newscuttings on the film and the lamas, see EE/41(b), RGSA. For passages quoted on the lama, see *Daily Express*, December 2, 1924; and, for the Sherpa, see *Daily News*, December 2, 1924.

lamas watch the feeding. Both the sea lions and the lamas are on display, both represented as part of the zoo.⁵⁷

The cinema trade press conveyed similar themes regarding the film itself. Before its opening, all of the trade press commented that critics in India had appreciated the film's drama "and even its comedy—the latter contained in scenes showing the intimate life of the Tibetans." In addition, the deaths of Mallory and Irvine turned the film into a tragedy "but a tragedy of the most glorious and inspiring sort."⁵⁸ *Cinema* remarked that the lamas' music creates "a peculiar semi-religious impression almost like a narcotic to the senses." *Bioscope* concluded that the lamas were an "immensely effective prologue to the film," and the *British Journal of Photography* opined that the lamas added "a valuable touch of local colour."⁵⁹

But the presence of the lamas added something more. The main theme of the *Epic of Everest* was the liberating presence of the extroverted, aggressive, and manly British climbers amid the introversion, passivity, and squalor of the mystical Tibetans. The village of Phari was singled out for its filth in this intertitle: "Amid dirt and mud and stinking refuse, the people live with their dogs and cattle in these hovels, begrimed with the smoke of the argo fires." The film explicitly established the contrast between the people of Tibet and the purity of the mountains: "And in contrast to all this, the cold purity of the snows of Cholmolhari puts to eternal shame the dirt of Phari." The ethnographic details placed in bold relief the purity of the mountain and its climbers. The dancing lamas also accentuated the film's contrast between the masculine climbers and the mystical Tibetans. After the expedition reached the mountain, an intertitle announced: "Into the heart of the pure blue ice, rare, cold beautiful, lonely—Into a Fairyland of Ice. It is of this Fairyland that you shall now see, that the Tibetan legends speak of Imps, Gnomes, Goblins and Hairy Men holding high revels during the frozen night."⁶⁰

Into these snows of superstition, the film immediately showed the British climbers walking confidently among large boulders and towers of glacial ice. Then they climbed the ice slopes to the North Col at 23,000 feet. "Physically incapable of carrying our camera higher, we can only watch these supermen returning from building two higher camps at 25,000 and 27,000 feet after breaking all records of human endurance." Before showing the mountain, the film had introduced the British climbers by name, personalizing the expedition and adding to the melodramatic contrast between the British and Tibetans. The disappearance of Mallory and Irvine was rendered as "the historic climax of our adventure—glorious because of

⁵⁷ For the camel, see *Children's Newspaper*, December 20, 1924; and *Graphic*, December 27, 1924. For the sea lions, see *Daily Mirror*, December 4, 1924. On related children's themes, see the *Daily Mail*, December 16, 1924; and *The Lady*, December 18, 1924.

⁵⁸ See identical passages in *Bioscope*, *Cinema*, *Film Renter*, and *Kinematograph*, on November 6, 1924, EE/41(b), RGSA.

⁵⁹ *Cinema*, December 18, 1924; *Bioscope*, December 18, 1924; *British Journal of Photography*, December 19, 1924.

⁶⁰ *Epic of Everest*. See the viewing copy at NFTVA. Such contrasts were staple representations of Tibet. See Bishop, *Dreams of Power*, 38. In earlier exhibitions, male "natives" were usually exhibited in wrestling matches, baggage races, mock battles, and military exercises, while female "natives" were shown dancing and in domestic settings. These "traditions" may have reinforced British representations of the dancing lamas' effeminacy. When male "natives" had danced before, it was usually identified as a "war dance." See, for example, Coombes, *Reinventing Africa*, 97–98, 205–09; and Schneider, *Empire for the Masses*, 141–44.

the marvel of attainment—sad because of the tragedy of death.” In its own mystical explanation, the film concluded by invoking the mysterious powers of the head lama of Rongbuk Monastery, who had predicted the failure of the expedition.⁶¹

TIBETAN AUTHORITIES had much to complain about after the 1924 expedition. On their return from the mountain, the climbers made two journeys—to the Rongshar Valley to recuperate and to Lhatse to survey—which went beyond what had been allowed in the passports from the Dalai Lama.⁶² But Noel’s film and the dancing lamas generated far more serious complaints and long-term consequences. In response to Bailey’s warnings, Noel agreed that the lamas would not perform religious dances, but he kept the “lice-eating” scene in his film. According to Noel, as a man picks a child’s hair clean, “he performs the usual Tibetan custom of killing what he finds with his teeth. This scene does not show him eating anything.” Hinks advised, “the distinction between ‘killing with the teeth’ and ‘eating’ is rather a fine one for the public, but I will leave that to you.”⁶³ In a still photograph from the film that may represent the scene (now missing), the man and boy are seated next to a woman holding in her lap a small primate, and the Tibetan-primate parallel may have contributed to Tibetan indignation.⁶⁴ (See Figure 6.) Hinks reassured Bailey that Noel explained to the audience that the dances were not religious. “To tell the truth,” Hinks wrote, “it is rather difficult to say what they are,” and he compared them to “a Morris dance of a very ungainly kind.” Hinks conceded that their musical instruments might be the same as those used in religious ceremonies, though he disclaimed any RGS responsibility since the film was in the hands of a private company.⁶⁵

Despite these disclaimers, the dancing lamas caused the cancellation of future expeditions to Everest and threatened broader Anglo-Tibetan relations by the spring of 1925. “Apart from the question of the relations between the Tibetans and the Everest Expedition,” Bailey warned, “I feel that their whole attitude towards us will be affected by this.” Tsarong Shape, the Tibetan commander-in-chief and the official who was most sympathetic to the British, told Bailey, “from the beginning the Tibetan government disliked the expedition owing to the sacredness of the mountain, but . . . Sir C. Bell brought considerable pressure, and, as the Tibetan Government were about to receive great favours (arms, etc.) from the Govt. of

⁶¹ *Epic of Everest*, NFTVA. The film has not enjoyed long-term critical success. See Low, *History of the British Film, 1918–1929*, 33.

⁶² Until the dancers appeared in London, the unauthorized journeys were the main points of contention in the autumn of 1924. See Bailey to India, September 2, 1924, and October 16, 1924, L/P&S/10/778, OIOC.

⁶³ See Porter to Hose, December 1, 1924, L/P&S/11/244, OIOC; Noel to Hinks, December 6, 1924, quoted in Unsworth, *Everest*, 150, and unnumbered letter with EE 31/4/12, RGSA; Hinks to Noel, December 8, 1924, EE 31/4/12, RGSA; and Hinks to Bailey, December 8, 1924, EE 24/2/4, RGSA; and L/P&S/10/778, OIOC.

⁶⁴ See Stills, Posters and Designs Collection, British Film Institute. The “lice-eating” scene is not in the viewing copy at NFTVA. This still resembles some descriptions of the scene, and its human-primate image is significant even if it does not show the “lice eating” itself. For a discussion of similar human-primate representations, see Haraway, *Primate Visions*.

⁶⁵ Hinks to Bailey, December 16, 1924, EE 24/2/5, RGSA; and L/P&S/10/778, OIOC. It is unclear what kind of dances the lamas did perform on stage.



FIGURE 6: Primate Visions. This photograph, identified as a still from Captain John Noel's film *The Epic of Everest* (1924), may represent the missing "lice-eating" scene. It does not appear in current versions of the film. Courtesy of BFI Stills, Posters and Designs, London.

India, consent was given.”⁶⁶ In April 1925, the Tibetan government denied permission for future expeditions. The prime minister of Tibet complained to Bailey about the unauthorized journeys. “Over and above this, they have enticed and taken away to England four or five monks, whose photos as dancers have appeared recently in the newspapers. We regard this action on the part of the Sahibs as very unbecoming. For the future, we cannot give them permission to go to Tibet.” The prime minister also demanded “the immediate return to Tibet and handing over of the monks, who have been taken away deceitfully.”⁶⁷

The Tibetan decision opened a breach between the Royal Geographical Society and the British government. To Hinks and Noel, the Tibetans possessed no independent agency. Any objection to the Everest expeditions could not originate with the Tibetans, they argued, but must have been manufactured by British officials, namely Bailey. As Noel wrote to Hinks:

The opinions that Major Bailey quotes as coming from the Tibetans are entirely from himself, and if people in England understood the real position of a Political Officer in India, they would know that he has such a peculiar position that the Government refers all matters to him and he practically dictates any answer he wishes, putting the authority on to the native people, because they accept his advice and he advises them to do what he wishes.

Noel silences the Tibetans and projects the habit of speaking for the Tibetans onto Bailey. In correspondence with the India Office that dragged on for months, Hinks continued to criticize Bailey. “We cannot help feeling that the refusal is due to what looks like an exaggerated deference to the more reactionary side of Tibetan feeling paid by the Political Officer in Sikkim.”⁶⁸

The India Office asked Noel and the other members of the expedition to explain their actions. The expedition was excused for its visit to the Rongshar Valley, but no justification could be found for the survey to Lhatse or for bringing the lamas to England. In particular, the India Office asked Noel to supply the official documents that, he claimed, gave permission for the lamas’ visit. There were none. The India Office bureaucrats were then brutally frank in their criticism of Noel. “He is also either disingenuous or much misinformed; if the former, his letter tends to support the Tibetan charge of ‘deceitfulness’; if the latter, he is obviously a careless organizer, and not qualified for the business he undertook.” A thorough investigation in India and Tibet concluded that “Captain Noel’s statement about the monks taken to England is in direct variance with the facts.”⁶⁹ The lamas left Tibet without

⁶⁶ Bailey to Hinks, January 1, 1925, EE 24/2/6, RGSA; L/P&S/10/778, OIOC; Add. MSS 63119, fol. 80, BL; and Unsworth, *Everest*, 151. Tsarong quoted in draft of Bailey to Parsons, January 26, 1925, MSS Eur. F. 157/290, OIOC; compare the final version in L/P&S/10/778, OIOC. Bell had applied such pressure before. See Christie, “Sir Charles Bell,” 52.

⁶⁷ Prime Minister of Tibet to Bailey, April 12, 1925, L/P&S/10/778, OIOC; EE 27/6/13, RGSA; and Unsworth, *Everest*, 151–52.

⁶⁸ Noel to Hinks, May 22, 1925, quoted in Unsworth, *Everest*, 157, and in EE 27/7/16, EE 34/4/24, RGSA. Hinks to Wakely, May 28, 1925, EE 27/6/10, RGSA; and L/P&S/10/778, OIOC; see also Unsworth, *Everest*, 153–55.

⁶⁹ D. T. Montheath, Minute, July 8, 1925, L/P&S/10/778, OIOC; see also Hinks to Under-Secretary of State for India, July 1, 1925, EE 27/6/15, RGSA; L/P&S/10/778, OIOC. India to London, August 4, 1925, and Garrett to Mt. Everest Committee, September 22, 1925, EE 27/6/16, RGSA; and L/P&S/10/778, OIOC; Unsworth, *Everest*, 153–55. See also Bailey to India, August 26, 1925, and Wakely to Hinks, October 20, 1925, L/P&S/10/778, OIOC; EE 27/6/18, RGSA; Add. MSS 63120, fols. 5–6, BL.

the knowledge of the officials of the Gyantse monastery or of the Tibetan government. Once the lamas arrived in India, their escort, John Macdonald, the son of a former trade agent in Gyantse, obtained police permits in Calcutta after passports had been denied in Darjeeling.⁷⁰ Noel took Macdonald at his word that he had obtained the necessary passports, when, in fact, Macdonald had not. Hinks was ultimately forced to apologize: "The Committee regret very deeply the humiliating position in which they were placed by the discovery that Captain Noel's statements were incorrect." Taking Noel's statements at face value, Walt Unsworth recently claimed that Bailey was "putting words into Lhasa's mouth." Unsworth even concludes that "one cannot help but agree with Noel that Bailey fixed the whole affair from start to finish." Unsworth suggests that Bailey wanted to stop the Everest expeditions to avoid paperwork and because Bailey wanted to climb Everest himself.⁷¹

If Bailey had been the obstacle, the Tibetans might have granted permission in 1928, when Bailey was replaced as political officer of Sikkim by Lt.-Col. Leslie Weir. But the Tibetan government did not give permission for another Everest expedition until 1932, after the renewal of Sino-Tibetan hostilities. When Weir visited Lhasa in 1930, he found the Tibetans still averse to British travel in Tibet in general and to Mt. Everest in particular. The Tibetans, Weir wrote to Hinks, "stress the hardship on the local inhabitants in having to supply supplies and transport in localities where such are impracticable." They also feared spying and harbored a "strong resentment against the last Everest Expedition." The Dalai Lama saw pictures of the "dancing lamas" in the weekly picture papers and reportedly looked "on the whole affair as a direct affront to the religion of which he is the head." In addition, the maharajah of Sikkim and an agent of the maharajah of Bhutan had seen the film in Darjeeling and found the "lice-eating" scene "extremely repugnant."⁷² In 1929, Kenneth Mason, assistant surveyor general in India, told Hinks that "neither Tibet, nor Sikkim, nor Bhutan will have Noel in their countries." The government of India supported their decisions, and so did Mason. "Our travellers must be more circumspect when they enter Native States or foreign countries, and not behave as though the whole place belongs to them."⁷³

⁷⁰ See L. Birley, Chief Secretary to Government of Bengal, to Foreign and Political Department, Calcutta, August 20, 1925; D. Macdonald to Bailey, August 18, 1925; S. W. Laden La to Bailey, August 13, 1925, all in L/P&S/10/778, OIOC. In a later book, Macdonald reasserts the lamas' authenticity as real monks but makes no mention of the controversy. David Macdonald, *Twenty Years in Tibet* (Philadelphia, 1938), 132.

⁷¹ Hinks to Under-Secretary of State for India, November 5, 1925, EE 27/6/19; EE 27/7/34, RGSA; and L/P&S/10/778, OIOC; Unsworth, *Everest*, 150, 156, 157. See also Swinson, *Beyond the Frontiers*, 220. Many officers, including Younghusband, Bruce, Noel, and C. G. Rawling, shared Bailey's pre-war ambition to climb Everest. See Hansen, "Vertical Boundaries, National Identities." No evidence indicates that Bailey was interested in climbing Everest in the 1920s.

⁷² Weir to Hinks, July 26, 1931, EE 44/5, RGSA. In 1926, General Bruce sounded out officials in India—as Lt.-Col. Howard-Bury had done in 1921—and was told prospects were "almost nil." Bray to Bailey, March 23, 1926, L/P&S/10/778, OIOC. Efforts to seek permission remained in abeyance until Weir's mission was sent to counter the reassertion of Chinese influence in Tibet, which began after Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek gained control in China. See L/P&S/12/4242, and L/P&S/12/4263, OIOC.

⁷³ Mason to Hinks, October 30, 1929; Mason, Kenneth, Corr. 1921–30, RGSA. See also the scathing review of Noel's book in *Alpine Journal*, 39 (1927): 366–68.

BOTH THE INDIA OFFICE AND THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY framed the debate over the dancing lamas in such binary terms—Bailey versus Noel—that they excluded any space for Tibetan agency. Yet the exchange between British and Tibetans was far more complicated and reciprocal than this dichotomy allows. During and after the controversy, Noel, the dancing lamas, Bailey, and Tsarong Shape each occupied subject positions transformed by the Anglo-Tibetan encounter. Their new roles, in turn, exerted a direct influence on the internal politics of Tibet.

Noel described the Everest expeditions in his book, *Through Tibet to Everest* (1927), as an encounter between “the inert East and the inquisitive, impertinent West.” But Noel’s relationship with Tibet was more ambiguous than his rhetoric. Noel’s modest ambitions as an amateur anthropologist led him to make films that were amalgams of adventure tales and ethnographic travelogues. In different ways, both Noel and his wife—he was a Roman Catholic, she was a psychic—were deeply influenced by Tibet. Noel devoted a long chapter to Tibetan customs, and his wife later published a collection of Tibetan folk tales based on material she collected while Noel was on the mountain in 1924.⁷⁴

As a result of the diplomatic controversy, Noel and the dancing lamas both became prophets without honor in their own countries. After Noel took the film and the dancing lamas on tour in Europe, his film failed to find a distributor in the United States. Noel’s company filed for bankruptcy, and he went on tour without the lamas in North America. British diplomats prevented Noel from organizing Himalayan expeditions from Berlin or Washington, D.C.⁷⁵ While it is unclear why the dancing lamas agreed to go to London, it is possible that they intended to be Buddhist “missionaries” or cultural ambassadors. Whatever their intentions, the few dancing lamas who returned to Tibet were severely punished. Most chose to remain exiles in Darjeeling. Although the decision not to return to Tibet shows that they were aware of the affair, the lamas themselves left no firsthand accounts of what they thought of the controversy.

While in London, however, the dancing lamas were aware of how they were portrayed in the press, and they attempted to resist Orientalist representations. During one tour of the city, Gana Suta Chempo, the head lama, chastised two of the others for laughing out loud at something they saw. “When two of his band so far forgot themselves as to lose their impassivity in their delight, he promptly boxed their ears, recalling them to attention and in the presence of a growing and wondering throng, administered a sharp lecture on the need for the preservation of dignity.”⁷⁶ Moreover, the dancing lamas articulated a critique of British culture

⁷⁴ Noel, *Through Tibet to Everest*, 86. On Mrs. Noel as a psychic, see Macdonald, *Twenty Years in Tibet*, 299–301. For Noel’s chapter on Tibetan customs, see *Through Tibet to Everest*, esp. 63–86; see also Sybille Noel, *The Magic Bird of Chomo-Lung-Ma: Tales of Mount Everest, the Turquoise Peak* (Garden City, N.Y., 1931).

⁷⁵ For Noel’s later plans, see Hinks to Noel, July 31, 1925, EE/31/4/25, RGSA; Noel to Hinks, December 7, 1925, EE 31/4/26, RGSA; and Wakely to Gaselee (Foreign Office), January 24, 1928, L/P&S/10/778, OIOC. For additional German and American proposals, see L/P&S/12/4275, OIOC; for Noel’s North American tour, see Brownlow, *War, the West, and the Wilderness*, 463.

⁷⁶ *Morning Post*, December 17, 1924. This scene took place during the lamas’ visit to the Houses of Parliament. They later visited the Army and Navy Store, as well as a Punch and Judy show. See also *Evening Standard*, December 16, 1924; and a photograph in *Daily Sketch*, December 17, 1924.

during their visit that was recognized, if not by most British observers, at least by other Tibetans. Rinchen Lhamo, a Tibetan woman married to an English diplomat, reported this critique and responded directly to the way the British press had portrayed the visit of the dancing lamas to London. "One writer described them [the dancing lamas] as being frightened by the marvels of your material culture; but he goes on to say that one of them said you were in danger of being enslaved by your own machines. That is not the remark of a man in fear, but of an acute observer. I wonder the journalist did not see it, but I suppose he was misled by the convention about us being primitive." Rinchen Lhamo identified this convention as part of a broader pattern of European writing about Tibet that one would now call Orientalism: "It is so much easier to say what is expected than what is true, but contrary to established views." Her comments were intended to counter what she called the absurd and scandalous things written about Tibet. "We are, like yourselves, a people with a highly developed culture, spiritual, social and material."⁷⁷

Tibetan culture was not isolated from the world but engaged in a transcultural exchange promoted by British and Tibetan officials, especially F. M. Bailey and Tsarong Shape. Although Bailey's dispatches to India demonstrate his sensitivity to Tibetan religious beliefs, it was Bailey, as much as Noel, who was responsible for the insertion of culture, sport, and media into Anglo-Tibetan relations. As news of the deaths on Everest reached Lhasa during his diplomatic mission in 1924, Bailey circulated among the Tibetans the British sporting ethos that animated the Everest expeditions. In his diary, Bailey recorded that the Tibetan prime minister offered his condolences.

He said he was very sorry at the death of Mallory and Irvine. Tibetans thought a human life very valuable. It should be used for the benefit of the religion or of one's government and not wasted on a mountain. I said that our experience was that people who took risks by doing things like climbing mountains, playing polo and football, shooting game were better at their work than people who sat indoors all day which led to drinking and gambling. A few people were killed at these things but the benefit to the others was very great.

The next day, Bailey noted, "Tsarong Shape had all of the Tibetan officers out to practice polo today. A good sign and shows they are keen." A few days later, "in the afternoon we played polo and all Lhasa was there as I gave them tea." Tsarong hoped to have his Lhasa team play matches with the British officers in Gyantse.⁷⁸ Although polo had been played for literally thousands of years from Persia to Mongolia, Bailey taught the Tibetans how to "play the game" as the British had been doing since adopting polo in India—or inventing mountaineering in the Alps—during the mid-Victorian decades.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Rinchen Lhamo, *We Tibetans*, 95–96. For an example of the report she was responding to, see the *Times*, December 17, 1924.

⁷⁸ Bailey, *Lhasa Diary*, August 1, 2, and 6, 1924, MSS Eur. F. 157/214A, OIOC. Bailey encouraged the Tibetans to "give good pay and rank to the boys they had sent to Rugby so that parents would see that the Government appreciated this education . . . That is what we did in England." *Lhasa Diary*, August 8, 1924. On Tsarong's plans to play polo in Gyantse, see Bailey to India, October 28, 1924, L/P&S/10/1113, OIOC.

⁷⁹ See Peter H. Hansen, "Albert Smith, the Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain," *Journal of British Studies*, 34 (1995): 300–24. The history of polo is less well

Bailey was also engaged in the interplay of cinema and power in Tibet. In Lhasa in 1924, Bailey showed films in Tsarong Shape's private screening room: "The King opening Parliament impressed them very much." Even after the diplomatic controversy over the lamas in 1925, Bailey brought a small movie camera to Gyantse—the city from which the lamas had been taken to England—and filmed the remaining lamas of the Gyantse monastery performing their "devil dance." Although Bailey thought his own films were "not a success," he set an example for later British envoys.⁸⁰ In Lhasa in the 1930s, Spencer Chapman regularly showed Rin-Tin-Tin and Charlie Chaplin films, short topical films, and his own home movies, and he often played soccer against a local team he called "Lhasa United."⁸¹

Tsarong Shape's career also illustrates the extent to which the intercultural encounters of Anglo-Tibetan relations affected Tibetan domestic politics. Tsarong had risen to prominence by saving the life of the Dalai Lama during his flight to India in 1910 and by marrying into the aristocratic Tsarong family, whose name he adopted, in 1913. (Shape is shown in Figure 7.) As a confidant of the Dalai Lama, leader of the military, and master of the mint, Tsarong led the faction in Tibetan politics, centered on military officers, that advocated the "modernization" of Tibet in the early 1920s. Tsarong remodeled the army along British lines, played polo, rode a motorbike, watched Western films, and even asked Bailey about life insurance for himself and his son.⁸² But Tsarong's secularism and imitation of the British brought him into conflict with the monasteries and Buddhist laws. After a fistfight broke out between police and soldiers in 1924, for example, Tsarong inflicted summary justice on the offender by cutting off one of his legs, despite a prohibition against such punishments. As Tsarong explained to his colleagues, he was the commander-in-chief of the Tibetan army and must have certain powers; the commander-in-chief of the British army had every right to deal with such cases, and why shouldn't he follow the same rule, since the Tibetans had introduced British drill instructions and had a desire to follow British rules and regulations?⁸³

developed. It was adopted by British officers in the Indian army and imported into Britain between the 1850s and the 1870s. See Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford, 1989), 209–10.

⁸⁰ Bailey, Lhasa Diary, July 30, 1924, MSS Eur. F. 157/214; and Bailey to Florence Bailey, August 1, 1924, MSS Eur. F. 157/184, OIOC. On his Gyantse films, see Bailey to Florence Bailey, February 10, 1925, and June 9, 1925, MSS Eur. F. 157/185, OIOC. Bell watched films in Tsarong Shape's cinema as early as 1920–1921. Bell also emphasizes that Tibetan clerks in the British Trade Agency at Gyantse were taught to play polo by British officers and Indian soldiers. Charles Bell, *The People of Tibet* (Oxford, 1928), 263.

⁸¹ F. Spencer Chapman, *Lhasa, the Holy City* (London, 1938), 247–55. The Tibetan soccer team never scored a goal; 269–71. The NFTVA also holds films made by British diplomats in Tibet, including F. M. Bailey, Charles Bell, Spencer Chapman, Basil Gould, James Guthrie, and George Sherriff. See also Peter H. Hansen, "Tibet and the Cinema in the Early Twentieth Century" (unpublished essay in the possession of the author).

⁸² Tsarong was born in 1885 into a peasant family and was known as Chensal (or Jensey) Namgang, before 1913, when he married into the Tsarong family and took the name Dasang Dadul Tsarong. After serving as commander-in-chief, Tsarong became a prominent trader with Mongolia, India, China, Japan, and France. He died in 1959 in a Lhasa prison after the Chinese repression. See Goldstein, *History of Modern Tibet*, 52, 66; and Rinchen Dolma Taring, *Daughter of Tibet* (London, 1970), 18–20, 24, 74, 261, the memoir of one of Tsarong's youngest wives, who later married Jigme Taring. On Tsarong's adoption of "Western" habits, see Bailey's various reports; for his request for life insurance, see Bailey, Lhasa Diary, August 14, 1924, MSS Eur. F. 157/214A, OIOC.

⁸³ For Tsarong's views, see Goldstein, *History of Modern Tibet*, 128.



FIGURE 7: "Lunch to Shapes, July 29, 1924." F. M. Bailey (standing, center) hosts a Tibetan delegation for lunch. Tsarong Shape is the only one of the four Shapes (seated) who is wearing a Western suit. MSS Eur. F. 157/837. Courtesy of the British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, London.

Also in 1924, Tsarong, other officers, and Laden La, a Sikkimese Buddhist whom the British sent to Lhasa to train the police force, may have plotted against the monasteries and the Dalai Lama. Melvyn Goldstein suggests that Tsarong's actions in mid-1924 led to his dismissal as commander-in-chief in the spring of 1925. While Goldstein suggests plausible reasons why the Dalai Lama may have delayed his reaction, it is just as plausible that the "dancing lamas" were responsible for the timing of Tsarong's demotion.⁸⁴ The Dalai Lama demoted Tsarong after the performances of the dancing lamas and at the same time as he refused permission for another Everest expedition in April 1925. This is not to argue that the dancing lamas were the only cause of Tsarong's downfall, or that their relationship was merely *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Rather, ever since Tibetan permission for Everest had been given in the context of Sino-Tibetan hostilities and the need for British weapons, the fate of the Everest expeditions had been inextricably linked to the political fortunes of Tsarong and the military in Tibet.

While Alastair Lamb admits that "it is hard to quantify the consequences of the business of the Tibetan 'dancers,'" he adds, "there can be no doubt, however, that it did not help the cause of modernisers in general and Tsarong Shape in particular." Lamb rightly suggests the Bailey mission to Lhasa in 1924 may have heightened the visibility of "modernization" in Tibet and polarized the Tibetan ruling elite. After earlier offenses, the affair of the dancing lamas made the positions of both Tsarong and the Everest expeditions untenable. Even if Tsarong's earlier behavior contributed to his demotion, it does not explain why Anglo-Tibetan relations deteriorated so rapidly in 1925.⁸⁵ Many Tibetans suspected that the performances of the dancing lamas had been organized by the British government. Not only did British *representatives* in Lhasa show films in Tsarong's cinema, play games with his officers, and encourage his reform of a theocratic state, but British *representations* of the dancing lamas in London also appeared to denigrate and exploit Tibetan Buddhism. In both instances, Anglo-Tibetan relations had intercultural consequences. Although there had been earlier resistance against the "modernization" of Tibet—the introduction of a modern police force and army, educational reforms, higher taxes, new roads, telegraphs, and hydroelectric plants—it was not until the performances of the dancing lamas challenged Tibetan religious beliefs and cultural practices that this Tibetan resistance crystallized into direct political opposition.

Yet asymmetrical levels of military development imposed limits on the Tibetan ability to bargain with the British. After a conflict between two monasteries on the Sino-Tibetan border escalated into a wider war in 1930, Tibet again turned to Britain for more weapons and diplomatic assistance with China. Weir visited Lhasa with promises of aid and, "taking advantage of the Tibetan Government's recent

⁸⁴ For the plots, see Goldstein, *History of Modern Tibet*, 121–38; and Lamb, *Tibet, China and India*, 161–62; and Williamson to Bailey, April 10, 1925, April 21, 1925, and April 28, 1925, L/P&S/10/1088, OIOC. For the demotion, see Goldstein, *History of Modern Tibet*, 133. It is significant that despite this demotion, Tsarong remained until 1930 a member of the Kashag, the governing cabinet of four Shapes. For the political organization of Tibet, see Goldstein, 6–36. The ambiguous position of the "native" intermediaries who represented the British, such as Laden La or Norbhu Döndup, deserves further study.

⁸⁵ Lamb, *Tibet, China and India*, 161, 159. Many explanations for the breakdown in relations are excessively general. See, for example, Singh, *Himalayan Triangle*, 94.

pro-British feeling,” asked for permission for yet another Everest expedition. The Dalai Lama replied: “From our point of view, almost every snowy mountain in Tibet is the seat of the gods and of the guardian deities of the inner religion (i.e. Buddhism), who are very jealous; yet, in deference to the wishes of the British Government and in order that the friendly relations may not be ruptured, permission is hereby granted.”⁸⁶ Although a Sino-Tibetan truce was soon called and the threat eased with renewed civil war in Szechuan, the Tibetan dependence on British weapons was once again abundantly clear. As in 1921, Sino-Tibetan military conflicts in the 1930s gave Tibetans the courage to put aside their religious convictions on the sacredness of mountains. Although the Tibetans placed stringent restrictions on the activities of the expedition, they once again gave permission for the climbing of Mt. Everest as a quid pro quo for the embrace of British arms.⁸⁷

IN THE END, the incident of the dancing lamas of Everest raises questions of power. But how should power be defined? Anglo-Tibetan diplomacy, the discourse of Orientalism, and cinematic representations of Everest—each defined power relations in distinct but related ways. At one level, Anglo-Tibetan relations negotiated the power politics of diplomacy. In exchange for British weapons, Tibet gave permission for British Everest expeditions in 1921 and again in 1932. In 1925, however, when Tibet faced few threats and conserved its stockpile of arms, it was able to deny permission. When Chinese threats reappeared in the early 1930s, “Everest permits now seemed to go with British Missions to Lhasa,” according to Lamb, and were granted as “welcoming gifts” to British envoys.⁸⁸ Since Tibet never became a British colony or client-state, Tibetans were able to resist British demands under certain conditions. Yet Tibetan resistance was limited by Tibet’s ambiguous relations with China, Britain’s differential capability of violence, and Tibet’s own internal politics.

At another level, these limitations on “power politics” suggest the extent to which power was defined more expansively in Anglo-Tibetan intercultural relations. For example, the “modernization” of Tibet encouraged by the British and spearheaded by Tsarong Shape ground to a halt in the mid-1920s when the dancing lamas of Everest tipped the balance of power within Tibet from the military to the monasteries. Yet this dichotomy within Tibet should itself be understood as an intercultural consequence of Anglo-Tibetan relations. The Everest expeditions, the dancing lamas, and British diplomacy in the 1920s were the latest in a series of Anglo-Tibetan encounters, from military clashes in Sikkim, to the Younghusband mission in 1904, that culturally constructed the Tibetan military in opposition to the

⁸⁶ Dalai Lama to Weir, July 8, 1932, L/P&S/12/4242, OIOC. See also Weir to India, July 27, 1932, and Walton to Hinks, August 30, 1932, EE/44/5, RGSA; and L/P&S/12/4242, OIOC. On the Sino-Tibetan context of Weir’s missions to Lhasa, see Lamb, *Tibet, China and India*, 177–213; and Singh, *Himalayan Triangle*, 95–101. The Dalai Lama died in 1933, and Tibet was ruled by regents into the late 1940s.

⁸⁷ The Everest expeditions continued to offend the Tibetans in the 1930s. See Williamson to India, October 2, 1933, L/P&S/12/4242, OIOC; and Add. MSS 63120, fols. 24–29, BL.

⁸⁸ Lamb, *Tibet, China and India*, 272.

monasteries.⁸⁹ By the 1920s, some Tibetans may have represented the Tibetan military in terms that had formerly been reserved for the British. Although such associations were by no means inevitable, they had long-term consequences. The Tibetan military lost elite support and, despite some rearmament, never recovered the position it had enjoyed in the early 1920s. When a resurgent China attempted to reclaim its Tibetan *irredenta* by force in the 1950s, the Tibetan army was too weak to stop it.

In other ways, the Everest expeditions redefined the power of Orientalism, the power to represent the Other, as the possession of *both* British and Tibetans. To be sure, many British observers portrayed Tibetans as objects of Orientalism, most notably in the publicity for the dancing lamas in London. But the dancing lamas were never completely silenced by their publicity. The Dalai Lama and the Rongbuk Lama also negotiated with the British from positions of strength, because their permission and blessings were needed to climb Everest. In addition, many Tibetans watched the Everest expeditions in Tibet in much the same spirit that British audiences watched the performances of the dancing lamas in London, in a kind of Orientalism in reverse. Consider John Morris's description of the Everest expedition's lack of privacy at its Tibetan campsites: "At every camp we were under close observation [by Tibetans] all through the day; not from any sinister motive but out of sheer curiosity. Our situation was like that of the denizens of those so-called native villages who are often a popular feature of international exhibitions."⁹⁰

The power of Orientalism to shape representations of the Other always remained in tension with the more complex Anglo-Tibetan encounter. British bureaucrats cracked a "smile of kindly superiority" at things Oriental, but they earnestly attempted to respect Tibetan religious beliefs. Many climbers struggled to express the sympathy they developed for Tibet, but their language remained Orientalist. Howard Somervell wrote: "Tibetans are not by any means uncivilised, although quite un-Westernized. Both in the towns they live in, and in the organisation of their state, they have a very definite, though characteristically Oriental civilisation." British and Tibetans searched for ways to describe the cross-cultural influences and hybridity of Anglo-Tibetan relations. This unresolved ambivalence about the Other appeared once again as admiration mingled with contempt in the performances of the dancing lamas and the Everest films.⁹¹

The cinema and mass media integrated culture and power in Anglo-Tibetan relations and played the crucial role in transforming the lamas' dances into diplomatic disputes. Ironically, Noel was convinced that his film and the dancing

⁸⁹ By the mid-1920s, the conflict between the military and the monasteries was well advanced. See Lamb, *Tibet, China and India*, 157–58.

⁹⁰ Morris, *Hired to Kill*, 163. Morris was a Gurkha officer with the expeditions in 1922 and 1936. For other varieties of "Orientalism," see Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993); and Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," in Lopez, *Curators of the Buddha*, 107–60, in which Japanese representations of Zen Buddhism were used to construct Japanese-ness (*nihonjinron*) during Japan's rise as a colonial power.

⁹¹ Somervell, *After Everest*, 47. See also Somervell's chapter "Tibetan Culture" in Bruce, *Assault on Mount Everest*, 313–18. See also the dilemmas faced by contemporary anthropologists in Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885–1945* (Cambridge, 1991). For related discussions of ambivalence, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994).

lamas would improve relations between Britain and Tibet.⁹² Noel presumably thought his audience to be the British or Europeans or Americans. But the global reach of early twentieth-century mass media—newspapers, exhibitions, cinemas—extended to remote parts of the world and expanded Noel’s audience to include the subjects of his film, the Tibetans. The Dalai Lama read the London papers, and officials from Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan watched Noel’s films in India. These media enabled the Tibetans, perhaps for the first time, to see themselves as they were seen by others. This is not to say that Tibetans had never been exposed to foreign representations of Tibet, as they must have been, for example, during the Dalai Lama’s periods of exile in China or India. But the Everest films were the first record *on film*, and Tibetans responded by vigorously challenging what they saw. Indeed, historians may have seriously underestimated the importance of the cinema and the mass media in disseminating representations and inspiring resistance during the early twentieth century. Tibet banned film crews from the Everest expeditions because access by the media—the right to make representations—had itself become one of the bargaining chips of diplomacy. Although Tibetans banned filmmakers from Everest, in the 1930s they watched Western films in private. The dancing lamas of Everest thus appear to be an early example of the complex process by which “modern modes of representation (e.g. film and video) have helped to reconstitute colonized subjectivities.”⁹³

The Epic of Everest also demonstrates that film could reconstitute the subject position of the British “colonizers.” Even if the dancing lamas were seen as a source of comedy, Noel was influenced by Tibetan culture. At the end of the film, Noel again highlights the contrast between the scientific West and the mystical East. The purpose of this comparison, however, is to cast doubt on the pretensions of science and to give credibility to the mysticism of Tibet. In the final scenes of the film, Noel anthropomorphizes Mt. Everest into a spiritual, religious force that opposed the British climbers:

To us Everest was but a mountain—a thing of rock and ice and snow. To the Tibetans she was more—she was what they named her. “Chomolungma.” “Goddess Mother of the World.”

Now could it be possible that something more than the physical opposed us in this battle where human strength and western science had broken and failed?

Strangely to memory the words of the Rongbuk Lama come—“The Gods of the Lamas shall deny you White Men the object of your search—”

[shot of the Rongbuk Lama through a window]

Could it be possible that we fought something beyond our knowledge? Could it be, as these mystic peoples say, that this terrible mountain LIVES and is SPIRIT GUARDED?

⁹² Noel to Hinks, June 26, 1925, EE/27/7/27, RGSA; L/P&S/10/778, OIOC.

⁹³ Talal Asad, “From the History of Colonial Anthropology to the Anthropology of Western Hegemony,” in *Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge*, George W. Stocking, Jr., ed. (Madison, Wis., 1991), 323, commenting on the article by Terrence Turner in the same volume, 285–313. See also the issues raised in Jane Desmond, “Ethnography, Orientalism and the Avant-Garde Film,” *Visual Anthropology*, 4 (1991): 147–60; Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Framer Framed* (New York, 1992); Peter Ian Crawford and David Turton, *Film as Ethnography* (Manchester, 1992); and Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York, 1995).

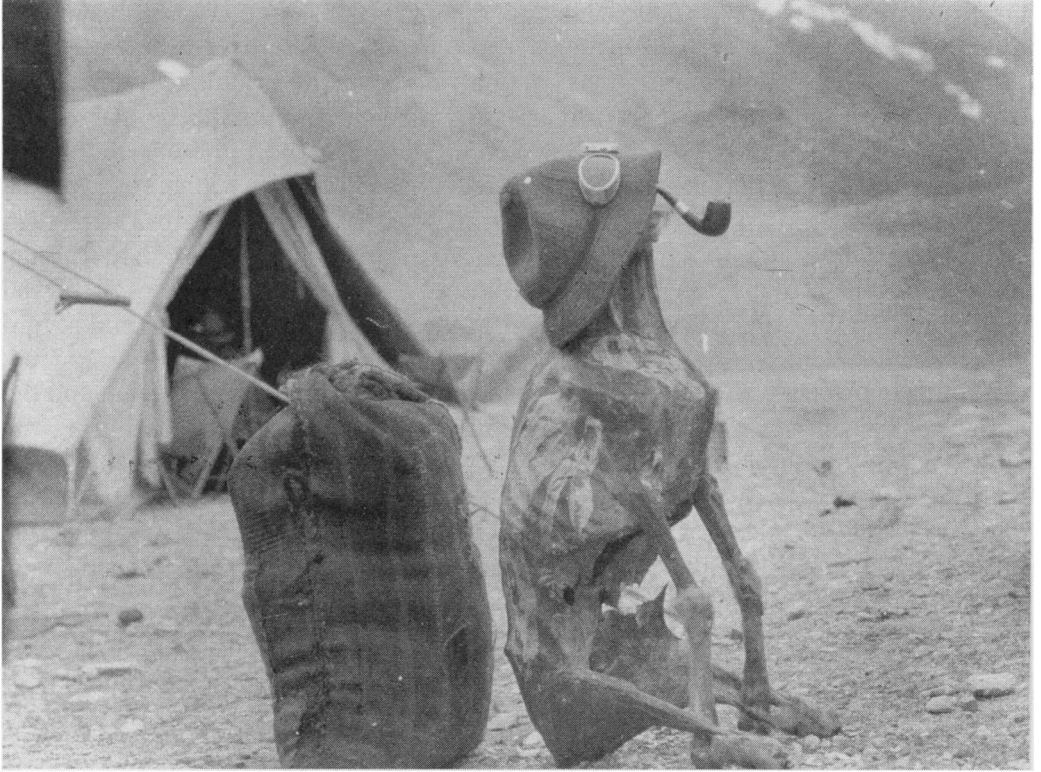


FIGURE 8: "The Rongbuk's Gift, Grain and Sheep." In 1924, Rongbuk Monastery once again gave a gift to the Everest expedition "according to the custom of the country." Bentley Beetham's photograph of the gift illustrates the fate of some gestures of cross-cultural goodwill. Courtesy of Royal Geographical Society.

[shot of clouds blowing over a ridge and a sunset on a peak]

CHOMO-LUNG-MA. GODDESS MOTHER OF THE WORLD.⁹⁴

The film then ends with a time-lapsed shot of Everest in the distance, a plume of clouds trailing off its summit, as shadows lengthen and darkness falls.

The ending of *The Epic of Everest* corresponds to the multiplicitous endings of the affair of the dancing lamas. In diplomatic narratives, the lamas fade into obscurity as the screen fades to black. Orientalist narratives might recognize the ending of the film either as an example of a venerable discourse of a spiritual Tibet versus the materialist West, or as the predictable personification of the melodramatic contrast between the climbers and the Other. But Noel's engagement with Tibet by the end of the film went deeper. Noel wrote in the *Sunday Express* that he sincerely thought Mt. Everest was alive. Although many British newspapers expressed incredulity at this notion and criticized the film's ending, the *Yorkshire Post* compared Noel's beliefs to contemporary British occultism and portrayed his views as uniquely Tibetan in inspiration. Noel persisted in these beliefs for years. If it is possible for men to land on the moon, Noel said in a 1969 interview, anything is possible.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ *Epic of Everest*, NFTVA.

⁹⁵ John Noel, "Is Mount Everest Alive? Eerie Sight," *Sunday Express*, December 28, 1924. See also the program to *Epic of Everest*, 6, L/P&S/11/244, OIOC; "Everest Devils," *Yorkshire Post*, December 29,

If this representation of Tibetan mysticism persisted well after the affair of the dancing lamas, so, too, did the personal influence of the lamas themselves. Each expedition that went through Tibet to Everest sought an audience with the Rongbuk Lama. His blessing ensured the cooperation of the Sherpas and other Buddhist porters on whom the expeditions so heavily depended. After meeting the Rongbuk Lama in the 1930s, expedition leader Hugh Ruttledge reflected, "We do not know everything in the West; is it possible that we have everything to learn?" Yet Anglo-Tibetan intercultural education remained incomplete at best. (See Figure 8.) When the Rongbuk Lama asked the British climbers to sing in 1938, they sang a hymn and then recited the mantra "Om Mane Padme Hum" to the tune of "God Save the King." Climber H. W. Tilman wanted the head lama to know that they did not climb "at the instigation of and assisted by the British Government for the sake of national prestige . . . We belonged to a small but select cult who regarded a Himalayan expedition as a means of acquiring merit, beneficial to soul and body, and equivalent to entering a monastery."⁹⁶ Not the least of the many intercultural ironies of the British Everest expeditions is that when the themes of Everest and national prestige were resurrected in 1953, one of the "conquerors" of Everest was Tenzing Norgay, who had once trained to be a lama and was himself the nephew of the head lama at Rongbuk Monastery.⁹⁷

1924. For contemporary criticisms of the film's ending, see *Sunday Herald*, December 14, 1924; *Observer*, December 14, 1924; *The Nation*, December 20, 1924; *Illustrated London News*, December 27, 1924; *Time and Tide*, December 21, 1924; and *The Star*, December 29, 1924. For John Noel's 1969 interview, and similar comments by Noel Odell, listen to Recording T35309, National Sound Archives, BL.

⁹⁶ Hugh Ruttledge, *Everest: The Unfinished Adventure* (London, 1937), 77; H. W. Tilman, *Everest, 1938* (London, 1948), 98. Ruttledge was leader of the expeditions in 1933 and 1936, Tilman in 1938. See also Ruttledge's sometimes inaccurate obituary of the Rongbuk Lama in *Himalayan Journal*, 17 (1952): 159–60; and the amateur Everest films from the 1930s expeditions by Percy Wyn-Harris, E. O. Shebbeare, and Hugh Ruttledge in NFTVA.

⁹⁷ One of Tenzing Norgay's maternal uncles was Zatul Rinpoche (Ngawang Tenzing Norbu), the Rongbuk Lama who met General Bruce. His successor, Tushi Rinpoche (Tr'ül-zhig), also claimed Tenzing Norgay as a relative. See Tenzing Norgay, *Man of Everest: The Autobiography of Tenzing Told to James Ramsay Ullman* (London, 1955), 35–36; and Aziz, *Tibetan Frontier Families*, 211–15.

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