

# The Original Buddha and the Recent Buddha : A Preliminary Report on Buddhism in a Gurung Community\*

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## 1. The Mahajana Bauddha Vihara in Butwal

While travelling on the Mahendra highway, you will see at the western end of Butwal a comparatively small Buddhist temple on a rather large plot of land. The name of the temple is inscribed there as *Mahajana Bauddha Vihara*, and it is added that it was established on the 1st January, 1980, by the Gurung Society, Rupandehi. The year is also given as 2564 in 'Kirant era'. Besides the temple, one sees four strange shapes inscribed with letters in Nagari script. The temple is at most times closed by a roller-type shutter, but it is opened during the three daily pujas and during the main festivals of the local Gurungs. Unfortunately, it was closed during my first visit here, and nobody could give me

any hint as to the meaning of the symbols.

During the subsequent visits at the site, however, I was able to trace the chowkidhar and the leader of this Gurung Society, Subedar Khadga Bahadur Gurung. In the temple, one finds a rather large statue of Sakyamuni Buddha in the simple style of Nepalese Theravada figures, and nine small statues of the Buddha. The walls are inscribed with texts. On the right side, under the heading *astangika marga*, a free translation of the formula of the noble eightfold path in Nepali is written, and on the other side, a free rendering of the *pancasila* which, however, incorporates the sixth, seventh and eighth *sila* with the fifth one, is found. The pujari uses the formula *mane paim ma ya*.

While investigating the influence and

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spread of Theravada Buddhism in Nepal, I became, of course, interested to find out more about the religious beliefs and practices of this particular Gurung community. In general, one may say that the influence of Theravada is restricted to certain sections of the Newars, a small number of Tamangs and very few Nepalis. The cooperation of the Theravadians with the followers of the Tibetan form of Buddhism is very limited, if not non-existent.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The Traditional Religion of the Gurungs

The community referred to in the inscriptions at the Gurung temple in Butwal belongs to the 'Sora jat' or 'Solah jat' (sixteen clans'). This group is traditionally considered as lower in status than the 'Char jat' or 'four clans'.<sup>3</sup> Most of the Gurungs of the Sora jat have been superficially influenced by Hinduism during the last two centuries while still practicing their own traditional rituals. This is also true of the Char jat, but in both sections of the Gurung population Lamas, i. e. priests of Tibetan Buddhism, serve important functions.<sup>4</sup> According to the information provided by Pignede, there are also two other classes of Gurung priests which he calls *pucu* and *klihbri*.<sup>5</sup> These words are spelt *puju* and *klxyebri* by Glover.<sup>6</sup> Both these groups of religious officiants belong to the

Sora jat, while Pignede connects the Lamas mainly with the Char jat.<sup>7</sup> Though the available ethnographic information is not always clear, it seems that in fact the influence of Lamaism is stronger with the Char jat than with the Sora jat. This was also confirmed by my informants.

In Pignede's monograph on the Gurungs, it is recorded that during the funeral ceremonies, the legend of *sirlo tohrlo* is recited. This text, which exists in oral tradition only, represents a creation myth which has been handed down in an ancient type of Gurung language. This language is considered 'almost unintelligible' today.<sup>8</sup>

The religion of the Gurungs has been characterized in the ethnographic studies as a tribal religion which combine elements of the pre-Buddhist religion of the Tibeto-Burman tribes of the shamanic type which is also represented by the original Bon religion of ancient Tibet, as well as traditions which are specific to the Gurungs with influences of the rNin-ma-pa tradition of Lamaism and with some rather superficial influence of the official brahmanic religion of Nepal. The origin as well as the details of many of the myths of the Gurungs has so far remained obscure in spite of the rather detailed ethnographic work done with regard to the

2) See Bechert and Hartmann 1986.

3) Bista 1967, pp. 72 f.; Pignede 1966, pp. 177 f.

4) Pignede 1966, pp. 291-293.

5) Pignede 1966, pp. 293-298.

6) Glover 1977, pp. 46, 90 and 210.

7) Pignede 1966, pp. 181, 291, 293, and 296.

8) See Pignede 1966, pp. 344 f. and 364.

Gurungs of Nepal.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The Beliefs of the Rupandehi Gurungs

The picture of the Gurung religion painted by my informants is quite different. However, they also claimed that the original religion of the Gurungs was almost identical with the original 'bon dharma' of ancient, pre-Buddhist Tibet. The ancient Gurung religion knew of a great teacher who existed a long time before the historical Buddha. He was the 'original Buddha'. This old tradition has no connection with the tantric form of Buddhism which was taught by Padmasambhava and which gained influence with certain sections of the Gurungs much later. The symbols in the garden of the Gurung temple in Butwal point to this ancient religion.

This 'first Buddha after creation of the samsara', who is termed a-buddha, taught his wisdom to four *mahagurus*, viz. 1. Jyehen guru, 2. Urgyan guru, 3. Kyetam guru, and 4. Cyintama guru. At that time, twelve men were introduced into the wisdom, and they are called *mahabauddha*. Their names are: 1. Khyalbu krasim, 2. Plam haruri, 3. Phremka cari, 4. Thum jyambara, 5. Thum mebara, 6. Thum yaumte, 7. Thum simra, 8. Vimsvo pacyupa, 9. Tade mani hyomkari, 10. Cyomdem mani hyomkari, 11. Tade mani kyomkari, and 12. Cyomde mani kyomkari. These twelve wise men, who from five groups were, at the same time, the first settlers of the hill areas and the ancestors of all Gurung

tribes. Three of these Mahabauddhas, who are called the 'royal ancestors' (*gyal phaila*), have the special function of being the main cultural heroes, and they are also referred to as the 'three laws of existence' (*phu tam som*). The tasks of these heroes were (1) to bring nine suns from the heaven to earth in order to melt the snow of the glacial period so that human life became possible, (2) to introduce vegetation and the knowledge of the use of mineral resources, and (3) to give men the power over animals so that they might use them domestically. The other Mahabauddhas also have important functions for the rise of civilisation: four were priests (*ghyamprin*) and were termed *lyhem phaila*; one, the *maim no phaila*, became a medicine man (*pacyu*, which corresponds to the term *pucu* mentioned above); two were in charge of economic duties (they were called *hyom phaila*); and two were responsible for administration and defence (the *gvom phaila*).

The rituals, which were ordered by the original Buddha, are performed by the class of priests called *gyamprin*, which corresponds to the *klihbri* in the record of the Gurung religion as given by Pignede. One of their functions is to read the sacred text of the ancient religion, which is called *kyerlo* (ancient form *kyemrlo*) by my informants, and which is nothing else than the *sirlo tohrlo* mentioned by Pignede.<sup>10</sup> My informant claimed that the ancient Gurungs had a rich literature which was, however, completely destroyed by King Jayasthiti Malla at the instigation of

9) During the Conference-Seminar on Nepalese Studies in Stockholm, 1987, I was informed that a comprehensive study of Gurung myths has been made by Simon Stikland in his unpublished Ph. D. thesis of Cambridge University. Unfortunately, it has not been available to me.

10) See above and Pignede 1966, pp. 344 and 364.

Sankaracharya, which is, of course, a well-known Nepalese myth. Only the *Kyerlo*, which had been learnt by heart by the priests, was saved, and it is usually read during the funeral ceremony. Very recently it was written down by the Gurung priest Tum Tekana Byaiimu Tamu Guru, and partially translated into Nepali by S. K. Gurung.

Another surviving element of the ancient religion is the calendar system with tutelary gods of the four directions. It largely corresponds to the 'systeme de l'horoscope' as described by Pignede.<sup>11</sup> The habit of beginning the year not with the day after the end of the month Chaitra, as the Nepalese calendar does, but with the 15th day of Pausya, which is counted as the first of *To k'hunda*<sup>12</sup>, seems to have originated under the influence of the European calendar.<sup>13</sup>

The Gurung community of Rupandehi knows of a 'Kirant Era' which starts in 584 B. C. As far as I could determine, it is not used elsewhere in Nepal. It seems that this era is a rather recent fabrication based on a modern calculation of the foundation of the Kirati dynasty from information contained in Nepalese chronicles and other sources.<sup>14</sup> It was during the reign of this dynasty that Sakyamuni is believed to have visited Nepal.<sup>15</sup> The Gurungs are considered to belong to the Kirat or Kiranti peoples.

The period in which the original Buddha

and the Mahabauddhas existed on earth is believed to have been about five to six thousand years back. It was much later, i. e. about 2500 years ago, that the 'recent Buddha' Sakyamuni was born in Lumbini in the Terai. He is said to have belonged to the Tharu population, an ancient ethnic group of which some members live in the Terai even now. My informants stressed that the Buddha was not an 'Aryan', but belonged to this ancient 'Mongoloid' population of the Terai, and that he did not teach a religion which he discovered by himself, as claimed by most Buddhists. He only revived the teaching of the original Buddha which was about to be completely forgotten, since it had been handed down by very few people at that time. The ritual in the Mahajana Buddha vihara is performed for this 'recent Buddha'.

For the ritual of the Gurung community of Rupandehi, three *mahamantras* are used. In the Gurung calendar which was published by the Gurung Society of Rupandehi for 1983<sup>17</sup>, which I have also largely followed in the orthography of the Mahabauddhas etc., the following attributions are given:

1) Mahamantra of the original Buddha (*a-buddha*): *Ma-ne-paim-ma-ya*.

2) Mahamantra of Sakyamuni Buddha in 'pali bhasa': *Na-mu-bhyo-ho-rege-kyo* (which is, of course, not in Pali, but derived from the famous Japanese mantra *namu*

11) Tamu 2566; cf. Pignede 1966, pp. 315—319; Ministry of Defence 1965, p. 91.

12) Tamu 2566, leaf 1.

13) See Pignede 1966, p. 317.

14) Cf. also Regmi 1960, pp. 62—65.

15) Cf., e. g., Wright 1972, pp. 109 ff.

16) Cf., e. g., 'Legende I' recorded in Pignede 1966, p. 165.

17) Tamu 2566.

*myoho-rence-kyo*).

3) Mahamantra of Sakyamuni Buddha: *Buddham Saranam gacchami, dhammam saranam gacchami, sangham saranam gacchami*.

The first of these formulas originally represents a modification of a Tibetan mantra, but it is explained by our Gurung scholar in a different way: *ma* (mother) *ne* (and) *paim* (father) *ma* (to) *ya* (to go to the foot), i. e. 'we go to the feet of mother and father'. 'Mother and father', however, is a particular expression denoting the Buddha.

The most important part of the ritual devoted to the cult of the recent Buddha consists in the recital of the *Buddha vandana*, which begins with *ma-ne-paim-ma-ya* to venerate the Buddha, and the corresponding formulas of veneration to the dharma (*Bauddha-dhyam-ra-ya*) and the sangha (*Bauddha-chomja-ya*). This is followed by the *pancasila*, the *astangika marga* and a translation of the three parts of the well-known formula *iti pi so bhagava araham*, etc. Though there seems to be a tendency to use the Gurung language, which is called the *tamu* language by the Gurungs, for the rituals of the old religion, these Buddhist formulas are always recited in Nepali.

#### 4. Conclusions

The religion of the Gurungs of Rupandehi is a unique type of Buddhist revivalism which combines elements of Theravada origin with a new interpretation of ancient Gurung myths and traditions. There is no doubt that the impact of Theravada originated from the Kathmandu valley, where the Theravadins have been gaining influence since about 1950.<sup>18</sup>

Besides these elements, the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, which has been present in Gurung society for centuries, may be traced in many ways. The Gurung calendar is an original creation of the Gurungs, but it is based on Lamaist tradition. The name of Urgyan Guru (Tib. *'u-rgyan guru*), the second Mahaguru of the Gurungs, denotes Padmasambhava, and several other Gurung names and terms, too, including *kyerlo*, may be shown to originate from Tibet. The situation is somewhat similar to that with the Tamangs, who also know of cultural heroes of partly Tibetan origination<sup>19</sup>, but there seems to be no particularly close relation of Tamang beliefs to Gurung traditions. The presence of a Japanese mantra in the ritual of the Gurungs of Rupandehi may be explained either by the proximity of Lumbini, which is visited by many Japanese pilgrims, or by the presence of a Reiyukai mission in Kathmandu.

The Gurung temple of Rupandehi seems to attract large crowds of Gurungs and cognate population groups during festivals. The propagators of Gurung Buddhism claim that originally many other Tibeto-Burmese population groups like the Tibetans, all the Tibetans, all the so-called Kirant-tribes as well as the Tharus of the Terai, belong to the Gurungs. In a narrower sense, of course, the Tamangs, the Thakalis and the Manangs may be described as closely related to the Gurungs proper. In this way, Gurung Buddhism is made acceptable to other population groups of Nepal as well. On the other hand, the Gurung temple in Butwal has so far remained the only one of its kind. Other Buddhist temples of the Gurungs which I had the opportunity to visit all belong to the rNin-ma-pa

18) Cf. Locke 1976; Kloppenburg 1977; Bechert and Hartmann 1986.

19) Cf. Hofer 1981, pp. 18-29.

tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, the religious movement observed in Rupandehi has so far remained a local phenomenon. However, it is a highly interesting example of the productivity of Buddhist traditions in contemporary Nepal, which helps us to understand the dynamics of the origination of new religious trends, and it exemplifies the way in which new syncretistic or inclusivistic variants of the great and the little traditions emerge.

The notions of the two Buddhas has its precedent in the discussion on the date of the Buddha. Early European Indological literature makes mention of an 'original Buddha' who lived before 1000 B. C., and the Buddha Sakyamuni who founded the existing Buddhist community in the sixth century B. C.<sup>20</sup> The source of this notion is not entirely clear, but it seems to have originated from the traditions concerning mythical Buddhas which are present in all forms of Buddhism. The similarity with the notion of the two Buddhas in the Gurung beliefs of Rupandehi is nothing but coincidence.

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20) Bechert 1986, p. 130.