

Tibet's exiled Muslims show intricacies of culture, identity for refugees

November 16 2016

Like the colorful, intricately drawn Tibetan sand mandala, Tibet is a rich cultural and religious tapestry that includes both Buddhist and Muslim communities. The country is not a monolithic Buddhist society as it is often portrayed.

The Chinese invasion of Tibet and the resulting diplomatic battle between India and China over the status of the country's Muslim exiles in 1960 may show that, just like the ceremonial destruction of the sand mandala, the culture and identity of refugee communities can be both complex and fragile, according to a Penn State historian.

"What we are seeing now—within both Tibetan Muslim and Buddhist refugee communities—is there continues to be this identity crisis about what and who they really are," said David Atwill, associate professor of history and Asian studies. "And both groups still struggle to hold onto those identities in a challenging situation."

Soon after the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959, a group of Tibetan Muslims—referred to as Khache—petitioned Chinese authorities to allow them to leave the country and also went into exile.

China initially courted the Khache and then harassed them into accepting the Chinese takeover, while India offered overtures to return to Kashmir, the mostly Muslim region of India. The Khache, as the name suggests, trace their ancestry back to a group of Muslims who emigrated from Kashmir to Tibet in the 15th century, Atwill added.

Eventually, with the Dalai Lama gone and the threat of Chinese oppression deepening, approximately 1,000 of the 5,000 Khache who lived in Lhasa, the largest city in Tibet, decided to leave the country, becoming another bargaining chip between China and India in their struggle for regional dominance.

"When the Dalai Lama and all his followers fled, they arrived in India as refugees," said Atwill. "However, because the Tibetan Muslims left as Kashmiris and Kashmiris were Indian, they arrived in India as Indian citizens."

But, even after their exile and their designation as Indian citizens, the Khache clung—and continue to cling—to their identities as Tibetans.

"When I'm interviewing Tibetan Muslims, they really feel that when they came to India, they ceased being Tibetan in the eyes of many people," said Atwill. "But, if you talk to them, they believe themselves to be Tibetan."

Although the Khache, unlike their Buddhist expatriates, were granted citizenship in India, their arrival in Kashmir was not idyllic and, in many ways, their conditions were worse than those that met the Dalai Lama and his followers, said Atwill, who published his findings in a recent issue of the *Journal of Asian Studies*.

"As soon as they crossed over into India, then—and remember Pakistan and India had just separated—being Muslim in India was not an ideal identity to have," said Atwill. "And that gets at the catch-22 of the situation. Their Kashmiri identity was the reason they were allowed to come into India—and they didn't want to shed that—but they did want to cling to their Tibetan identity, too."

Economic conditions in their new homes were also less than welcoming.

"A decade and a half after arriving, most Tibetan Muslims lacked employment, were deprived access to higher education and remained in substandard housing," said Atwill.

While most of the world rallied behind the plight of the Buddhist exiles, little attention was paid to the Khache, further isolating the Muslim community and tearing at their identities as Tibetan.

The situation was not much better for Khache members who stayed in Tibet. Prior to the Chinese takeover of Tibet, the Khache were integrated into Tibetan society, often serving as merchants and government advisers. The Khache who remained in Tibet after the takeover tended to draw the ire of Chinese administrators, while Muslims who emigrated to Tibet from China, became the object of scorn from Tibetan Buddhists, who believed the Chinese Muslims were in league with the Chinese rulers.

Atwill said the situation, which continues today to be fluid and volatile for all communities in both Tibet and India, offers a glimpse into the complex relationship between identity and refugee status.

"The current situation, I think, raises questions about what being a refugee means," he said. "What is a refugee community? And when do they stop being refugees and start becoming citizens?"

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Tibet's exiled Muslims show intricacies of culture, identity for refugees (2016, November 16) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-11-tibet-exiled-muslims-intricacies-culture.html>

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