

THE origin and history of the Tibetan oracles can be traced back to the earliest periods of the Forbidden Land, when the religion of Buddha had not yet crossed the icy barrier of the Himalaya and the country was still the undisputed domain of the shamanistic Bon faith, whose wizards and priestesses claimed to possess various supernatural powers, among others that of being able to communicate with the souls of the dead and to predict future events by way of prophetic trances.

Buddhism, upon its introduction to Tibet in the seventh century AD, had to compromise with the Bon faith by accepting into its own religious system many of the ancient, deep-rooted beliefs. Thus oracle-priests soon began to play an important part in the ceremonies of the Buddhist clergy.

Supreme head of all the countless oracles, whose profession still flourishes in the Land of the Lamas, is the so-called Nechung Chodje, "The Religious Lord of Nechung Monastery," who acts as State Prophet of the Tibetan Government and whom the Tibetans regard as the medium of Pehar, a demoniacal deity with three fierce heads and six arms. The first spiritual ancestor of the Nechung Chodje is said to have come to Tibet in the wake of Tibetan troops returning to their homeland after a successful military expedition to neighbouring Mongolian regions. The homeless oracle-priest became attached to Samye Monastery, one of the oldest Buddhist establishments in Tibet, which remained the seat of his successors for a long time.

Under the reign of the fifth Dalai Lama however, the residence of the Samye oracle was transferred to the neighbourhood of Drepung Monastery near Lhasa, and Tibetan chronicles explain this event by the following legend.

Having dwelt at Samye for about six centuries, the demon Pehar chose the monastery of Tsalgung-thang, which lies in the proximity of the Tibetan capital, as his new abode. He soon got into dispute with a lama of this monastic establishment and, to anger his adversary, Pehar set fire to a shrine which the pious lama was building. The infuriated priest in turn, by means of powerful mantras, compelled the troublesome deity to enter a wooden box, which he then threw into a nearby river. The casket was quickly carried away by the current and, upon reaching the vicinity of Drepung Gompa, was espied by one of the four abbots of this monastery.

SAVED FROM RIVER

Due to the supernatural powers over which he had command, the high priest recognized that Pehar himself was locked in the box, and he therefore ordered a lama to retrieve the casket immediately from the river and to bring it inside the shrine. The lama acted according to the abbot's order, but when carrying his load towards Drepung curiosity overwhelmed him and he forced the lid open. On this, Pehar, assuming the form of a white dove, escaped from his prison and vanished among the branches of a birch-tree. As all subsequent endeavours to persuade the deity to return to Samye failed, a monastery dedicated to Pehar, and known nowadays as Nechung Gompa, was built on this spot. The oracle-priest of the new monastic establishment, who began to act as Pehar's medium, was finally appointed by the Dalai Lama to the office of a chief prophetic adviser to the Tibetan Government.

In the centuries to follow, the oracle-lamas of Nechung were destined often to play a fateful part in the life of the rulers and people of Tibet. Great attention was paid to their prophetic words when the search was started for a new Dalai Lama or when their counsel was asked in matters of foreign policy. At the beginning of this century, when strained relations began to develop between Britain and Tibet, the State Oracle correctly pre-

dicted that war between the two countries would break out "in a year, when only little snow will fall," and that foreign troops would penetrate into the very heart of Tibet. He seems to have claimed, however, that "after all the enemy will be unable to occupy Lhasa itself", and as this part of his prophecy proved untrue, the magician was punished by dismissal from his responsible post.

Some years later, a successor was named but he soon incurred the displeasure of the Government on account of a brawl which broke out among the monks of Nechung monastery. For many years then the office of the State Oracle remained vacant until, some two decades ago, the present Nechung Chodje was confirmed in his rank by the Tibetan Government. More than one of his prophecies were mentioned, even in news-despatches: as in 1947, when upon his advice Lhasa refused permission to a mountaineering expedition to cross the Tibetan boundary, or during the recent political developments which led to the assumption of power by the present Dalai Lama.

GREAT CEREMONY

In case the Government decides to consult the Nechung Chodje, one or two cabinet ministers are despatched to his monastery to question the State Oracle on the measures he suggests should be adopted. A great religious ceremony is held on such occasions and the oracle-lama, dressed in colourful garments of heavy brocade and wearing the various magical emblems of his office, takes his seat on a silver throne, which stands in a small chamber back of the monastery's main assembly hall. Fragrant incense is burnt and the lamas begin to chant sacred invocations, accompanied by the rhythmic beat of the great temple-drums.

As the ceremony progresses, the oracle commences to show signs of disquietude. The eyelids begin to twitch, his legs tremble and from time to time a deep groan escapes from his mouth. An invisible force seems to twist his limbs, he rises from his seat, then drops back again and his face, which gradually becomes pink and swollen, loses its normal appearance and assumes the expression of a fierce, bloodthirsty demon. Two attending lamas now approach the throne, carrying a helmet of solid gold, adorned with jewels, small silken flags and the wing-feathers of a vulture. This peculiar head-dress, which is said to weigh some 90 lbs, is slowly lowered on to the magician's head and firmly fastened by a number of leather straps.

In spite of his heavy helmet, the oracle-lama jumps from his throne soon afterwards and, with bloodshot eyes and foam-covered lips, begins to turn in a slow, graceful dance. This is supposed to be the moment in which Pehar has assumed full control of the magician's body, and after some tea and a white scarf have been presented ceremonially to the deity, the questioning begins. The rapid, muffled answers of the oracle, mostly sung in verse and couched in vague expressions, are written down by an experienced lama-secretary in a peculiar shorthand of his own and later interpreted by a council of learned priests and officials.

Carrying the heavy gold-helmet is not the only proof of the un-

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but he has deluded others as well as yourself, and has been making a comfortable living for years out of the victims of his fraud. I speak feelingly of this type of fraud, because I know something of it at first hand. Some friends of mine were caught in this manner. Fortunately they were able to weather the loss, which was considerable, but they were left homeless and angry. It is all very well to say, as some smug folk do, that more caution should be exercised, that only fools are gullible. But there are innocents at home as well as abroad, and as evidence, the old "confidence trick" of a dropped handkerchief, wallet, or bunch of keys still works.

One of our loudest grumbles, and one in which friends from overseas join, is against the high price of cleanliness. Laundries just frankly double their bills in a curious little sum at the end. The only possible means of keeping a home clean, now that labour is so scarce and expensive, is the vacuum-sweeper. Naturally these are higher in price than they were in pre-war days; but should you require a new one the Government tax on it is exactly a third of the actual price. This seems scarcely fair to a people who pride themselves (with reasons I have never yet discovered!) on their cleanliness. You may think I am being rather waspish about this matter of cleanliness and hygiene, but I shudder when I am handed an unwrapped loaf of bread over the counter, and the only alternative is a cut-loaf in waxed paper and one penny dearer. And I object to having my bread cut for me. Why can't I have an uncut loaf wrapped in wax paper?



Are we to prepare for a cold and fireless winter? The Coal Board has said nothing about this; neither have the meteorologists. But fashions seem to indicate something of the sort. To begin with there is the quilted and padded petticoat, much advertised, and certainly taking on a most elegant appearance; but still suggestive of those chill rooms of the Victorian age, when warm rooms were considered degenerate, and shivering a virtue. Then there are tweed dresses, soft, pliable stuff but designed for dinner wear, if not for the ballroom.

And then shawls are well in the news; black soft woollen ones, with bright fringes, but still shawls, warm and cosy. You can trim them in any way you please; sequins are in high favour, and rhinestones appear on sweaters and jumpers for daily wear. Well, there you are; it seems we are going to be elegant though warm. Another thing; I am told that the wide elastic belt so popular at present will certainly go on into the winter, the reason being that no woman who has worn one will chance taking cold without one. I am not so sure; but this was told to me when I saw some of these belts in clan tartans; Gordons, Camerons and Macleod were represented, and there will be many more. The clan touch seemed to me the only excuse for wearing these ugly things.

Three-Prong Forks

Three-pronged forks, which ceased to grace dining tables over 200 years ago, are coming into fashion again in Britain. Their slender appearance is in better keeping with present-day elegance, and women are finding them far easier to clean. In the USA there is great demand for the British-made slender "rattail-pattern" products. Many housewives think it possible that the four-pronged variety may soon become a rarity.

FOR HIS AGE?



months old and tipping the balance in our favour. Many of our inferiority feel they ought to do an inferiority complex—so they've Nebuchadnezzar.

even if he lives in a town. Another glorious songster that will enter towns is the Magpie-Robin though it sings only in summer and is partial to the false dawn. However, its song is one of the very few things in life for the sake of which it is worth getting up at 5 a.m.

Birds of the cuckoo family (especially the Koel and the Hawk-Cuckoo) and a few others will call at night when there is light enough; sometimes they usher in each watch of the night as if it could not progress without their announcements.

All these are factors to be considered in studying dawn-song, but what I like most about it is the fact that very often the vocal zest of birds then cannot be ascribed to the two main motives that are said to induce birdsong, territorial feeling and love. I like to think that birds sing at times just because they are happy, from joie de vivre and nothing else, and their morning songs cheer me for this reason, however harsh their voices.

Moth-marking

If you have registered your colours with the Insect Immigration Committee in Britain, you may mark the moths you catch in your garden. When the colours are registered the committee can trace any moth caught and avoid confusion with those bearing foreign marks, otherwise all the entomologists' work will be wasted.

Moth-marking is analogous to bird-ringing or banding, which has been going on for years in many parts of the world, and entomologists mark their moths to check up on their migration routes. Moths fly at night, but the modern naturalist does not sit up all night with a net waiting for them to visit his garden, for there are now more modern methods of waylaying the travelers. Specially-designed mercury vapour lamp moth traps are used and in some cases the moths are marked or stained with identification colours before they are released to continue on their journeys.

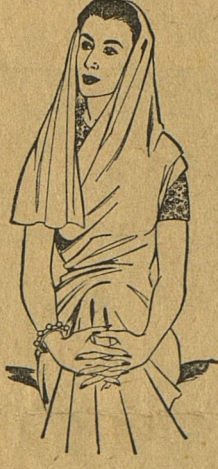
The traps are forty times as effective as ordinary lamps and are set from dusk to dawn. They capture about seventy-five per cent of moths in a garden and put them harmlessly to sleep with an anaesthetic, ready to be examined in the morning. Each trap has an 80 or 125 watt mercury vapour lamp and a special cone-shaped entrance, like a small lighthouse, which is visible from all directions. It is not always possible to leave such a bright light on all night and in that case invisible rays are used because moths use shorter wavelengths than human beings do. The trap, fitted with black glass, emits only shorter, ultra-violet wavelengths which are invisible to man but which still attract thirty-five per cent of moths.

Large hawk moths which come over the Channel to Britain in August are marked like queen bees, with a numbered paper disc spot gummed on the back, and small moths are sometimes trapped in hundreds and sprayed with a stain which acts as a colour coat for that area. In case moth lovers might be anxious, no insects are wantonly destroyed. When they have recovered from the anaesthetic they are all set free the night after.

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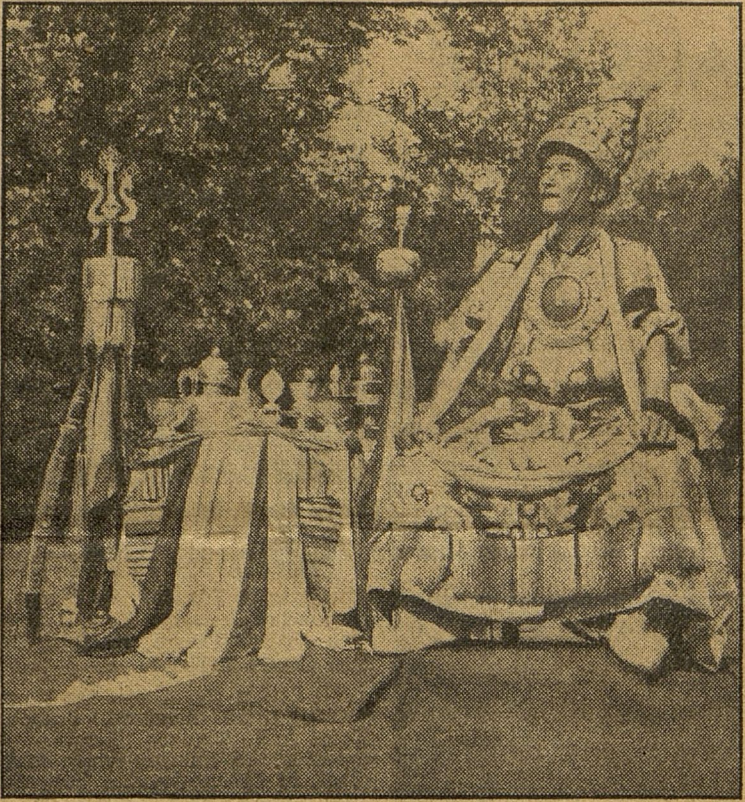
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The beginning of the trance: the oracle's face twitches in pain and his body begins to tremble. To the left is a table with precious sacrificial vessels, flanked by the ritual weapons of the deity, who assumes possession of the medium's body.

TIBETAN ORACLES

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usual physical strength displayed by the Tibetan State Oracle during the trance. Another feat, forming a part of the test, which each Nechung Chodje has to pass and which is occasionally exhibited also by other (minor) oracles, is the bending of a heavy sword, some of the magicians being able to twist the steel blade of the weapon into a knot with their bare hands.

There are numerous stories in vogue among the Tibetans, narrating how surprisingly the predictions of the Nechung Chodje or some other oracle have proved to be true. One of the most popular accounts tells about the difficult test which one of the newly-

discovered oracle-lamas had to pass. During one of his trances, the priest was suddenly handed a slip of paper, bearing the following enigmatic inquiry of the Government: "Somebody, who had been born in a year which stands under the sign of the sheep, has fallen very ill. What should be done? Please answer clearly." To this, the oracle at once replied: "If you can mend it, then it might still last for some time, but if you can't, then throw it away." This surprising answer turned out to be correct, as by "somebody," a pair of sheepskin bellows was meant, which were used at the Government's office and had become rather worn.

Apart from the State Magician of Nechung, the rulers of Tibet consult also the oracles attached to several great monasteries in and around Lhasa, their advice being sought in order, to supplement and elucidate the statements of the Nechung Chodje. There are numerous other oracles, some of country-wide fame and some of purely local importance, their position and renown mainly depending on the rank of the spirit or deity who chooses them as his or her mouthpiece. Many of these oracle deities are believed to be the spirits of lamas or laymen who have died a sudden and unnatural death. Thus Dorje Shungdan, "The Mighty Thunderbolt"—one of the best-known prophetic deities of Tibet—is said to be the spirit of a famous abbot of Drepung Monastery, who killed himself by swallowing a ceremonial scarf, and consequently every time a medium becomes possessed by this deity, the horrible gasping sounds of a man in the agony of suffocation come forth from the twitching, distorted mouth of the oracle during the early stages of the trance.