

## MYTHOS TIBET, Bonn, 10-12 May 1996

### Conference report by Bettina Zeisler

Since antiquity up to the present day "Tibet" has been associated with romantic notions of a counter - or other - world. These affirmative as well as antipathetic representations of Tibet were critically reviewed at the international symposium "Mythos Tibet" (10-12 May 1996) in Bonn (organised by the Forum der Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland and the Seminar für Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft Zentralasiens, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Bonn) held on the occasion of the opening of the exposition "Weisheit und Liebe - 1000 Jahre Kunst des tibetischen Buddhismus". Contrary to academic traditions the symposium was open to and was met with a good response from a broader public - except a few visitors whose hopes for a deeper foundation of their personal myths about Tibet were severely disappointed by the high scholarly pitch of the lectures.

On the first two days, the focus lay on the historical development of the ambivalent images of Tibet in the West and the use and effects of these images. The first rather reliable information did not reach Europe before the 17th century with the reports of the catholic missionaries Antonio d'Andrade and Ippolito Desideri, who nurtured negative prejudices about the uncivilised barbarians with their disgusting superstitious rituals (**Rudolf Kaschewsky**). Enlightened scientists looked down with contempt and fear on the mystical enthusiasm on the one hand, and the degeneration of original Buddhism on the other, while romantic partisans (not knowing that the Blue Flower does, indeed, grow in the Himalayas) were looking for secret wisdom of the Orient, criticising Occidental civilisation and incipient modernisation with its impact on individuals and society (**Loden Sherab Dagyab Rinpoche**). Per Kvaerne's survey of more modern Tibetan studies showed that they were either led by evolutionist and colonialist attitudes or, again, by the search for archaic traditions and the original religion of Tibet. Recent studies consider Tibet as integrated in a broader context of Asian culture and history.

**Reinhard Greve** described how German Tibetan studies were incorporated into the National Socialist foundation "SS Ahnenerbe". Obscurantist "scholars" protected by Himmler, who was an adherent of occultism, maintained that the Aryan race from Atlantis found refuge in Shambala. Likewise, but from a more rational point of view, the expedition of 1938/39 led by Schäfer and Beger aimed to study the enclave of Tibet and the remnants of the immigrant Nordic race, which was "weakened" and "suppressed" by a Judaic-Masonic-papal-lamaist pacifistic conspiracy. The extreme negative position was held by Rosenberg and the circle around Mathilde Ludendorff: Europe was threatened by satanic-lamaist sexual practices introduced by the Etruscans. Thus, Buddhist associations like the one in Berlin-Frohnau should be eliminated by assassinations. The "empty space" in Central Asia met with an increasingly political interest resulting in the foundation of the Sven-Hedin-Reichsinstitut in Munich. However, Helmut Hoffman and Johannes Schubert found a niche apart from politics, and the course of war prevented them from being manipulated by the Nazis. After war they build up the first chairs for Tibetology in East and West Germany.

A prominent part in shaping Western ideas of the Orient and the psychologisation of its arts and religion was played by the Theosophical Society which, at the same time, by reflecting back the Western imaginings of the Orient affected the self-perception of the Easterners (**Poul Pedersen**). In America, from the 19th century, Tibetan Buddhism was co-opted by and fused with marginal religious groups such as the "Buddhistic Swedenborgian Brotherhood of Los Angeles". The romantic images of Tibet and misunderstood "Buddhism" provided an ideal sect of religious principles for the New Age movement (**Frank J. Korom**). Since the days of European Enlightenment Illuminati and other "enlightened" people always found a big market. T. Lobsang Rampa's book "The Third Eye" (1956) is one of the best-selling books on "Tibet" ever written. **Donald S. Lopez** gave a condensed summary of the work of this would-be Tibetan lama, showing that the borrowing from scholarly research makes trivial fiction so seemingly authentic. Peter Bishop's lecture followed a similar path, examining the image of Tibet in Western films and literature for adults as well as for children. Documentary films found their way to Tibet and met with an ambivalent reception. While the image of Tibet as Shangri-La found a

positive echo the Mount Everest films of the 1920s led to a severe disturbance of Anglo-Tibetan diplomatic relations (**Peter H. Hansen**).

Responding to Donald S. Lopez, **Thierry Dodin** (who together with **Heinz Räther** projected and organised the symposium) claimed that fictional literature, as unserious as it may be, may play an important role in drawing the interest of the public to Tibet and Buddhism. However, as **Loden Sherab Dagyab Rinpoche** remarked in his lecture, although recourse to romantic ideas by Tibetan teachers facilitated the spreading of a superficial interest in Buddhism in the West, it did not lead to and even prevented a deeper understanding of Buddhist teaching and practice. Similarly **Dawa Norbu** complained that lay Tibetan refugees, when confronted with the Western notion of all Tibetans being noble savages and saintly magicians, were set back in their adaptation to a new environment. Obviously they are torn between nostalgic sentiments and the rejection of their traditions combined with an uncritical adoption of the Western myth of development. **Toni Huber** added the observation that Tibetan women in exile seeking their identity were attracted by the Western idealisation of the ancient Tibetan society as an egalitarian one and were, consequently, quite upset to find out that women were precluded from several rituals in these good old times.

"Orientalism" or exoticism is not only a European invention. Parallels of clichés were presented by **Thomas Heberer**. China claimed to be the cultural centre of the world, and the barbarians, seen as minor children or instinct-driven libertines, had to be elevated by education to the standard of Confucianism. Nor was the mystification of Tibet a product of mere fantasy, but, as **Heather Stoddard** argued, at least partly a result of the cultural shock that Westerners underwent when they were confronted by the visual representations of tantric practice and imagination. **Oskar Weggel** discussed actual political positions towards Tibet that are still marked by the same old sentiments, positive and negative mystifications of (secret) tradition versus (superstitious) backwardness.

On the third day, panel discussions and introductory lectures centred about the question of whether Tibetans were exemplary ecologists, peaceful, and tolerant. **Ludmilla Tüting** admitted that

while insight into Tibetan Buddhism might help to restore the ecological balance, the application of this insight encounters economic as well as socio-cultural limitations. **Graham E. Clarke** polemicised against the new myth of a "noble conservator", drawing attention to problems of desertification and deforestation, partly natural and partly caused by Tibetans entering the modern market economy. Likewise, the Gandhian principle of non-violence adopted by the present Dalai Lama for political reasons is merely projected back onto his predecessors and was not part of the intellectual atmosphere of the past (**Elliot Sperling**). As for tolerance and rationality, **Jeffrey Hopkins** expounded the custom of noncritical allegiance towards the own, as well as opponent-bashing of rival monastic colleges that is part of the traditional education system.

With the exception of **Robert A.F. Thurman** who, in his lecture and in his opening address (as organiser of the exposition), emphasised the spiritual power of the Tibetan culture, the lectures showed a rather critical distance towards the subject of their studies. However, not without reaching a limit: the discussion was blocked when the question was raised from the audience whether the visual art of Tibet, especially the representation of the Shambala myth, was not full of terror, violence, and intolerance (against Moslems), and which could not be explained and put aside as psychological means leading to a peaceful mind. If this somewhat emotional accusation corresponds to the negative mystification of Tibet, the uncritical affirmation of the harmless contents of Tibetan paintings corresponds to the romantic one, and it might be time to examine this question with as much scrutiny as the various themes of this conference, presented in a way that makes us look forward to the publication of the proceedings.