

Islam and Tibet – Interactions along the Musk Routes

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Chapter 11

The Muslim Queens of the Himalayas: Princess Exchanges in Baltistan and Ladakh

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INTRODUCTION: MUSLIM QUEENS IN BUDDHIST KINGDOMS¹

The practice of exchanging princesses (giving and/or receiving them as brides) was a prevalent feature of ancient diplomacy that was widely practised in Tibet² and in the states of the north-western Himalayas. Accounts of bride exchange³ can be found in Ladakhi and Balti histories and in folksongs that commemorate the birth and accomplishments of Kings (*rgyal-po*) and Lords (*jo-bo*),⁴ Queens (*rgyal-mo*) and Noble Ladies (*jo-jo*) and other important historical figures, such as ministers, priests and famous artists. In this article, we will look at folksongs concerning Ladakh's 'royal era' (*rgyal-dus*) that celebrate the extraordinary lives of Muslim princesses who were sent as brides to the court of Ladakh and became known as *Khatuns*, Muslim queens of Buddhist kingdoms.

¹ This article would not have been possible without the AHRC providing funding for two fieldwork trips in Ladakh in the summers of 2007 and 2008. Photographs taken during these journeys are available on <http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/islamtibet/documents.html> (see also Plate 11.1). Special thanks go to the following individuals for their advice, guidance and assistance: Ladakhi historian Tashi Rabgyas for meeting with me on several occasions at his son's home in Leh and guiding me through the vast oral and written sources on the history of Ladakh, and to Abdul Ghani Sheikh for availing his knowledge of Muslim traditions. I am also grateful to the editors and to Christopher Beckwith, Brandon Dotson and John Bray for their valuable comments.

² The union of matrimony and politics had already driven Tibet's foreign relations during the imperial period; see Brandon Dotson, 'The 'Nephew-Uncle' Relationship in the International Diplomacy of the Tibetan Empire (Seventh-Ninth Centuries)', in id. et al. (eds), *Contemporary Visions in Tibetan Studies* (Chicago, 2009).

³ This early and most fundamental exchange between one group and another was first discussed in terms of alliance theory in kinship by Claude Lévi Strauss in *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris, 1949) and n. 41 below.

⁴ While *Yabgo* (a title from Turkestan) was the proper name of a ruling lineage or dynasty in Baltistan, 'the title of the ruler of Khapalu was the Tibetan word *Cho*' (Tib. *jo-bo*; lord, master): Richard Emerson, 'Charismatic Kingship: A Study of State-Formation and Authority in Baltistan', *Politics and Society*, 12 (1983): pp. 413-44, at p. 423.

Cultural historians and social anthropologists of Islam and of Tibet may wish to re-examine the neglected subject of Buddhist-Muslim marriage alliances; for by their frequency, such exchanges gave rise to intricate forms of interdependence between families and lineages that challenge stereotypes of cultural homogeneity and religious exclusivity and introduce important ways to evaluate the intricate history of Tibetan-Muslim relations in the Himalayas. Furthermore, the Muslim queens in Ladakh are important for reconstructing the Central Asian legacy of Muslim women as symbols of sovereignty.⁵ It is well documented that after the Mongol invasion in Central Asia and Persia the thrones of Muslim states were 'occupied by an impressive number of women with the privileges of the *khutba* and coining of money': that is, the most important expressions of sovereignty in the Muslim world.⁶ Not unlike the Mongol Khatuns, the Muslim queens of Ladakh, who bear the same title, are the outcome of the spread of Islamic civilization in Central Asia and its borderlands.

The Muslim queens of our folksongs witness to a rich cultural heritage, an old blend of Arab, Persian, Mongol, Indian and Tibetan elements. They inspired their own legacies for the people of Baltistan ('Little Tibet') and Ladakh ('Middle Tibet'), which shared epic and oral traditions as well as Tibetan Buddhism from the times of the Tibetan Empire (seventh-ninth centuries).⁷ Ever since the conversion of the Baltis to Islam in the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries partly by Sayyid 'Alī Hamadānī of Srinagar and mainly by his principal disciple, the *khalīfa* Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh (1392-1464),⁸ the Muslim princess-brides stood as promises of unity and peace and as means of alleviating conflict between the warring houses of Baltistan and the Buddhist kingdoms of Ladakh.

⁵ This study complements Fatima Mernissi's work on the history of Muslim women ascending the thrones of Muslim states from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Mernissi reports, for example, the marriage of Padishah Khatun to Abaqa Khan, Hulegu's son who was a Buddhist; see *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Minneapolis, 1993), p. 100.

⁶ Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens*, p. 99. The Mongols had fewer reservations in regard to entrusting the governing of states to women than the Abbasid caliphs. The Mongol Khatuns appear to have held prominent positions and were honoured both at the court and in the mosque (*ibid.*, pp. 99-107).

⁷ For the position of Ladakhi and Baltī in the Tibetan language family see Bettina Zeisler, 'On the Position of Ladakhi and Balti in the Tibetan Language Family', in John Bray (ed.), *Ladakhi Histories: Local and Regional Perspectives* (Leiden, 2005), pp. 41-64. For the Baltīs and Baltistan see M.A. Stein, *Ancient Geography of Kashmir* (Calcutta, 1899). For Persian references on medieval Ladakh and Baltistan, see Jigar Mohammed, 'Mughal Sources on Medieval Ladakh, Baltistan and Western Tibet', in *Recent Research on Ladakh 2007* (Leh, 2007), pp. 35-42.

⁸ A.S. Bazmee Ansari, 'Baltistān', *EP*. For the spread of Islam see Wolfgang Holzwarth, 'Islam in Baltistan: Problems of Research in the Formative Period', in Irntraud Stellrecht (ed.), *The Past in the Present: Horizons of Remembering in the Pakistan Himalaya* (Cologne, 1997), pp. 1-40. For the development of the Nurbakhshi order, see n. 31 below and the contribution of Magnusson in this volume.

Unlike the Buddhist princess-brides received into Muslim harems (of which we hear little), the Khatuns of Ladakh were politically visible in court and, when caught in intrigues and public scandals, their notoriety preceded them. Yet, it is not surprising that Ladakh's seventeenth-century cultural renaissance coincided with the reigns of the two most famous Balti queens, Gyal Khatun and Kelsang Drolma. For in the realms of arts, architecture and religion they are celebrated as builders of mosques and patrons of Islamic culture as well as promoters of Buddhism and symbols of the Mahāyāna faith. Beyond their noted public contributions, the Khatuns of Ladakh participated in other intimate and important ways: as close kin with ties to Muslim sovereign houses, partners to Ladakhi kings and queen-mothers to their son-successors.

Future studies on the oral traditions of the north-western Himalayas will undoubtedly contribute to our greater understanding of the political, religious and cultural assumptions that governed matrimonial exchanges among the Muslim and Buddhist sovereigns,⁹ the hierarchies and expectations of the bride-givers vis-à-vis the bride-receivers, and the possibilities for mobility for junior princesses in Muslim and Buddhist harems respectively.¹⁰ Here we will focus on the folk traditions.

HIMALAYAN FOLK LITERATURE: KHATUN SONGS FROM THE ROYAL ERA

The rich and relatively unexplored traditions of folk literature in Ladakh and Baltistan are celebrated in festivals, songs and hymns, fables and proverbs, dances, music and drama.¹¹ Folk literature in the Indian Himalayas was greatly

⁹ It appears that cultural assumptions governing royal marriages did not reflect those operating on a more general level in the marriages of commoners; see for example the status of the Argons ('*ar-gon*') or 'cultural hybrids', a term applied 'to all offspring of a Ladakhi mother converted to Islam and of a Muslim father, without regard to ethnic origin (Kashmir, Punjab, Yarkand, Baltistan, etc) as well as their descendants'; see Pascale Dollfus, 'The History of Muslims in Central Ladakh', *The Tibet Journal*, 20/3 (1995): pp. 35-58, at p. 42, and Gerhard Emmer, 'The Condition of the Argons in Leh', in *Recent Research on Ladakh 2007*, pp. 179-87. Inter-religious marriages have tended to be quite common in Ladakh, at least until recently.

¹⁰ Polygamy was a custom for Balti and Buddhist sovereigns alike. Commonly, the Muslim queens were junior wives to the Kings of Ladakh. They had to compete to secure the succession of their sons in the nobility in Leh or that of the minor Buddhist kingdoms of Zaskar, Nubra, Mulbekh, Purig and so forth. Adoption, common among Tibetan nobles, was not an option for royal succession. For kingship in Ladakh see Peter Schwieger, 'Power and Territory in the Kingdom of Ladakh', in Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rāther (eds), *Recent Research on Ladakh 7* (Ulm, 1997), pp. 427-34.

¹¹ The folk traditions of Ladakh have, until now, received much less attention than they justly deserve, especially since they are under threat from modern societies. The present survey draws from the following collections and studies: Nawang Tsering

influenced by literary traditions from Tibet and monastic and lay forms of Tibetan Buddhism. Since the advent of Islam in the area there has been an arrival of Persian and Arabic literature. Among the Persian and Arabic stories introduced in some parts of Ladakh, the most influential are the famous Persian Epic *Shāhnāme* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*.¹²

The remarkably diverse collection of Ladakhi folk songs (*glu*) span over a period of more than a thousand years. They are often accompanied by instrumental music (*dbyangs*)¹³ and have been classified on the basis of their purpose, social function or subject-matter.¹⁴ For example, there are numerous heroic folksongs (*'gying-glu*) inspired by epic sagas like Gesar of Ling, Druguma and Api Cho;¹⁵ songs sung by Dard immigrants to the region; religious songs of the Buddhist (*chos-glu*) and Muslim hymns (*hamd*, *qasida* or *manqabat*, *marsia*, and *bahre tawils*); songs of love (*grogs-glu*), teasing (*tshig-glu*) and songs sung in marriage (*bag-ston gyi glu*), dance (*shon-glu*), drinking (*chang-glu*) songs and others, covering a wide range of occasions, topics and moods.

Folksongs are the soul and body of Ladakhi folk literature. For generations poems celebrated kings as symbols of legitimate sovereignty and guardians of the common people. Hence, songs about Khatuns belong to the genre of heroic oral literature, the glorious and romanticized times of the *rgyal-dus*, the royal era. In a heroic Ladakhi song, the *Yaisha Castle* (*Yai-sha pho-brang*), among the blessings of heaven and earth, the presence of queens is a gift to all women:

Shakspo (*The Culture of Ladakh through Song and Dance* [Leh, 2008]; *Songs from the Himalaya: Ladakhi Folk Songs* [Leh, 1985]); Tashi Rabgyas (*Poems and Songs – 'jig rten kun tu dga' ba'i glu* [Leh, 2007]); Kacho Sikandar Khan Sikandar (*Ladakh in the Mirror of her Folklore: A Comprehensive Survey of the Folklore of Ladakh* [Kargil, 1997]); Abdul Gani Sheikh ('Folksongs and Dances of Ladakh', in *Recent Researches on the Himalaya* [Delhi, 1998], pp. 56-61); A.H. Francke ('Ladakhi Songs', *The Indian Antiquary*, 31 [1902]: pp. 87-106; *A History of Western Tibet* [London, 1907]; *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, part II [Calcutta, 1926]; Historical Songs from Ladakh in the Leipzig Archives, see n. 42 below); and Banat Gul Afridi (*Baltistan in History* [Peshawar, 1988]).

¹² For the influence of Arabic and Persian literature see Khan, *Ladakh in the Mirror*, p. 52. For Muslim and Tibetan elements in Ladakhi vocal and instrumental music, see Mark Trewin, 'A Cross-cultural Study of Instrumental Music in Ladakh', in Gudrun Meier and Lydia Icke-Schwalbe (eds), *Wissenschaftsgeschichte und gegenwärtige Forschungen in Nordwest-Indien* (Dresden, 1990), pp. 273-6, and Mark Trewin and Susan Stephens, *The Music Culture of Ladakh: City University Ladakh Expedition* (London, 1987).

¹³ See Eric Larson, 'Ladakhi Folk Songs and Instrumental Music', in Patrick Kaplanian (ed.), *Ladakh Himalaya Occidental Ethnologie, Écologie* (Pau, 2000), pp. 73-5.

¹⁴ For contemporary classifications and examples, see Khan, *Ladakh in the Mirror* and Tsering Shakspo, *The Culture of Ladakh*.

¹⁵ Api Cho was believed to have been one of old Baltistan's popular heroes living near Shigar. Khan (*Ladakh in the Mirror*, p. 48) explains that 'according to a tradition, Api Tso [Cho] was killed at the hands of Kesar.'

On the high horizon of Yaisha Castle
 There exist ye twain bodies of Sun and Moon;
 If ye twain bodies of sun and moon
 Do so exist,
 A blessing will it be
 For us winged beings.

...

Inside (The) High Yaisha Castle
 There livest thou The Father King;
 If thou the Father King Dost so live,
 A blessing will it be for (the union of) us
 King and subjects.
 Inside the high castle of Yaisha
 There livest thou
 The Mother Queen;
 If thou the Mother Queen
 Dost so live,
 A blessing will it be for us
 The fair sex.¹⁶

FOLKSONGS OF MUSLIM QUEENS FROM LADAKH AND BALTISTAN

I. MUSULU BEKIM, THE CHARM OF A THOUSAND QUEENS

The second half of the fifteenth century witnessed the rise of a new Ladakhi dynasty descending from King Tri Tsugde (c.1380-1410). His son Drag Bumde (c.1410-35)¹⁷ succeeded his father on the throne and is remembered as a devout Buddhist ruler with strong ties in Central Tibet. Bumde sponsored many Buddhist temples, among them Spituk monastery,¹⁸ the first establishment of the reformed school of Buddhism (Gelug) in Ladakh. He is famous for his royal edict abolishing what may have been a widely-held practice of animal sacrifice.

¹⁶ Translation by Khan, *Ladakh in the Mirror*, p. 202.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, dating follows Luciano Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh* (Rome, 1977) and *A Study on the Chronicles of Ladakh (Indian Tibet)* (Calcutta, 1939). Tashi Rabgyas provides different regnal dates for the Ladakhi kings in *History of Ladakh called the Mirror which illuminates All (Mar yul la dwags kyi sngon rabs kun gsal me long)* (Leh, 2006).

¹⁸ An original eleventh-century temple on this site was said to have been erected by the King of Guge (Western Tibet), eventually becoming a monastery of the Kadampa school of Tibetan Buddhism: Geneviève Tchekhoff and Yvan Comolli, *Buddhist Sanctuaries of Ladakh* (Bangkok, 1987), p. 77.

Not far from Mulbekh lies the village of Pashkum.¹⁹ According to tradition, King Bumde had a castle built in Pashkum after his marriage to Ganga Rānī, a Kashmiri princess known by her Indian name. According to Sikandar Khan, in the folksong *The Great Pashkum*, the Muslim princess is known as the Queen Muslim Bekim (Tib. rGyal-mo Mu-su-lu Be-kim).²⁰ Besides her distinguished beauty and charm noted by the folk tradition, not much else is known of her life. It is likely that she was requested as a bride by King Drag Bumde to serve as an ambassador of goodwill, given the immanent threat of Muslim forces led by Rai Madari of Kashmir.²¹ Her son with King Bumde received the Tibetan-Muslim name Drungpa 'Alī.²²

The Great Pashkum

(Sikandar Khan, *Ladakh in the Mirror*, pp. 73-4)

Lol! The Royal Palace of Great Pashkum
 Having been erected
 Is touching the sky!
 The Great Palace of Great Pashkum
 Having been built is equaling the sky!
 The Royal Palace of Great Pashkum
 Is all aglow with the light of
 Sun and Moon.
 Not the light of Sun and moon it is
 But the charming complexion of
 'Queen Muslim Bekim', The Queen!
 Not the glow of the full moon it is
 But the charming appearance of

¹⁹ The village of Pashkum (Pashkyum) is located in the Suru valley in Purig.

²⁰ Khan, *Ladakh in the Mirror*, p. 73. Be-kim is probably a title derived from *begum* (Indo-Persian *begam*); see Ansari, 'Baltistān'. Musulu Bekim must have been the junior wife, for a colophon mentions the King and the name of his Ladakhi wife, a Queen Jowo Kyab Pha (Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 22).

²¹ The conquering of Baltistan by Rai Madari during the reign of Sikandar (1394-1416) may have heralded the Islamic conversion of Baltistan (Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 22).

²² Francke, *A History of Western Tibet*, p. 81. For the tradition of granting half-Tibetan half-Muslim names to princes of Buddhist-Muslim descent, see n. 51. Nawang Tsering Shaksपो reports on a different tradition of Muslim-Buddhist names in the village of Khuksho (120 km from Leh): 'According to village custom the eldest son of the family receives a Muslim name. Others would have "mixed" names such as Ali Tsering, Musa Namgyal, Sonam Bibi, Fatima Tsering and so on': 'The Significance of Khuksho in the Cultural History of Ladakh', in Henry Osmaston and Philip Denwood (eds), *Recent Research on Ladakh*, 4 & 5 (London, 1995), pp. 181-7.

Queen Muslim Bekim!
 Verily, Queen Muslim Bekim
 Does excel
 A hundred queens;
 Verily, Queen Muslim Bekim does possess
 The grace and charm of
 A thousand queens.

II. GYAL KHATUN AND GYAL KELSANG, THE BALTI CHAIN OF QUEENS

'Alī Mīr and Jamyang Namgyal

The history of relations between the Ladakhi dynasties and the warrior-clans of Baltistan was marked by reciprocal territorial invasions and plundering followed by times of peace sustained between the Balti warrior clans²³ and the royal house of Leh. Earlier Ladakhi incursions into Baltistan met with little resistance up until the reign of the greatest figure in Balti history, 'Alī shīr khān (1580-1624),²⁴ or 'Alī Mīr of the *Ladakhi Royal Chronicles (La dwags rgyal rabs)*.²⁵

'Alī khān was a man talented in statesmanship and diplomacy.²⁶ It appears that he enticed the Ladakhi king, Jamyang Namgyal (c.1575-95), to lead an army to aid the sultan of Chigtan who was in conflict with the sultan of Kartse. This move proved disastrous for the people of Ladakh who were left behind defenceless. Outmanoeuvred and resourceless in enemy territory, King Jamyang had to surrender himself and his noble prisoners to the powerful sultan of Skardo. The Baltis seized the opportunity to invade Ladakh, plundering and ravaging Buddhist temples and religious treasures with memorable vengeance and iconoclastic fever.²⁷

²³ The local title of the Balti rulers was makpon/maqpon (Tib. *dmag-dpon*, lit. army leader); see Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 33, n. 3. In old folksongs they are known as Cho (Jo-bo).

²⁴ Dates provided by Afridi, *Baltistan in History*, p. 40.

²⁵ The alleged founder of the lines of Balti chiefs, 'Alī shīr khān mentioned by Alexander Cunningham (*Ladák, Physical, Statistical, and Historical* [London, 1854]), Shridhar H.N. Kaul (*Ladakh through the Ages: Towards a New Identity* [Delhi, 1992]) and Afridi (*Baltistan in History*), can be no other than the 'Alī Mīr who invaded Ladakh and kept captive the Ladakhi King Jamyang Namgyal and his army; see Petech, *A Study on the Chronicles*, pp. 134-6; Francke, *A History of Western Tibet*, pp. 92-6 and *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, pp. 184-7. Rabgyas (*History of Ladakh*, p. 168) provides his full title, Ali Mir Sher Khān.

²⁶ In 1591, he gave 'a daughter in marriage to prince Salim, the heir-apparent of the Moghul empire; and he appears again in the Moghul texts of 1603': Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 33.

²⁷ For an account of the damage on Ladakh's religious heritage see Janet Rizvi, *Ladakh: Crossroads of High Asia* (Delhi, 1996), p. 66.

Popular tradition, backed by the *Royal Chronicles*, recalls that while Jamyang Namgyal was in prison, 'Alī Mīr's daughter was placed in his attendance. 'In due course, the princess and the king exchanged vows of marriage and she became pregnant. Her father having examined her and "seeing the damage that had been done, he gave his daughter to the king and allowed him to return to Ladakh together with his nobles."²⁸ Whatever the circumstances may have been, 'Alī Mīr released King Jamyang but not before giving his daughter, later known as Gyal Khatun, as his bride²⁹ with the stipulation that her son must inherit the Ladakhi throne. Following this mandate, Jamyang's two sons with his first wife, Queen Tsering, were *ipso facto* banned from royal succession and were sent off to Central Tibet.³⁰

Muslim-Buddhist marriages

The royal marriage must have been an elaborate and expensive affair for both parties. The Rajas of Baltistan were known to give very lavish and generous dowries, which usually came in the shape of both movable and immovable property. Movable property included 'gold, silver, precious stone, jewellery, fine and costly clothing, swords, guns and 12 sets of house-hold utensils. As regards immovable property, village or villages are given in dowry.'³¹ Tradition recalls that part of Gyal Khatun's movable dowry was 'a bevy of Muslim maids,

²⁸ Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 34.

²⁹ Afridi (*Baltistan in History*, p. 43) argues that 'it was Sher Gazi, Raja of Saling, Khaplu, who gave his daughter Rgial Khatoon, in marriage to' Jamyang Namgyal. The Khaplu ruler had also achieved his release from the Raja of Ladakh who agreed that Gyal Khatun's children should be given preference in succession to those of the first queen; see Hashmatullah Khan, *History of Baltistan* (Islamabad, 1987), pp. 122-3, and Kaul, *Ladakh through the Ages*, p. 49. Afridi's contention is not supported by Ladakhi historical sources and the rock inscription at Mulbekh which addresses Gyal Khatun as Mir Khatun, the daughter of 'Alī Mīr Khān; see Prem Jinq Jina, *Tibetan Manuscripts and Inscriptions* (Delhi, 1998), pp. 91-2. There seems to be some mix up here, for Hashmatullah Khan (*History of Baltistan*, p. 123) reports that 'after her death, a portion of taxes continued to be paid to the Raja of Khaplu for a long time in the form of 2 maunds of phuli (Tr. note: probably rice) and 12 maunds of salt.' Sheikh Mohammad Jawad Zubdavi offers a compromise when he says that 'tradition has it that she was the sister of Salmulday, the Raja of Khapalu in Baltistan' and not the Raja's daughter ('History of Balti Settlements in the Indus Valley around Leh' [unpublished paper delivered at Kargil Conference, Kargil, Ladakh 2005]).

³⁰ After their banishment we hear nothing of them (Petech, *A Study on the Chronicles*, p. 137).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200. Evidence of the princess' movable dowry can be seen today at the Stok Palace Museum which preserves the Queen's necklace or stomacher consisting of thirteen rows of silver beads.

a host of male servants and a band of Balti musicians' sent to Ladakh with the marriage party.³²

There are no actual records of what wealth was exchanged between the two royal houses. King Jamyang may have had to pay bride-price to his Balti overlords. This would entail *khamital*, whereby the parents of the boy send presents to the parents of the girl.³³ After *khamital*, the parents of the boy ought to follow the custom of *rintho*, or *onarin*, a term signifying the payment of the price of milk that the girl was fed during the period of her suckling. The payment consists of 24 *tolas* of gold and 24 goats, after which the date of marriage is considered fixed.³⁴

Apart from exchanging honours and marital gifts, both parties were expected to respect each other's faith. Foreign queens were allowed to retain their Muslim faith³⁵ and the Ladakhi kings reigned according to the country's Tibetan Buddhist customs. King Jamyang, even though initially forced to acknowledge Islam, continued his reign as a generous patron of Buddhism while the Ladakhi lamas, eager to neutralize what they may have perceived as an unmistakable Islamic infringement on the royal blood line, welcomed Gyal Khatun as an emanation of the Buddhist divinity of long life, the white Tārā. Even though the tribute to her in Buddhist folklore was flattering, she appears to have remained Muslim until her death, while private mosques were built for her and her servants in Leh and Shey.³⁶

³² Later, the Muslim musicians who settled in Leh had their status elevated to 'Kharmon' or 'royal musicians'. In 'A Brief History of Muslims in Ladakh', in *Recent Research on Ladakh*, 4 & 5, p. 190, Sheikh further reports that 'several hundred Balti Muslims are thought to have migrated from Baltistan and Purig to Shey and Chhushot during the reign of Jamyang Namgyal. Their descendants' number has now swelled to some 6,000. According to oral tradition, the King also granted land to Kashmiri Muslim traders to settle permanently in Leh. These traders were called "Kharchongpa" or "palace/royal traders".'

³³ 'Khamital' is a typical Balti term composed of 'kha' ('tongue') and 'mital' ('not to exceed') meaning that a seal has been fixed on the tongues of the parents of the girl (Afridi, *Baltistan in History*, p. 195).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Unlike Kashmir that was predominantly Sunni, Balti princesses from the Magpon houses of Skardo were Shiite, or if they originated from the houses of Khaplu and Shigar, they may have been Nurbakhshi. The Nurbakhshis are a Sufi order that combines Shiite and Sunni elements, named after Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh (1392-1464). It is still adhered to in Ladakh and Baltistan; see Andreas Rieck, 'The Nurbakhshis of Baltistan: Crisis and Revival of a Five Centuries Old Community', *Die Welt des Islams*, n.s., 35 (1995): pp. 159-88, and Shahzad Bashir, *Messianic Hopes and Visions: The Nurbakhshīya between Medieval and Modern Islam* (Columbia, 2003).

³⁶ Later Muslim queens of Ladakh used to offer prayer in these mosques; see Sheikh, 'A Brief History', p. 190.

The fame of Gyal Khatun

The Balti princess, daughter of 'Alī shīr khān, was destined to be the most renowned of all Muslim Khatunṣ in Ladakh. Praised in the oral traditions for her personal charisma and beauty, she is famous for giving birth to the 'Lion King' of Ladakh, Senge Namgyal (c.1616-23); see Plate 11.2. The name of the greatest conqueror king of Ladakh³⁷ is still heard on the lips of the people. A famous ballad from Ladakh narrates the birth of 'Alī Mīr's grandson, Senge Namgyal in the arms of his mother Gyal Khatun, known as Zi-Zi:³⁸

Today the old king's name shall resound through the universe, for see the lovely babe his grandson, born today. See him in the arms of his mother, this child whose name shall be famous in all the world. See him in the arms of Zi-Zi the queen, this child whose name shall be famous in all the world.³⁹

After the death of King Jamyang Namgyal, the Balti queen appears to have carried on the government in the interregnum on behalf of her elder son Senge Namgyal who was still a minor,⁴⁰ before retiring to the palace of Hondar in Nubra to spend her last days in religious activities.⁴¹ Like most Ladakhi Khatunṣ her real name is not known. The name Gyal Khatun is a half-Tibetan (*rgyal*) half-Turkish (*khātūn*) title of sovereignty.⁴² Given her high esteem among the Ladakhi people, she may be Si-li-ma in the Ladakhi folksong of praise to *Silima Khatun*.

³⁷ Senge Namgyal's life and exploits are recounted in the *Royal Chronicles*. The Jesuit priest, Francisco de Azevedo, described him as 'a man of tall stature, of a brown colour, with something of the Javanese in his features and of stern appearance ... His hair hung down to his shoulders, either ear was adorned with turquoise and a large coral, whilst he wore a string of skull bones round his neck to remind himself of death'; see Petech, *A Study on the Chronicles*, p. 149.

³⁸ Zi-zi was a title given to Muslim queens of Ladakh. Francke (*Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, p. 146) defines zi-zi, a duplication of zi, for lady in Urdu (or Persian).

³⁹ Rizvi, *Ladakh*, pp. 170-71.

⁴⁰ Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 38.

⁴¹ According to Hashmatullah Khan (*History of Baltistan*, p. 123), in [Nubrah] 'with the purpose of gaining merit for the soul of her husband, she [Gyal Khatun] had two grand serais built, which exist to this day. She also built a sacred mosque near the palace and she is buried near this mosque'.

⁴² Just as *malika*, *sultāna*, *al-ḥurra* were titles used for women who ruled in the Arab world, the title of *khatun* is most often found in Asian Islam; see Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, p. 21. A junior Queen Khatun (Tib. *btsan-mo ga-tun*), either a Turkic or 'A-zha princess, whose funeral is recorded in the *Old Tibetan Annals* for the year 708-709, appears to have tried to place her son, Lha Bal-po, on the Tibetan imperial throne; see Brandon Dotson, *Tibet's First History: An Annotated Translation of the Old Tibetan Annals* (Vienna, 2009), pp. 18-19, 105, and Christopher Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 68-70. The earliest reference to a Buddhist-Muslim princess exchange in the western Himalayas is that of an Arab lady Tagzig-ma (Tib. sTag-

The Song of Silima Khatun

My famous queen is like the rising sun,
 The precious Silima Queen is brilliant like a vision of light.
 My famous queen is like the shining full moon
 To he lee [utterance to fill the rhythm].
 My precious Silima Queen you are brilliant like a vision of light,
 Even your royal line is god-like, brilliant like a vision of light.
 Silima Khatun your royal line is the line of sugar-cane wood,
 Precious Silima Queen your race may flourish like leaves.
 Your name and qualities have become known all over the world [*‘ālam*, Arabic for world]
 Oh precious Silima Khatun Queen, brilliant like a vision of light.⁴³

Senge Namgyal's Balti queen

If ‘Alī shīr khān intended to install a Muslim queen-mother to the throne as an expedient to introduce Islam in Ladakh he must have been sorely disappointed. King Senge Namgyal's devotion to his Buddhist teacher Tagtsang Repa of the Drukpa School saw the zealous construction of many temples and monasteries and the granting of donations of landed estates to the Buddhist clergy.⁴⁴ This period marked by a Buddhist renaissance in Ladakh produced the fortress-palace of Leh, monasteries of the Drukpa school of Buddhism (He-mis, lCe-bde, sTag-sna), ornate temples (Basgo, Shel), and the crafting of the Tibetan Buddhist canon in gold and silver.

Senge Namgyal was not alone in his religious activities. Being half Balti on his mother's side he long entertained friendly relations with his Skardo kin and married probably a cousin, a Balti princess, the famous Muslim Queen Kelsang (sKal-bzang). Her name recurs in many Buddhist dedications jointly with the king, and like Gyal Khatun, she was held to be an incarnation of Tārā, ‘a title that is never absent from the inscriptions’.⁴⁵ A small shrine to Buddha Maitreya near

gzigs-ma, lit. Arab lady), one of the four wives of King Kyide Nyima Gon, the founder of the first Ladakhi dynasty; see Petech, ‘Western Tibet. Historical Introduction’, in Deborah Klimburg-Salter (ed.), *Tabo: A Lamp for the Kingdom. Early Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Art in the Western Himalaya* (Milan, 1997), pp. 229–55, at p. 232.

⁴³ My translation. The Tibetan text is preserved in the Leipzig Archives, Germany, see Michael Hahn, *August Hermann Francke und die Westhimalaya-Mission der Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine: eine Bibliographie mit Standortnachweisen der tibetischen Drucke* (Stuttgart, 1992), Historical Songs from Ladakh (95.1.24).

⁴⁴ Petech, *A Study on the Chronicles*, p. 149.

⁴⁵ Petech, *A Study on the Chronicles*, p. 138. Kelsang Drolma (sKal-bzang sgrol-ma) is a common Tibetan Buddhist name and one to have been easy for the Ladakhis to identify with. The identification of foreign queens with the Buddhist divinity Tārā is reminiscent of the Chinese and Nepalese brides to Tibet's emperor Srongtsen Gampo (c.605–50); see

the Serzang Temple in Basgo contains a 1642 inscription dedicated by Kelsang Tārā.⁴⁶ It would appear to have been constructed as an act of merit for King Senge Namgyal.⁴⁷

The problem of Senge Namgyal's succession was not settled at once, and for some time the dowager queen Kelsang acted as a regent for her three sons.⁴⁸ With Delden Namgyal the elder son as the successor ruler of Ladakh, the kingdom was divided among the three brothers with Khatun Kelsang receiving Matro, Yigu and Purang as her personal estate. Queen Kelsang continued promoting the construction of Buddhist monuments, and upon her request, in February 1647, Tagtsang Repa laid the foundations of the main temple in the Shey palace.⁴⁹ A small temple in Shey with an image of Buddha Amitāyus is likely to have been a benefaction of our Balti princess.⁵⁰

The old queen was active during her last years. In 1649 she sent to Central Tibet a mission on behalf of the court, and in 1650, against the advice of her revered teacher, she undertook a long journey, breathing her last in Zanskar. Her corpse was brought to Shey, where the funeral rites were performed.⁵¹

III. THE RETURN OF THE BUDDHIST PRINCESS FROM THE HAREM OF 'ALĪ SHĪR KHĀN

Receiving Muslim brides was a common practice among the Buddhist rulers of the northern Indian Himalayan kingdoms. There appears to have been a reciprocal practice whereby Buddhist princesses were given as brides to the Muslim sultans of Baltistan and Kashmir. During the reign of 'Alī shīr khān (1580-1624), noble brides from Buddhist families were sought after and had a choice in rejecting marital offers. The following folksong contains an anonymous confession by a noble lady probably from one of the minor royal houses of Ladakh:

(Afridi, *Baltistan in History*, p. 183)

For months and years, the sky has been clear (of clouds) but what a time has come that despite this no sunrays have appeared on the mountains.

Sarat Chandra Das, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet* (Delhi, 1988), p. 165. Kelsang Drolma appears in two folkdances which may date to the times of the Balti queen (Francke, 'Ladakhi Songs', p. 104; Shakspe, *The Culture of Ladakh*, pp. 55-7).

⁴⁶ David Snellgrove and Tadeusz Skorupski, *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh* (Warminster, 1977), p. 97.

⁴⁷ Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, pp. 56-7, also mentions the construction of the main temple of Tsede (lCe-bde) consecrated by Lama Tagtsang Repa, finished in 1645-46.

⁴⁸ Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*.

⁴⁹ Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 58.

⁵⁰ Snellgrove and Skorupski, *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*, p. 91.

⁵¹ Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, pp. 58-9. The sources remain silent concerning which kind of funeral rituals were performed.

The sky has been cloudy for months and years but what a time has come that no dew appears on the ground.

Maqpon Ali Sher Khan sends people to sue for my hand,

No I shall not accede to his request, for, my dearest, I have taken an oath not to do so.

The Kalon⁵² of Ladakh requests me to marry him; no I cannot accept his offer, because my friend, I have made a promise to you (to marry you).

The Malik⁵³ of Kashmir makes an offer marriage; but I cannot accept that offer since I have already chosen you as my spouse.

Our knowledge of Buddhist bride-giving to Muslim rulers derives primarily from Balti histories and folksongs. The *Royal Chronicles* remain silent on such exchanges. If the Ladakhi historians did not find them important, two cases included in Hashmatulla Khan's *History of Baltistan*⁵⁴ are sufficiently embarrassing to warrant their omission from the Ladakhi chronicles. Both incidents took place during the reign of the Ladakhi King Delden Namgyal (c.1640-75).

The first case involved a bride-request by King Delden. Troubled by the incursions and attacks of his relative Shīr Khān, he sent a messenger to the Rājā of Shigar with the following message:

Forgive my past mistakes. Sher Khan troubles me greatly and I have never seen a more quarrelsome person before in my life. I feel a strong repulsion towards him and I am ashamed of being his relative. The weight of this shame has not lifted from my heart, though I have severely mauled his army. I wish your son to marry my daughter to double our unity through such a link. Then we can together punish this evil character.⁵⁵

The Rājā of Shigar wrote back:

No matter how one treats a piece of sandstone, it can never become a ruby, but friendship and unity is good for all times and can be strengthened without any further measures.

⁵² Kalon is the title referring to a minister of Ladakh.

⁵³ Ar. 'king'; for its usage see Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens*, pp. 12, 13, 72.

⁵⁴ Maulvi Al Haj Hashmatullah Khan's text, first published in Urdu in 1968 (Lahore: Hassan Publishing), remains the most important published source on the history of Baltistan. He conducted his study while travelling extensively in Baltistan for both research and in the administrative capacity as *wazir-i-wazarat* (governor) of Ladakh and Baltistan for the Dogra government of Jammu-Kashmir. His work is based on records of the ruling families, oral traditions of the region and the *Shagharnama*, a Persian chronicle written in the court of Imam Quli Khan, ruler of the Balti state of Shigar in about 1700; see Emerson, 'Charismatic Kingship', p. 3.

⁵⁵ Hashmatullah Khan (*History of Baltistan*, p. 62).

Hashmatullah Khan concludes that Delden Namgyal was deeply disappointed and, with the intention of giving aid to Hatīm Khān, he attacked Khapalu ‘giving the Muslims cause to worry’.⁵⁶

A second incident is reported by Hashmatullah.⁵⁷ Shīr Khān was apparently delighted to hear that the Buddhists of Ladakh ‘did not remain true to their faith and started making preparations for war’. Seizing upon this opportunity, he sent the following message to the king of Ladakh:

I am your friend and well-wisher, and will be loyal to you as long as I live; my only condition is that you give your daughter in marriage for my son. If you accept this bond, our family is your liege and all of Tibet lies at your feet.

The message reached the king of Ladakh who conferred with his ministers and advisors and unanimously accepted his proposal. Shīr Khān was elated with the news and proceeded to make preparations for the marriage. He sent his son to Ladakh in order to consummate the marriage, and along with this, he sent a request for ten thousand soldiers so that he might destroy his enemies at Skardo and Shigar. This must have been Khān’s plan all along but it came as a surprise to Delden Namgyal, for Hashmatullah concludes that ‘the Raja of Ladakh hid his head when he received this request’.⁵⁸

The Balti song (*sbal-glu*) *Hilal Bagh*, preserves another embarrassing incident. King Jamyang Namgyal (c.1575-95) is said to have given his daughter as bride to ‘Alī shīr khān (1580-1624) during his turbulent reign. Given the political standstill between Baltistan and Ladakh with King Jamyang held hostage to the Baltis, princesses may have been exchanged as part of a reciprocal agreement between the two rulers. However, since a matrimonial swap has not been recorded in the *Royal Chronicles*, it is possible that King Jamyang offered his daughter to ‘Alī khān as a way of negotiating his way out of prison.

As narrated in the *Hilal Bagh*, the Ladakhi bride, Queen Mandok by some counts,⁵⁹ was sent from Leh with a large marital procession of horses and men. Upon her arrival in Skardo she had a royal reception stepping on turquoise. If the

⁵⁶ Ibid. The folksong *The Treasure House Rshingo Rshing*, recalls another case of a marriage requested to settle a family dispute between the king of Ladakh and Tsering Malik of Chigtan, who bears a half-Tibetan name (Khan, *Ladakh in the Mirror of her Folklore*, p. 101).

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 71.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Two other cases of Buddhist matrimonial exchange are reported. The first involves the daughter of the Ladakhi king given to the Rājā of Khapalu, Yabgo Behram (1494-1550) who bore him Yabgo Sikam, his successor (Hashmatullah Khan, *History of Baltistan*, p. 120). Another Ladakhi princess was sent as bride to the son of Sher Gazi, as reported by Afridi (*Baltistan in History*, p. 120).

⁵⁹ Kaul, *Ladakh through the Ages*, p. 49. Concerning the name of the Ladakhi princess, Gyal-mo (Tib. *rgyal-mo*; queen) Mandok, Afridi (*Baltistan in History*, p. 44) suggests that

folksong is accurate in recounting these events, it must have been disappointing for the Ladakhi king to receive his daughter back divorced from 'Alī khān.⁶⁰ The folksong *Garden of Hilal* narrates the lonely departure of the Ladakhi princess from Baltistan and celebrates 'Alī shīr khān, the Great:

Hilal Bagh

(Afridi, *Baltistan in History*, pp. 44-5)

Behold the red rose blossoming
 In the Hilal Bagh (Hilal garden)⁶¹ of the Broq Maqpon.
 Oh, it was not the red rose; it was Maqpon Ali Sher Khan.
 Behold the 'Halo' flower blossoming, in Broq Maqpon, Hilal Bagh.
 Oh: it was not the 'Halo' flower, it was Anchan⁶² Ali Sher Khan.
 When the queen was brought (to Skardo)
 She was accompanied by hundreds of men and horses
 When the queen was brought, she was to tread on steps made of turquoise
 (as a mark of honour) the steps leading to the palace had been adorned with
 turquoise.
 When the Queen was sent back, there was not a single person or horse to go with
 her.
 Despite these (indignities), O, Anchan Ali Sher Khan
 I may lay down my life for your glory and happiness.

'Hashmatullah erroneously took' Jamyang Namgyal's daughter for the famous queen Mindoq Gyalmo.

⁶⁰ Returning a bride may have been construed as an insult and even the cause for war; as in the case of Senge Namgyal conquering the King of Guge for refusing to receive his sister as a bride; see Petech, *A Study on the Chronicles*, p. 140.

⁶¹ The *hilal bagh* were the royal gardens below the Mindoq-khar Flower Palace (Afridi, *Baltistan in History*, p. 44). According to Hashmutallah Khan (*History of Baltistan*, p. 18), when 'Alī Shīr Khān left for Gilgit, the Ladakhi Queen wishing not to stay with the people of Skardo, had a separate palace constructed outside the fort. It was called after her name the Mindoq-khar.

⁶² *Anchan* is used as an epithet for 'Alī Khān meaning 'the great'.

IV. THE LONGING OF THE MUSLIM QUEEN OF ZANSKAR

It appears that Khri Mohammed Sultan of Kartse⁶³ had no male son to succeed him.⁶⁴ In a folksong dedicated to the people of Suru Karche, the Sultan's sister betrothed to the King of Zanskar⁶⁵ is haunted by the thought that the ancestral throne will perish after her brother's death. The anonymous Muslim queen of Zanskar prays for the birth of a successor son for the Sultan, anxious to leave her foreign husband and return to her native land of Suru Karche.

The People of Suru Karche

(Khan, *Ladakh in the Mirror*, pp. 118-20)

If the people of Suru Karche
 If the people are truly lucky,
 May my, the girl's, Brother
 Be blessed with a noble son!
 If the people of Suru Karche,
 If really lucky the people are,
 May King Thi Sultan, The King,
 Be blessed with a Noble son!
 O King of Zanskar I beg of thee,
 Do send me, the princess, back
 To her native land:
 According to ye Buddhists a noble deed
 Equal to erecting a Mani⁶⁶ will it be!
 O King of Zanskar I pray thee!
 Do send the princess back to Suru Karche;

⁶³ The principality of Kartse or Karche (dKar-rtse) lies in the fertile valley of Suru. The relations between Kartse and Ladakh have not been without their share of strife. During the reign of king Delek Namgyal (c.1675-1705) it is reported that his commander-in-chief Sakya Gyatso lead expeditions in Purig taking prisoner to Ladakh the Khri (Thi) Sultan of Kartse (Petech, *A Study on the Chronicles*, p. 153).

⁶⁴ Curiously, another folksong preserves a story of King Nyima Namgyal being adopted as a son and successor to the Sultan of Karche, Cho (King) Tri (Khri) Mohammed (Khan, *Ladakh in the Mirror*, p. 75).

⁶⁵ Zanskar covers an area of 2,700 square miles. According to the *Chronicles of Zanskar*, the area was under Kashmir before it was seized by the Tibetans; Francke, *A History of Western Tibet*, p. 136. Since Nyima Gon's (c.tenth century) death, it was an independent kingdom conquered in the seventeenth century by Senge Namgyal who gave it as an apanage to his third son Demchok Namgyal. The latter founded a new Zanskar dynasty which lasted until the Dogra conquest in 1841 (Petech, *A Study on the Chronicles*, p. 155).

⁶⁶ Referring to a *mani*-wall: a wall made of stone-blocks loosely stacked one over another and often inscribed with the six-syllable mantra of the bodhisattva of compassion.

According to us Muslims a noble deed
 Equal to erecting a Mosque will it be.
 O turquoise-blue pigeon on the wings!
 Lucky do I think [O] pigeon thou art!
 Fly on, fly on, to alight on the
 Palace roof of this girl's brother.
 O turquoise pigeon flying in the sky!
 (How) lucky though art O turquoise pigeon!
 Fly on, to alight on the façade of
 King Thi Sultan's Palace!
 O smoothly flowing river, hear!
 Lucky thou art O river, do I feel!
 Flow on, flow on, to touch the palace wall
 Of my, this sister's, Brother!
 O swiftly flowing river, hear!
 Lucky thou art O river, do I feel.
 Flow on to flow beneath the palace wall of Thi Sultan, the King!

V. GYALMO BI-BI, THE TRAGIC QUEEN OF LADAKH

In the history of Ladakhi Kings, Tsewang Namgyal (c.1753-82) stands out as one odd exception.⁶⁷ He earned his notoriety for an obsession for Central Asian horses (collecting as many as 500) and for surrounding himself by Muslim favourites and becoming estranged and indifferent to Buddhism. A man eccentric to the ways of the Buddhist court, he fell under the spell of Bi-bi from Kartse, and was eventually abandoned by the Zangla lady from Zanskar, his first queen.

With his new Muslim wife Queen Bi-bi or Bhe-mo Gyal, Tsewang Namgyal undertook to crush the Ladakhi nobles and officials opposed to their marriage by killing Kunkyob his minister and the village headman of Tingmosgang while chaining some aristocrats in the dungeons. To top that, he increased taxes and appointed as his new minister no other than Nasib Ali, Queen Bi-bi's brother. The tyrannical couple did not anticipate that the growing resentment of the people would turn into an angry and violent protest. From what followed, it appears that the local population blamed Queen Bi-bi entirely for the political ineptitude and flawed character of their king. While King Tsewang was not physically harmed but allowed to continue his reign until he had to abdicate,⁶⁸ Queen Bi-bi met a horrific end nailed to the door of the bazaar in Leh and publicly flogged to death by the Buddhist mob.

⁶⁷ For a detailed description of the events, see Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 116.

⁶⁸ Tsewang Namgyal abdicated in 1782 but not before marrying another Muslim wife (Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 135).

It is fitting for the folk traditions to preserve the *Da ltong biru ltong*,⁶⁹ a song of self-praise sung by Gyalmo Bi-bi. A narrative, inflated like Queen Bi-bi's reckless actions in the Ladakhi court, it reads with a certain irony, given the martyrdom that followed.

Da ltong biru-ltong

(Khan, *Ladakh in the Mirror*, pp. 179-80)

Climb the lofty peak of Da-ltong biru-ltong,
 Ascend the Da-ltong biru-ltong Mount of Delight;
 The Father land that gave birth
 Is just under the nose!
 The land of [S]higar⁷⁰ and Skardo⁷¹
 Is close by!
 The fatherland that gave birth
 Has three kinds of castles;
 Yea, the land of Shigar and Skardu
 Possess three kinds of Castles!
 One castle is the castle 'The Great Castle'
 One castle are the parents who gave birth and
 One castle am [I] the girl myself:
 One castle am I, Rgyal Bi bi myself!
 The like of me, the girl, is
 Nowhere on the earth to be found;
 The like of Rgyal Bi Bi is
 Nowhere in the world to be found;
 Thanks to the parents who gave
 Rgyal Bi Bi birth;
 Thanks to the Mirs and Akhons⁷²
 Who named Rgyal Bi Bi, Rgyal Bi Bi.

⁶⁹ In the absence of a Tibetan transcription of the folksong we cannot be certain, but the title of the song could mean *mda' gtong bi ru gtong*, literally 'shoot the arrow, shoot it at Bi-bi'.

⁷⁰ The little chiefship of Shigar had its own Gyalpo who has been subject to the kings of Baltistan (Cunningham, *Ladák*, p. 32).

⁷¹ Balti-yul is often called Skardo by the Tibetans (*skar-mdo* or *skar-ma-mdo*, lit. starry place) (Cunningham, *Ladák*, p. 34).

⁷² *Akhon* is a Central Asian expression designating scholars of Qur'anic law (*mollah*) (Dollfus, 'The History of Muslims', p. 55, n. 24). This reference to Bi-bi's noble descent is not altogether clear. Our historical Bi-bi Khatun has passed down in history as a low-caste (Bhegar) Muslim woman. Ruling out historical inaccuracy or altogether a Queen Bi-bi other than King Jamyang's wife, the folksong may have been popularized by

CONCLUSION: MUSLIM QUEENS UNTIL THE END OF THE DYNASTY

Songs celebrating the fame of khatuns were composed up until the end of Ladakh's dynastic era. At times, notoriety served as a reason for being noted in the official pages of history. The *Royal Chronicles* preserves the story of Queen Bi-bi the Martyr who served as a scapegoat for the political and economic ills of the times. There have been other khatuns who maintained positions of secular power by promoting their agendas and favouring their kin. Political ingenuity and manipulation are found in the story of Zi-zi Khatun, wife to King Nyima Namgyal (c.1694-1723).

Nyima Namgyal's first queen belonged to a noble family from Central Tibet but died soon after giving birth to his eldest son and successor Dekyong Namgyal. His second wife Zi-zi Khatun⁷³ from Purig, granddaughter of Hatim Khān and niece to Daulat Khān of Khaplu, appears to have forced her way into the Ladakhi court. A document from Wam-le, dating sometime after her giving birth to Tashi Namgyal and Princess Tashi Wangmo, reads like an appeal by Zi-zi Khatun to be granted authority at the Ladakhi court.

The Wam-le appeal

Thus said Queen Zi-zi:

On the occasion when a *prima facie* relationship was established at Kha-ha-phu-loo [Kha-pa-lu],⁷⁴ my paternal grandfather Ha-da-khan [Haidar-Khān] and my uncle Rdab-lad-khan [Daulat-Khān],⁷⁵ gave Zi-zi [as wife to the Ladakhi king], [with the stipulation] that should a boy be born, Steng-mkhar⁷⁶ will be given [to him]. However, since Zi-zi's 'power of speech' [kha dbang; authority]

Ladakhi Muslims intent on celebrating their Muslim queen as a symbol of power, glossing over her humble origins and humbling death.

⁷³ Francke (*Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, p. 191) claims to have identified her Muslim burial-ground at Hundar in Nubra valley under the name 'A-yum-khri-rgyal-om. Her story as recounted can be found in Petech (*The Kingdom of Ladakh*, pp. 95-8).

⁷⁴ Khapalu stretched 25 miles further down Shayok river according to Cunningham (*Ladāk*, p. 28). The chiefs of Khapalu have been for generations under the supremacy of the Balti kings and 'their ancestors most probably had possession of the country for several centuries before the rise of the Balti dynasty, whose very title *Makpon*, or "General," betrays that they are the descendants of some military chief' (ibid.).

⁷⁵ A Daolut Khan is listed in Cunningham's (*Ladāk*, pp. 29-30) index of the Gyalpos of Khapalu (Khapolor). Cunningham's dating of the kings must be treated with caution.

⁷⁶ I have not been able to identify this place or castle (Tib. *steng-mkhar*, lit. upper citadel or castle).

was not established, we have ignored it. Henceforth, Zi-zi has the authority [maturity of speech] and it is necessary to hear her.⁷⁷

Actively, she helped her son Prince Tashi Namgyal to take possession of Mulbek and make it his capital. While Nyima Namgyal was still alive, Muslim Zi-zi came in direct opposition with Dekyong Namgyal and his ministers over the issue of marrying her daughter, Tashi Wangmo, to the Muslim Rājā of Kishtwar.⁷⁸ The old royal couple succeeded in holding the wedding. Tashi missed the atmosphere of freedom in Leh and appealed to her kin. Zi-zi Khatun recalled her daughter back to Leh but the Rājā of Kishtwar would not let her return alone. The khatun, fearing that her son-in-law might eventually compete over the rule of Purig with her own son Tashi Namgyal, sent a trusted servant to join the party with secret instructions that the Rājā be killed on the way. The servant obeyed, pushing the young man off a bridge so that he drowned.

Tashi Wangmo did not remain a widow for long but soon married into the royal house of Khaplu. However, the truth about the murder leaked out, causing considerable damage to the reputation of the house of Leh. The Queen mother of Kishtwar entreated the Mughals to send a punitive expedition against the Ladakhis for the unjust loss of her son. The Ladakhis managed to stop the expedition by bribing the imperial court. The mother of the victim had no other recourse than to employ Indian Brahmans to curse the Ladakhi dynasty.⁷⁹ The action of Zi-zi was openly denounced by the people and cast an inefaceable slur on her.

The negative publicity generated by Zi-zi Khatun did not prevent subsequent Ladakhi kings from taking Balti princesses as brides. On the contrary, marrying Muslim princesses appears to have been in vogue in the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries. For after Queen Bi-bi's tragic death by flogging, King Tsewang took another Muslim wife, a Bhe-kim of Purig who bore him his eldest son and throne successor Tseten Namgyal (c.1782–1802). This short-lived prince also acquired a woman known as Zi-zi Khatun from Pashkyum and when his brother Tsepel Namgyal succeeded him to the throne he married his Muslim widow. She bore him a son, Tsewang Rabten, the last scion of the Ladakhi dynasty. In 1835, Prince Tsewang Rabten took two wives, among them Zo-ra Khatun, the last Muslim Queen of Ladakh who gave birth to his son, Tenrung Yulgyal.⁸⁰ Tsewang Rabten Namgyal died in exile in Bashahar after a personal clash with Dogra leader Zorawar Singh who had defeated the Ladakhi army in 1835.

⁷⁷ My translation; the Tibetan text is found in Francke (*Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, p. 190).

⁷⁸ According to Petech (*The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 98), the Kishtwar family converted to Islam in 1687.

⁷⁹ 'To these curses all the subsequent troubles in the family, early deaths etc., were attributed' (Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 98).

⁸⁰ Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, pp. 135–7.

The legacy of the Muslim queens ends with the last vestiges of Buddhist sovereignty in Ladakh. A love-song (*grogs-glu*) composed in the nineteenth century, the very end of the *rgyal-dus* era, is about the famous minister Nodrup Tenzin and the beautiful Salam Khatun of Skardo:⁸¹

Love Song

(Shakspo, *The Culture of Ladakh*, pp. 40-44)

In a colourful silky garden, a lucky lotus flower blossomed,
 It was not a lucky lotus flower, but was the beautiful Salam Khatoon [Khatun].
 In the capital town of Skardu, a hundred and one streams flow.
 Though such streams flow, yet our beloved chief feels it [is] as muddy water.
 If our beloved feels the water as muddy, may Salam Khatoon become a mountain stream,
 If dNos-grub bstan-hdsin feels the water as muddy, may I become a mountain stream.
 On the sands of the sandy plain, the feet of dNos-grub bstan-hdsin are burning.
 On the sands of the sandy plain, the head of dNos-grub bstan-hdsin is burning.
 If the head of my chief is burning, may I become a parasol.
 If the head of dNos-grub bstan-hdsin is burning,
 may Salam Khatoon become a parasol.

The exchange of foreign princesses was a prevalent form of international diplomacy between Ladakh and the Muslim ruling houses of Purig, Chigtan, Shigar, Khaplu, Karche, Skardo and Kishtwar. Matrimonial exchanges were politically motivated and served as diplomatic means for the exercise of sovereign choices between states.⁸² It would appear that marriage alliances were at the forefront of Ladakh's foreign policy, preoccupied with its Muslim neighbours and the encroaching presence of the Mughal Empire. By the mid-seventeenth

⁸¹ The Leh minister is also known for composing *The King's Garden at Leh* (Francke, 'Ladakhi Songs', p. 89). He served as regent for some time after the deposition of Tsepal Namgyal by the Dogra overlords (Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, p. 142).

⁸² Ladakh and Baltistan would appear to form an exception to Geoffrey Samuel's characterization of Tibetan-speaking communities in the Himalayas as 'stateless societies' ('Tibet as a Stateless Society and Some Islamic Parallels', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 41/2 [1982]: pp. 215-29). Unlike other stateless societies, the kingdom of Ladakh did not abide by the Tibetan Buddhist model of shared power (religious and secular) and was clearly acting as a centralized state in the Himalayas in competition with another Tibetan-speaking people formerly organized into small agrarian states. Emerson ('Charismatic Kingship', p. 413) argues that Baltistan, even though composed of small sovereign political units ('ranging from about forty thousand to one hundred thousand people, as estimated back from the British census of India), they clearly met the defining features of a state'.

century, Ladakh was closer to speaking the language of diplomacy of the Muslim sultans in its western frontiers than that of its distant cousins, the central Tibetans in the east with their monastic celibates in joint positions of secular and spiritual power.⁸³

To conclude, the anonymous Muslim queens of Ladakh, known mainly by their common Tibetan (*rgyal-mo*) and Persian titles of power (Zi-zi and Khatun), were daughters, wives, advisors and lovers to the kings and often mothers to their successors. They contributed to an extensive network of horizontal kinship relations forged through the blood-line.⁸⁴ In other capacities, they served as cultural and political ambassadors, peace-makers in times of trouble, secret agents and even dowager queens for their respective courts. Over the centuries, their legacy shaped the diplomatic relations between Buddhists and Muslims and enriched the religious and cultural landscape of the Indian north-western Himalayas.

Table 11.1 Muslim Queens in the Buddhist Court of Leh

Ladakhi kings	Regnal years	Muslim queens and their origins
Kyide Nyima Gon	10th century	Tagzig-ma (Arab)
Drag Bumde	c.1400-44	Be-kim (Kashmir)
Jamyang Namgyal	c.1595-1616	Gyal Khatun (Skardo)
Senge Namgyal	c.1616-23	Kelsang Khatun (Skardo)
Nyima Namgyal	c.1694-1723	Zi-zi Khatun (Purig)
Tsewang Namgyal	c.1753-82	Bi-bi Khatun (Karche) Bhe-kim (Purig)
Tseten Namgyal	c.1782-1802	Zi-zi Khatun (Purig)
Tsewang Rabten (prince)	d.1834	Zo-ra Khatun (unknown place)

⁸³ During the Tibet-Ladakh-Mughal war of 1679-84, Ladakh allied with the Mughals to repel the Tibetan incursion by Gaden Tsewang. Previous attempts at international diplomacy prompted two Ladakhi embassies to be sent to Lhasa in 1664 and 1667. These missions failed at their task, mocked by the government in Lhasa; see Zahiruddin Ahmad, 'New Light on the Tibet-Ladakh-Mughal War of 1679-84', *East and West*, 18/3 (1968): pp. 340-61, at p. 342.

⁸⁴ The offspring of Muslim queens and Ladakhi kings gave rise to important relations of kinship from the side of the mother's family.