



Shépa. The Tibetan Oral Tradition in Choné

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This landmark study of Shépa, an oral tradition from the Choné region of Amdo in Eastern Tibet, contains stories, songs and narrations painstakingly collected by local people. The book is translated in Tibetan, Chinese and English and is part of the World Literature Project which works to keep alive languages and cultures under threat of extinction. The Choné people are one of 55 Tibetan ethnic groups defined by the Chinese Government during the 1950s. Numbering roughly 30,000 they live along the borderlands between China Proper and Cultural Tibet and speak a language closer to Kham Tibetan. In the past they have interacted with their Chinese neighbours to such an extent that some refer to them as neither Tibetan nor Chinese and this connection is reflected in their songs and stories. Since 1949, great influxes of Chinese migrants have had the effect of making Choné people feel like a minority in their own homeland and have resulted in a growing sense of abandonment exacerbated by a lack of young learners willing to carry on the Shépa tradition. Despite this, however, Shépa performances still continue, many having been adapted to suit modern times.

Shépa means “explanation” or elucidation’ and the performances are given in the form of question and answer. The songs, stories and narrations range from creation myths linked to Bon and Buddhist cosmologies, to songs sung as part of weddings, New Year celebrations and other Festivities. They can

be presented in verse, prose or a combination of both and, although most performances are given by high-ranking senior males, women can and sometimes do perform them. The content can be religious or secular and they are usually the highlight of community gatherings. The performances last one or two days and may be delivered standing or seated and commonly include a choir and lead singer. No two performances are identical.

As well as a helpful lengthy overall introduction, each of the book's eight sections has its own introduction dedicated to the performance being described. There are extensive reference notes and, at the end of the book, a series of black and white photographs give some indication of how the performances look. Each section reflects the different themes and stories, all of which provide a fascinating insight into Choné life and culture. Some are creation and adventure stories like Khyung the bird deity associated in Bon and Buddhism with meditation and with the creation of the Universe and who, when captured by a demon, is rescued by a bat. Then there is Rubel, a cosmic tortoise deity who holds the universe in his belly and keeps the earth grounded. Khyung and Rubel are always performed together and neither in its entirety. Jilkten Chakluk tells of the destruction and formation of the world and Da represents the arrow which has huge religious and cultural significance and is widely used in ceremonies. Some performances are more secular, like the story of how the Chinese Princess Wengcheng was taken by force to Tibet, while others describe details of ceremonies and wedding rituals. The last two sections are devoted exclusively to the wedding ceremony and the process of the giving and taking of brides.

Although this book will obviously be of interest to students and scholars of ethnic studies, linguistics, and anthropology it may also delight the average reader with an interest in folklore and culture. This is an important groundbreaking study which by making the wider world more aware of their plight, will hopefully help to preserve the way of life of the Choné people for many generations to come.

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