

## TRADER, MIDDLEMAN OR SPY? THE DILEMMAS OF A KASHMIRI MUSLIM IN EARLY 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TIBET

John Bray

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In September 1814 William Moorcroft (1770-1825), the East India Company veterinary surgeon and explorer, reported a meeting with Khwajah Ahmed Ali, the Patna representative of a Kashmiri commercial house with agents and depots in Dhaka, Kathmandu, Lhasa and Xining as well as Kashmir itself.<sup>1</sup> The topics that they discussed were highly sensitive. The Company had recently declared war on the Gorkha rulers of Nepal, and Ahmed Ali was a potential source of vital information on the most viable military and transport routes between the Nepal border and Kathmandu. He seemed willing to share this information in the hope of future reward, but at the same time was afraid of reprisals from the Nepalis and even from his fellow Kashmiris.

As it turned out, Moorcroft's meeting was the first in a series of encounters between Ahmed Ali and British officials. Like a classic three-act play, the story falls into three distinct episodes, each of which has its own set of files in the British records. In Act One, between September and November 1814, Ahmed Ali offers his services as a source of wartime intelligence. In Act Two, which takes place between September 1815 and October 1816, Moorcroft proposed Ahmed Ali as a potential British commercial agent in Lhasa, but the arrangement ultimately fell through. The denouement in Act Three begins to unfold in March 1831 when Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800-1894), the Acting Resident in Kathmandu, receives a desperate appeal from Ahmed Ali who has now been imprisoned in Lhasa on charges of being a British spy.

Ahmed Ali's story concerns the life and personal dilemmas of a particular individual. However, it also serves as an illustration of the wider role played by the Kashmiri merchants who travelled between northern India, Nepal, Tibet and western China between the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Trade and a number of specialist crafts provided their prime sources of livelihood. However, since they were one of the few communities with extensive family and commercial networks on both sides of the Himalaya, they also served as important sources of knowledge for all the parties with whom they dealt, and even as diplomatic go-betweens. In the best case, they became trusted intermediaries, honoured, respected and rewarded by all sides. In the worst case, they risked denunciation as untrustworthy outsiders, and even as spies.

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<sup>1</sup> Memorandum by Moorcroft, 15<sup>th</sup> September 1814. *Papers Respecting the Nepaul War, Papers Respecting the Nepaul War*, Printed in conformity to the resolution of the Court of Proprietors of East India Stock of 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1824 (London): pp. 85-86. A manuscript version of the same record is to be found in the British Library Oriental and India Office Collection (OIOC), H/645, pp. 79-88. On Moorcroft see: Garry Alder, *Beyond Bokhara. The Life of William Moorcroft* (London: Century Publishing, 1985).

In this initial memorandum Moorcroft refers to his visitor as "the Cashmeree", but subsequent archival records—clearly concerning the same person—refer to him by name and title. There are many variant spellings: I use "Ahmed Ali" throughout, but reproduce the original spellings in the quotations. "Khwajah" is a Persian/Urdu word literally meaning 'lord' or 'master', and widely used as a title by Kashmiri Muslims. It is also used as the family name of one of the most prominent Muslim families in Ladakh.

The British records show that Ahmed Ali was always acutely conscious of the risks and opportunities that came with his middleman status, and was forever calculating how to use his position—and, above all, his sources of information—to best advantage. This paper reviews his calculations as a means of shedding light on the history of the wider Kashmiri community in the region. Continuing with the theatrical metaphor, it sets the scene with a ‘prologue’ reviewing the earlier history of the Kashmiri merchants’ international network, before embarking on a more detailed discussion of Ahmed Ali’s personal three-act drama and its wider implications.

### **Prologue: a community of go-betweens**

The Kashmiri Muslim merchant community had begun its expansion into Ladakh, Central Tibet, Turkestan (now Xinjiang) and as far as north-west China by the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, if not earlier.<sup>2</sup> In all these regions, representatives of the leading merchant families established permanent bases and married local women, thus establishing kinship networks that extended across the entire region. However, despite these strong local connections, they retained their Muslim identity as well as their affiliation with the wider world of Islamic learning. The Persian language remained a critically important medium of communication linking a wide range of cities in or bordering on Central Asia including – in due course – the commercial thoroughfares of British India.

According to oral tradition, the Kashmiri merchant presence in Ladakh dates back to the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century when King Jamyang Namgyal (‘Jamdbangs nam-rgyal – r. c.1595-1616), offered land to a select group of traders known as *mkhar tsong pa* or ‘palace traders’, encouraging them to settle permanently in Leh.<sup>3</sup> The *mkhar tsong pa* enjoyed special privileges in the wool trade between Western Tibet via Ladakh to Kashmir. Many married local women: their mixed-race descendants are known as Argons, and are an important constituent of the local population in Leh to this day.<sup>4</sup> In addition to their commercial acumen, many Kashmiri settlers had other specialist skills. For example, the founder of the Zergar family in Ladakh was invited to Leh to strike coins.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, it is said that the Ladakhi kings invited the Khwajah family to assist with their Persian-language correspondence with the Mughal governors of Kashmir.<sup>6</sup>

The origins of the *Kha-che* or Kashmiri Muslim community in Lhasa appear to be similar. Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark writes that the first arrivals were almost certainly traders.<sup>7</sup> However, he also notes theories suggesting that the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai

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<sup>2</sup> In the same period merchants from Multan were extending similar networks across Afghanistan, Iran, Turan and even as far as European Russia. See: Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade 1600-1750*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). For a broader discussion of early modern South and South-east Asian trading networks see: D Lombard & J. Aubin, *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000). This includes an essay on Kashmiri Muslims by Marc Gaborieau.

<sup>3</sup> Abdul Ghani Sheikh, ‘A Brief History of Muslims in Ladakh’, in Henry Osmaston and Philip Denwood (eds.) *Recent Research on Ladakh 4&5* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1995): p. 190.

<sup>4</sup> For 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century perspectives on the Argons’ trading networks see in particular: Janet Rizvi, *Trans-Himalayan Caravans. Merchant Princes and Peasant Traders in Ladakh* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Jacqueline Fewkes & Abdul Nasir Khan, ‘Social Networks and Transnational Trade in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ladakh’ in John Bray (ed.) *Ladakhi Histories. Local and Regional Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill): pp. 321-334.

<sup>5</sup> Sheikh, ‘A Brief History’: p. 190. See also: Luciano Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh* (Rome: IsMEO): p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> Sheikh, ‘A Brief History’, p. 190.

<sup>7</sup> Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark, ‘The Moslems of Central Tibet. *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 39 (1952): p. 238.

Lama applied to the Mughal Emperor for advisors, or that he caused Muslims to come to Lhasa in a “purely representative capacity” so that he could show that people from the whole world attended his *tem-del* (*levées*). The *Kha-che* traditions cited by Marc Gaborieau link the foundation stories of the Lhasa community with Khair-ud-Din, a Muslim saint who had come from Patna—Ahmed Ali’s home town—in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century and, according to one version, secretly converted the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to Islam.<sup>8</sup>

A notable example of the way in which leading *Kha-che* families combined commercial and semi-diplomatic roles concerns the triennial *lo-phyag* mission from Leh to Lhasa, which was set up under the terms of the 1684 Treaty of Temisgang (gTing-mo-sgang) between Ladakh and Tibet.<sup>9</sup> The mission combined trade with the offering of a prescribed set of ceremonial gifts to the Dalai Lama. The ceremonial head of the mission was always a Buddhist but by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—and possibly much earlier—the Khwajah family had assumed responsibility for organising and actually managing the mission. It was particularly well placed to do so because of its kinship networks in both Ladakh and Tibet and, for that matter, in Turkestan.

The Kashmiris’ international connections and bilingual skills in Persian and Tibetan meant that they were well equipped to assist pioneer Western travellers in the region.<sup>10</sup> The Italian Capuchin missionaries, who first arrived in Lhasa in 1707, received welcome assistance initially from Armenian merchants and subsequently from their Kashmiri counterparts.<sup>11</sup> For example, in the 1720s a Kashmiri named Iusuf helped transmit funds from Rome on the last stage across the Himalayas to the Capuchins in Lhasa.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, when the Italian Jesuits Ippolito Desideri and Manuel Freyre travelled from Kashmir via Ladakh to Central Tibet in 1715-1716, they took with them a Muslim Persian-speaking interpreter. While still in Ladakh, they met a Kashmiri coming from Rudok. In an apparent reference to the Capuchins in Lhasa, he told them that he had been to Central Tibet and that he had seen “certain poor men wearing shaggy woollen capes and felt caps which hung down in the back, who were distributing many kinds of medicine to the people, and he knew for certain that they were Europeans”.<sup>13</sup>

In 1775 George Bogle (1747-1781) visited the court of the Third Panchen Lama in Tashi Lhunpo as an emissary from the British Governor-general Warren Hastings. Hastings believed that the capture of the Kathmandu valley by Gorkha ruler Prithvi Narayan Shah had disrupted an important trade route between northern India

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<sup>8</sup> Marc Gaborieau, *Récit d'un voyageur musulman au Tibet*, Publications du Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative, Université de Paris X (Paris: Klincksieck): pp. 17-18; Marc Gaborieau, 'Pouvoirs et autorité des Soufis dans l'Himalaya' in Thierry Zarcone (ed.) *Musulmans et Soufis du Tibet* (Milano: Arché): pp. 27-33.

<sup>9</sup> On the *lo phyag* mission see in particular: R.L. Kennion, 'The Lapchak' in *Sport and Life in the Further Himalaya* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood): pp. 241-161; Abdul Wahid Radhu, *Caravane tibétaine*, trans. Roger Du Pasquier (Paris: Fayard); John Bray, 'The Lapchak Mission from Leh to Lhasa in British Indian Foreign Policy', *Tibet Journal* 15 (1990), No. 4: pp. 75-96.

<sup>10</sup> See Marc Gaborieau's article in this volume.

<sup>11</sup> On the Armenian connection see: Hugh Richardson, 'Armenians in India and Tibet' *Journal of the Tibet Society* 1 (1981): pp. 63-67: Reprinted in: *High Peaks. Pure Earth*, ed. Michael Aris (London: Serindia, 1998): pp. 462-467. Armenian trading activities between northern India and Tibet paralleled those of the Kashmiris, but appear to have faded by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>12</sup> Adelhelm Jann, 'Zur Kulturarbeit der katholischen Kirche in Innerasien' in Leo Helbling (ed.) *Studien aus dem Gebiete von Kirche and Kultur. Festschrift Gustav Schnürer* (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh): pp. 147.

<sup>13</sup> Michael J. Sweet, 'Desperately Seeking Capuchins: Manuel Freyre's Report on the Tibets and their Routes (Tibetorum ac eorum Relatio Viarum) and the Desideri Mission to Tibet' *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 2 (August 2006), No. 2 [www.thdl.org?id=T2722](http://www.thdl.org?id=T2722): p.17.

and Tibet, and he hoped to establish or strengthen new commercial connections via Bhutan. Bogle found that the Kashmiri were well-established in the region:

The Kashmiris settled in Tibet are mostly the offspring of Tibetans, a sixth or eighth part only being natives of Kashmir. They have been long settled in this country and from the wealth which they acquire from their extensive commerce form a very respectable, though not very numerous body.<sup>14</sup>

Apparently the Kashmiris and the Gosains<sup>15</sup> enjoyed a comparative advantage in the Trans-Himalayan trade since Tibetan merchants felt unable to travel to India on account of the climate:

They [the Tibetan merchants] said that being born in a cold country they were afraid of going into a hot one; that their people would die in Bengal; that they had heard from tradition that about eight hundred years ago the people of this country used to travel into Bengal, but that eight out of ten died before their return; that the Kashmiris and Gosains travelled into different countries, but that they could not.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to their trading activities, the Kashmiris also served in diplomatic roles. For example, in 1780 Bogle wrote that the Panchen Lama's court in Tashi Lhunpo included a munshi, who was able to translate letters into Persian for onward transmission to the British.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in 1789 the Regent in Tashi Lhunpo chose two Kashmiris, Mohammed Rajeb and Mohammed Wali, to carry letters to Calcutta for the Governor General Lord Cornwallis.<sup>18</sup> The Kashmiris performed similar services for the British. For example in November 1792 Abdul Kadir Khan, who was serving as a British agent in Kathmandu, recommended that the British employ a Kashmiri named Sulaiman, who knew Chinese, Tibetan and Nepali, as a Tibetan translator.<sup>19</sup>

The context of the Tibetan exchanges with the British in 1789 and 1792 was a series of conflicts between Nepal and Tibet.<sup>20</sup> The eventual outcome of these conflicts was the consolidation of Manchu authority over Tibet, exercised through two Ambans (commissioners) in Lhasa, and this in turn meant that the country was barred

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<sup>14</sup> George Bogle, 'Political and Ethnographical Notes on Tibet and Other Parts of Asia', in Alastair Lamb (ed.) *Bhutan and Tibet. The Travels of George Bogle and Alexander Hamilton. 1774-1777* (Hertingfordbury: Roxford Books): p. 287.

<sup>15</sup> The Gosains were Indian religious devotees who combined pilgrimage with trade across northern India and the Himalayan region. Bogle himself received extensive assistance and guidance from a highly talented Gosain named Purangir. However, their influence in Tibet seems to have declined in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, possibly because they were perceived to be too close to the British. On the wider regional background of the Gosains see: Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Role of the Gosains in the Economy of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Upper India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 1 (1963-1964): pp. 175-182.

<sup>16</sup> Lamb, *Bhutan and Tibet*, p. 260.

<sup>17</sup> Bogle to Hastings, Rangpur, 30 Sept. 1780. In Lamb, *Bhutan and Tibet*, p. 444.

<sup>18</sup> Lamb, *Bhutan and Tibet*, p. 470.

<sup>19</sup> Abdul Kadir Khan, 17 November 1792. Cited in Isrun Engelhardt, 'The Closing of the Gates: Tibetan-European Relations at the End of the Eighteenth Century', in Henk Blezer (ed.) *Tibet, Past and Present* (Leiden: Brill): p.238, n.33. Abdul Kadir Khan was a Shia Muslim from Benares. On his background see: C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information. Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): pp. 82-83,

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these events see: Alastair Lamb, *British India and Tibet, 1766-1910*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); Lamb, *Bhutan and Tibet*; Englehardt, 'The Closing of the Gates.'

to Europeans even more effectively than before. However, Kashmiri merchants continued to trade on both sides of the Himalaya, and therefore remained one of the prime sources of information on Tibet that was still available to the British in northern India.

An early 19<sup>th</sup> century illustration of the Kashmiris' role as a source of British knowledge comes from Walter Hamilton's *East India Gazetteer* where the entry on Tibet draws heavily on details provided by "Abdul Russool, a Cashmerian merchant of Lassa" who had evidently been in contact with Norman MacLeod, a British official based in Cooch Behar in around 1816. Abdul Russool is cited as a source of information on gold mines, imports and exports and taxes. Speaking of his own community, he reported:

The natives of Cashmere established with their families at Lassa are computed at 150 persons, who carry on a considerable trade between that capital and their native country, from which they import shawls, numdee, a very thick woollen cloth, saffron and dried fruit. The exports to Cashmere are silver bullion, and tea, of which last article to the value of 1,50,000 rupees is annually exported from Lassa to Cashmere.<sup>21</sup>

One final contemporary illustration of the importance of Kashmir and the Persian language as an entry point for Western studies of Tibet comes from the career of the Hungarian linguist Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784-1842). Csoma was inspired to take up the study of Tibetan following a meeting with Moorcroft in Ladakh in 1822. In a letter written in 1825, Csoma reports that he owed his first lessons in the language to the conversation and instruction of an unnamed "intelligent person" in Ladakh—almost certainly a Muslim of Kashmiri origin—"who was well acquainted with the Tibetan and Persian languages."<sup>22</sup> Those early lessons culminated in Csoma's groundbreaking *Essay Towards a Dictionary, English and Tibetan* (1834).<sup>23</sup>

### **Act One: an offer of intelligence**

At the outbreak of the war with Nepal in 1814, the East India Company found itself facing a shortage of intelligence in two critical respects:<sup>24</sup>

- The first was local and tactical. Few Westerners had travelled in Nepal and, as a matter of state security, the Gorkhas had prevented them from acquiring detailed

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Hamilton, *The East India Gazetteer; Containing Particular Descriptions of ... Hindostan, and the Adjacent Countries...* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London), Vol.2: p. 643.

<sup>22</sup> Csoma to Captain Kennedy, 28 January 1824. Reproduced in Peter Marczell *Alexander Csoma de Kőrös. Volume 2. British-Indian Source Documents* (Kolkata: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 2007): p. 56.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Csoma de Kőrös, *Essay Towards a Dictionary. Tibetan and English*. Prepared with the Assistance of Sans-rgyas Phun-tshogs (Calcutta, 1834). There is now an extensive literature on Csoma starting with: Theodore Duka, *Life and Works of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös* (London: Trubner & Co, 1885). See also: József Térjek, *Alexander Csoma de Kőrös 1784-1842. A Short Biography* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984).

<sup>24</sup> For the wider political background to the war see: Lamb, *British India and Tibet*, pp. 26-42; Ludwig Stiller *The Rise of the House of Gorkha*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (Kathmandu: Human Resources Development Research Center), pp. 283-290. Contemporary accounts of the war include Henry Thoby Prinsep *History of the Political and Military Transactions in India during the Administration of the Marquess of Hastings 1813-1823* (London, 1825); and the official publication *Papers Respecting the Nepaul War* (1824). John Pemble gives a detailed account of the military conduct of the war in *The Invasion of Nepal. John Company at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). C.A. Bayly offers a brilliant analysis of how the British in India managed—and failed to manage—their various sources of intelligence in his *Empire and Information*. It was a reference in Bayly's work (p.108) that first set me on the trail of Ahmed Ali, and I gratefully acknowledge this source of inspiration

information on the various alternative routes into the country, and their military defences.

- The second was regional and strategic. Since its military victory over Nepal in 1792, China regarded Nepal as—at least loosely—a subordinate state. Lord Hastings, the Governor-general, was uncertain of China’s intentions and wished to ensure that the Emperor did not intervene on Nepal’s behalf, or take reprisals against emerging British interests in Canton.

Against this background, the British struggled to muster whatever sources of intelligence they possessed, and Moorcroft proved an eager volunteer. Moorcroft’s official role was to manage the Company’s stud, an important responsibility in an era when armies were still heavily dependent on horsepower (and, in India, the odd elephant). However, in 1812 he had already undertaken a covert journey across Gorkha-ruled Kumaon and Garhwal into Western Tibet, thus demonstrating a characteristic taste for intrigue combined with an irrepressible enthusiasm for new discoveries.<sup>25</sup> Now he scoured his extensive list of personal contacts for possible intelligence sources. Potential candidates included Francis Neville, the son of a French father and a Newari mother who had been born in the Kathmandu valley; the Gosains (“faqueers”), whom he praises for their powers of observation; a Mishur horse-dealer; and—as discussed in the memorandum of 14<sup>th</sup> September—Ahmed Ali.<sup>26</sup> In introducing him, Moorcroft himself played the role of a middleman, speaking enthusiastically of Ahmed Ali’s qualities, but at the same time distancing himself in case his information turned out to be unsatisfactory.

Moorcroft described Ahmed Ali’s background in the opening paragraphs of the memorandum, which was addressed to John Adam, secretary to the government’s Political and Secret Department. It seems that he belonged to a Kashmiri commercial house which had been established in Patna some two centuries previously, and had representatives in Kashmir, Nepal, Lhasa, Sining and Dhaka.<sup>27</sup> Its principal business in Patna was to collect otter skins through a network of agents in Dhaka and its neighbourhood, and to despatch these via Nepal to Tibet and China in return for gold.<sup>28</sup> Moorcroft had long been in contact with him because of his own interest in spreading the practice of vaccination in ‘Hither China.’

Now Ahmed Ali had approached him bewailing his current misfortunes. The war would disrupt communications with Nepal and Tibet, thus preventing him from receiving money that he was owed, and causing financial embarrassment in India. A further problem, as he explained a week later, was that a “great body of furs prepared for the China market remained on his hands”, and he feared that they might be damaged by the delay caused by the conflict.<sup>29</sup> The war therefore presented him with a series of dilemmas. As Moorcroft puts it:

This man balances between the two interests. He fears for his property in Nepaul; and he fears losing his connection there, should the British arms not be

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<sup>25</sup> Moorcroft gave his own account of the journey in: ‘A Journey to Lake Mánsaróvara in Ún-dés, a Province of Little Tibet’, *Asiatick Researches* 12 (1816): pp. 375-534. See also: Alder, *Beyond Bokhara*, pp. 135-178.

<sup>26</sup> Moorcroft to Adam, Hajipur, 11 September and 14 September 1814. *Papers Respecting the Nepaul War*, pp. 82-86.

<sup>27</sup> Moorcroft memorandum, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1814, *Papers Respecting the Nepaul War*, p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> To the Silk Route and the Musk Route of contemporary historiography must now be added the Otter-skin Route.

<sup>29</sup> Moorcroft to Adam, 23 September 1814. *Papers Respecting the Nepaul War*, pp. 86-88.

successful, and it were discovered that he had been in any respect active. Whether it would be worth while to secure such a man as this, by the promise of his property being respected, or by anything else, you are a better judge than myself.<sup>30</sup>

Already at the first meeting, Ahmed Ali had interesting intelligence to report. According to his agent in Tibet, the Raja of Nepal had sent a letter to the “principal Chinese Tajun [Amban] residing at Lassa” a year previously, and asked him to forward a second letter to the Emperor of China requesting assistance in the likely event of war between Nepal and the British. Moorcroft duly passed on this information, but with the qualification that he had no means of ascertaining whether it were true or false, since “the Cashmeereans are convenient agents in all kinds of chicane”.

At the second meeting a week later, Ahmed Ali made clear—apparently after some hesitation—that “he wished for some remuneration for the loss he contemplated or, in fact to be paid, under some other name, for the information he might furnish.”<sup>31</sup> He now had two main items of intelligence to offer. The first was to give more details than the British then possessed on the roads from the Nepal border to Kathmandu, and he summarised this in an accompanying note. The second concerned the source of his information on the letter from Nepal to the Chinese Emperor. In response to Moorcroft’s observation that it was unlikely that a foreigner residing in Lhasa for commercial purposes should be acquainted with important political events, Ahmed Ali replied that:

... the [commercial] house having been established for near two centuries at Lassa, its members were considered as domiciliated or naturalized, and were held in such high respect by the [Dalai] Lama, as always to be presented with tea by the hand of the Pontiff himself when they visited his durbar, to which they had free access.

Being the channel of much beneficial commerce, and enjoying much consideration also with the Chinese Tajaas, the resident Cashmeerees have abundant opportunities of becoming acquainted with every circumstance which may importantly affect the interest of the neighbouring countries.<sup>32</sup>

Moorcroft nevertheless retained his suspicions of Ahmed Ali’s honesty and reported that:

I examined the countenance, gesture, voice, and general demeanour of the deponent, with great attention, during the whole of our conversation, but discovered nothing, save what was naturally deducible from a struggle between hope and fear.<sup>33</sup>

At a third meeting, Ahmed Ali produced the letter from Lhasa to which he had referred.<sup>34</sup> The letter and its contents were of “such Sitburrooa Nepaul paper as is

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<sup>30</sup> Memorandum by Moorcroft, 15<sup>th</sup> September 1814. *Papers Respecting the Nepaul War*, p. 85.

<sup>31</sup> Moorcroft to John Adam, 23 September 1814. *Papers Respecting the Nepaul War*, p. 87.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87.

<sup>34</sup> Moorcroft to Adam, 8<sup>th</sup> October 1814. *Papers Respecting the Nepaul War*, pp. 91-92.

common both in Nepal and Tibet” and, at least to outward appearances, Moorcroft judged it to be authentic. Ahmed Ali refused to allow Moorcroft’s munshi to see any portion of it, but allowed Moorcroft himself to read the key extract concerning the Emperor of China, and to make a copy. Translated from the Persian, the extract read:

Further it has been heard from the Great Tajim of Lassa, that the Rajah of Nepal made three requests to the Emperor. 1st. That the mundermullee [currency] of Nepal should pass current in Lhasa as formerly.<sup>35</sup> 2d That the Emperor should permit a passage for the Rajah’s troops to Asham. 3d. That the Emperor should assist him with men and treasure to wage war against the Feringees.

The Emperor declared that he would assist the Rajah with men and treasure, to the extent which might be required: he also agreed to the passage of the Rajah’s troops to Asham. The Emperor wrote in the most encouraging terms to the Rajah, but refused to admit of the circulation of the mundermulee.<sup>36</sup>

The official correspondence on Ahmed Ali continued into November 1814. On 3 November Moorcroft wrote that he had requested Mr H. Douglas, a British official based in Patna, to ascertain whether Ahmed Ali or his servants might be able to provide information on the roads leading from the Nepal border to Kathmandu.<sup>37</sup> Douglas evidently interviewed Ahmed Ali in public and, because he did not wish his connection with the British to be made known, he had replied in the negative. As Moorcroft wrote:

It appeared that through fear of his Connection with me being made known to other Kashmeerean Merchants or to Nepalees Khojah Uhmed Ulee when interrogated in Court by Mr Douglas, as to having people in his service capable of acting as interpreters in Nipaul thought himself prudentially obliged to answer in the negative.<sup>38</sup>

In subsequent negotiations, Ahmed Ali dwelt not only on the prospect of financial reward bestowed by the British government on persons who had been politically serviceable, but also “the rank and credit they enjoyed in society”.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, Moorcroft was persuaded that Ahmed Ali did have the “power to shew the shortest and best road to Kathmandu” as well as “the disposition so to do on the prospect of a proportionate remuneration.”

A further setback occurred after Ahmed Ali deputed one of his servants to provide the information the British were looking for. The servant was allowed to

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<sup>35</sup> There had been a longstanding dispute between Nepal and Tibet concerning the quality of silver in Nepali rupees circulating in Tibet. The Nepali coinage was started by King Mahendra Malla of Kathmandu (1560-1574), and the main silver coin was therefore known as the *mahendramalli*. See: Schuyler Camman, *Trade Through the Himalayas* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1970[1sted. 1950]), pp. 108-111; Vijay Kumar Manandhar, *A Comprehensive History of Nepal –China Relations up to 1955 A.D* (New Delhi: Adroit Publishers), p. 72. In 1815 October 1815, the mintmaster was asked to strike coins for Tibet. See: N.G. Rhodes, K. Gabrisch and C.Valderetto, *The Coinage of Nepal from the Earliest Times until 1911*,(London: Royal Numismatic Society), p. 206.

<sup>36</sup> *Papers Respecting the Nepal War*, p. 92. Subsequent intelligence confirmed that the Raja of Nepal had written to the Emperor, a point that obviously was of crucial importance to the British. However, contrary to British fears, the Chinese sent neither money nor troops to support the Nepalis against the Company.

<sup>37</sup> Moorcroft to Adam, Gamakhun, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1814. OIOC. H/646, pp. 623-626.

<sup>38</sup> Moorcroft to Adam, Anah, 22 November 1814. OIOC. H/647. p. 107. Underlining in the original.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

return home in order to prepare for the journey to the border and “whilst there was prevailed upon to abandon his intentions to plead ignorance of the road and to pretend that his master had understood him.”<sup>40</sup> In the end, Ahmed Ali himself chose to brave “the resentment of his countrymen” to proceed to the camp of the military force led by Major-General Bennet Marley in the hope of discovering a hidden road leading into the Nepal hills.<sup>41</sup>

After weeks of prevarication, Ahmed Ali had clearly and openly committed himself to the British cause. In the event, Marley’s military campaign proved singularly ineffective, and on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1815 he went so far as to abandon his camp without telling anyone where he was going, thus giving up his command.<sup>42</sup> Against this background of official incompetence, it is doubtful whether Ahmed Ali’s intelligence information yielded the British any real advantage. Nevertheless, he naturally felt that he deserved to be rewarded for the risks that he had taken.

### **Act Two: a commercial proposal**

In September 1815, before the Anglo-Nepal war had come to a final conclusion, Moorcroft again approached Adam with a new proposal on Ahmed Ali’s behalf. This time the proposal was more overtly commercial. It was in the British interest to promote trade with Tibet, and Moorcroft therefore suggested the government might be interested in sponsoring Ahmed Ali in a trading venture with Lhasa. Once again, Moorcroft plays the role of an anxious but enthusiastic middleman. It is his letter that proposes the trading venture. By contrast Ahmed Ali’s accompanying note is both more cautious and less specific. After outlining his past services, he proposes—at least ostensibly—to embark on a life of devoted contemplation:

I therefore humbly hope that your Lordship [the Governor-general] in your gracious favour will be pleased to grant a provision for my support so that I may remain occupied in prayer for your Lordship’s prosperity and be ready to manifest my devotion to the British Government.<sup>43</sup>

Two themes dominate the subsequent correspondence. On the one hand, we again see Ahmed Ali anxiously weighing up the balance between commercial opportunity and all manner of personal and financial risks. As Moorcroft observed, he seemed to “view difficulties through a magnifying glass.”<sup>44</sup> On their side, the British authorities were concerned about the political and diplomatic risks of working with a local intermediary whom they could not be certain of controlling.

In presenting Ahmed Ali’s case, Moorcroft pointed out that there were special considerations:

Uhmed Ulee has drawn upon himself the resentment of the other Kashmeereean merchants who traffic from Patna to Lassa by his having been active in the British cause, (although fruitlessly from circumstances not under his control) and I would willingly hope that on this account as well as from his

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<sup>40</sup> Moorcroft to Adam, Hajipur, 20<sup>th</sup> December 1814. OIOC. H/651, pp. 37-38.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> See Pemble, *John Company at War*, pp. 210-228.

<sup>43</sup> Translation of a petition from Ahmed Ali. OIOC. F/4/552/13385, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Moorcroft to Adam. 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1816. OIOC. F/4/552/13385, pp. 27-33.

former connections with Tibet he may be deemed worthy of the patronage of the British Government.<sup>45</sup>

Bearing in mind the political sensitivities, he suggested that the government's sponsorship should be covert. The government might offer financial support, but it would be better for the venture to "wear the appearance of being conducted by Uhmud Ulee for his own use to avoid exciting jealousy."

The Governor-general in Council took a favourable view of the proposal but, according to Adam's subsequent reply to Moorcroft, expressed reservations about using a local trader as an intermediary. The main risk was that he might exceed his authority:

The principal objection to employing native agents of this description is the fear that they will exceed their powers, and that in pursuit of their own interest they will by assuming the character of authorized officers of Government commit its credit with the chiefs and people of the country in which they are employed and thus both involve the British Government in immediate embarrassment and ultimately defeat or delay the success of the plans which they were employed to promote.<sup>46</sup>

The Council therefore came up with a slightly modified proposal suggesting that the venture should be "not merely ostensibly but really" on Ahmed Ali's account. The government would supply him with goods in the form of a loan to be repaid at the rate of six per cent per annum. Provided that appearances were maintained, the loan would not be strictly enforced.<sup>47</sup> If the plan failed, the government would not insist on repayment. However, if it were successful it would give favourable consideration to Ahmed Ali's "claim to further employment and reward."

Alongside his commercial activities, Ahmed Ali would also be encouraged to collect information both about Sikkim—which was then favoured as a potential new trade and communications route to Tibet—as well as Tibet itself:

In like manner he should be desired to report largely on the commercial resources and relations of Lassa & the countries with which that city maintains a mercantile intercourse, and to procure and bring back with him specimens of the productions and manufactures of those countries also.<sup>48</sup>

As will be seen, this suggestion was to take on particular significance in Act Three of Ahmed Ali's story.

Finally, lest there should be any room for misunderstanding, Adam concluded his letter by insisting that Ahmed Ali should not see himself as an official representative of the Company in any sense at all:

... he is to be strictly cautioned not to assume the character of an agent of the British government and not to engage in any transaction of a political nature, and he should be distinctly informed that any deviation from this rule will

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<sup>45</sup> William Moorcroft to John Adam, Calcutta, 19<sup>th</sup> September 1815. OIOC. F/4/552/13385, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Adam to Moorcroft, Calcutta, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1816. OIOC. F/4/552/13385, pp. 9-10.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

subject him to the entire forfeiture of the favour and protection of the government.<sup>49</sup>

The correspondence between the Council and Ahmed Ali continued back and forth for over a year, with Moorcroft as the go-between. On 17<sup>th</sup> February 1816, following further consultations with Ahmed Ali, Moorcroft highlighted the risks involved in a new venture “in a country wholly unconnected with British influence”. He therefore suggested first that Ahmed Ali’s brother might be sent to Lhasa instead of himself.<sup>50</sup> Secondly, he commented that Ahmed Ali’s funds had been depleted by his losses on the fur trade, and suggested that he might himself offer him a loan on the understanding that this would be backed by the government. The Council agreed to the suggestions of a loan as long as it “assumed the appearance of a private transaction” between Moorcroft and Ahmed Ali.<sup>51</sup>

On 22<sup>nd</sup> September, Moorcroft came back with a further report.<sup>52</sup> Ahmed Ali offered a new explanation of why he could not go to Lhasa in person:

It appeared that one of his ancestors many years back had established at Lassa through personal communication with the Lama and his minister a commercial House and that ever since the business of that house had been carried on by agents and relations to the principals who have not themselves visited the concern on account of the large presents which would be expected on such occasion as inferred from the cost attending the 1<sup>st</sup> establishment of the connection.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, in order to minimise the risk, he now asked for a monopoly on the trade in otter skins from Chittagong and Dhaka, which Moorcroft described as “a most profitable article of trade with the inhabitants of the China Frontier.” He would be prepared to send British cloth to Lhasa, but only at the risk of the government, and he was hoping for a delay in starting the new venture. At the same time, perhaps hoping to emphasise his usefulness, he offered recently acquired intelligence concerning a meeting between Nepali officials and a Chinese general who had just arrived in Tibet.<sup>54</sup>

By this time the Council had had enough. On 5<sup>th</sup> October, Adam sent a letter to Moorcroft stating that, since Ahmed Ali was unwilling to travel to Lhasa in person, the Governor-general in Council had “determined to relinquish the scheme of employing his agency.”<sup>55</sup> At the same time, responding to the somewhat defensive tone of Moorcroft’s most recent letter, the Council expressed appreciation for:

..the active spirit of public zeal which has uniformly stimulated your endeavours to promote objects of national interest, whether immediately

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp.15-16.

<sup>50</sup> Moorcroft to Adam. 17<sup>th</sup> February 1816, OIOC. F/4/552/13385, pp. 21-24.

<sup>51</sup> Adam to Moorcroft, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1816. OIOC. F/4/552/13385, p. 24.

<sup>52</sup> Moorcroft to Adam. 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1816. OIOC. F/4/552/13385, pp. 27-33.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.p. 28

<sup>54</sup> On the Chinese general see: Lamb, *Britain and Tibet*, p.35; Pemble, *John Company at War*, pp. 342-343. To Hastings’ relief, the Chinese accepted the British explanation that their quarrel was solely with the Gorkhas and that they had no designs on Tibet.

<sup>55</sup> Adam to Moorcroft, 5<sup>th</sup> October 1816, OIOC. F/4/552/13385, p. 34.

connected with your proper department [i.e. the Company stud] or embracing a wider range...<sup>56</sup>

Moorcroft's promotion of Ahmed Ali's services had not in the end proved successful but, from the government's perspective, he was not to be blamed.

Ahmed Ali approached the government once again in early 1817, having received invitations to Tibet from two commercial agents in Lhasa, but the Council refused to change its view. It now favoured a *laissez faire* approach and had decided "to leave to the operation of natural Causes that extension of the Commercial intercourse in question".<sup>57</sup> It was therefore unnecessary to offer Ahmed Ali any financial support. The Council was happy to approve of Moorcroft's supplying Ahmed Ali with cloth and other British manufactures on his own account. However, he was to explain distinctly to the Kashmiri that:

... Government took no further interest in the concern and that he was in no wise to consider himself as employed by the Government as its agent in any capacity.<sup>58</sup>

As far as the British authorities were concerned, this was the end of the matter. Events were to prove them wrong.

### **Act Three: an espionage case in Tibet**

Act Three begins with an urgent plea for assistance received in March 1831 by Brian Houghton Hodgson, the East India Company's Acting Resident in Nepal.<sup>59</sup> Ahmed Ali had been imprisoned in Lhasa on charges of espionage and, in his capacity as a "dependent and servant of the British Government", he appealed for British assistance to secure his release. This time Ahmed Ali's affairs – far from being a private affair involving a few senior officials – sparked a diplomatic incident involving the governments of India, Nepal and China.

The immediate crisis passed relatively quickly. On 20<sup>th</sup> April 1831 Hodgson was able to report that Ahmed Ali had already been released, and was winding up his affairs in Lhasa before leaving the country.<sup>60</sup> On 2<sup>nd</sup> June Ahmed Ali arrived in Kathmandu in person, and immediately claimed Hodgson's protection at the British Residency.<sup>61</sup> Hodgson was able to persuade him that he was now quite safe and could more conveniently stay in the city while preparing for his onward journey to India.

Hodgson and his colleagues in Calcutta now had the task of understanding Ahmed Ali's previous relationship with the British authorities, while avoiding antagonising their counterparts in Kathmandu, Lhasa and Beijing. Their task was made more complicated by the fact that Moorcroft—the official who had known him best—had died in northern Afghanistan in 1825 on his way back from his epic journey

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Note by George Swinton, Chief Secretary, 22 July 1831, Calcutta. OIOC F/4/1384/55154, pp. 55-59.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Urzee of Khaja Ahmed Alli, a well wisher of the British Government from Lassa. Dated 21st August 1830, received 20<sup>th</sup> March 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, pp. 25-28. On Hodgson see in particular: William Wilson Hunter, *Life of Brian Houghton Hodgson, British Resident at the Court of Nepal* (London: John Murray, 1896); David Waterhouse (ed.), *The Origins of Himalayan Studies. Brian Houghton Hodgson in Nepal and Darjeeling 1820-1858* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

<sup>60</sup> Hodgson to H.T. Prinsep, Secretary to the Governor General, Kathmandu, 20<sup>th</sup> April 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 31.

<sup>61</sup> Hodgson to Prinsep, Kathmandu, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p.39.

to Bukhara.<sup>62</sup> John Adam, who had handled the correspondence with Ahmed Ali on behalf of the Governor-general, had died in the same year.

Hodgson evidently formed a certain regard for Ahmed Ali, describing him as:

...a man of great respectability, evidently, and of considerable intelligence and he doubtless possesses general information about Tibet which (especially the commercial part of it) would be cheaply purchased by the gift of a few hundred or even thousands of rupees.<sup>63</sup>

At the same time, he was frustrated by Ahmed Ali's negotiating style: the latter evidently regarded information as a precious resource, and released it only slowly, and with apparent reluctance.

### *Ahmed Ali's quarrel with his family*

It emerged that the immediate cause of Ahmed Ali's woes was a quarrel with his younger brothers Abdullah and Ashraf Ali. All three had been involved in the family business in Lhasa. However, Ahmed Ali had fallen out both with his siblings, and with his agent, one "Fuzuloolah Fukro of the Kashmeerian tribe but born in Bootan."<sup>64</sup> As Hodgson later observed, the quarrel was "of long standing and properly involves a world of affairs, the discussion of which belongs properly to a court of Justice".<sup>65</sup>

Ahmed Ali had in fact intended to bring a law suit against his brothers in Tibet. However, as a counter-move, they denounced him to the Lhasa authorities, claiming that he had been employed by the British authorities to construct a map of the country.<sup>66</sup> When he was arrested, three Persian-language manuscript volumes containing a compilation of information on Tibet were found in his possession, together with "a document containing 16 paragraphs granted by government through the medium of the late Mr W. Moorcroft". The discovery of these documents lent credence to the charges that Ahmed Ali was a British spy.

### *Chinese investigations and accusations*

Having arrested Ahmed Ali, the Chinese authorities commissioned a translation of all his papers from Persian into Chinese, an indication of the seriousness with which they viewed the espionage allegations. With perhaps a touch of exaggeration, Ahmed Ali later claimed that a group of Kashmiris residing in Lhasa were employed on this task day and night for two months.<sup>67</sup> As Hodgson observed, the fact that such translators were available is testimony to the cosmopolitan nature of Lhasa society at the time:

With respect to the means possessed by the Chinese Viceroy [Amban] of interpreting Persian letters and documents and corresponding in that language,

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<sup>62</sup> On Moorcroft's journey to Bokhara see: William Moorcroft and George Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab, in Ladakh and Kashmir, in Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz and Bokhara*, ed. H.H. Wilson, 2 Vols, (London: John Murray). On the circumstances of his death, see: Alder, *Beyond Bukhara*, pp. 344-360.

<sup>63</sup> p. 49 Hodgson to Prinsep, Kathmandu, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 39.

<sup>64</sup> Urzee of Khaja Ahmed Alli, 21st August 1830. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, pp. 25-28. In accordance with 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century usage 'Bootan' here almost certainly refers to Tibet.

<sup>65</sup> Hodgson to Prinsep, Kathmandu, 10<sup>th</sup> February 1832. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 111.

<sup>66</sup> Khajah Fukheeroolla to Secretary to the Governor General, 29<sup>th</sup> December 1830. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, pp. 23-24.

<sup>67</sup> Translation of Ahmed Ali's Reply to the Questions put to him by the acting Resident at Kathmandoo, in obedience to instructions from Calcutta. n.d. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 102.

these means are regularly supplied to him, by the maintenance of a Persian translator attached to the office of the foreign Secretary at Lhasa. Bhotiah, Newaree, Parbattiah [Nepali], Cashmeeree, Moghal and Tartar translators are similarly attached to that Office.

Out of the multitude of Mohamadans resorting continually to Lhasa from the plains of India, Cashmir, Ladâkh, and Bucharia, and some of whom are domiciled at Lhasa, there can be seldom a difficulty in selecting a suitable person for the post of Persian translator to the government, though of course the qualifications of the successive tenants of the office will be apt to vary.<sup>68</sup>

Having prepared the translation, Ambans sought instructions from the Emperor's court in Beijing. The Emperor's verdict was conveyed in a sent a letter of complaint that the Ambans sent via Sikkim to the "ruler of the city of Calcutta", alias the Governor-general.<sup>69</sup> The letter was written in Chinese and accompanied by a Persian translation. It began with a summary of the contents of Ahmed Ali's manuscripts:

The different boundaries of this kingdom, the situation of the roads, mountains and rivers, the nature of the soil, the general outline and face of the country and the distance and vicinities of the public routes are all marked and written down in these volumes. The stations of the troops of Kathay and China are all marked and written down in these volumes.<sup>70</sup>

The letter then summarised the law concerning foreign traders: they were expected to solicit permission from the border authorities and to return home once the period assigned to them had expired:

Such is the rule observed towards the merchants of Cashmeer, the Newar tribe and others who come to this country for purposes of trade. But for any other class to come like spies in order to find out the affairs and state of the kingdom under the garb of merchants is not within the law and statutes of the empire...<sup>71</sup>

Despite this offence, the Emperor had decided to spare Ahmed Ali's life and to inflict no further punishment other than expelling him from the country. The Ambans expected the Governor-general to receive this news with appropriate deference:

You will reflect upon the Imperial generosity and kindness and, occupying yourself with the exercise of humility within the sphere of your zemindary, [domain] remain in amity and concord with the neighbours on your frontier, by which you will give pleasure and satisfaction to the Celestial King [the Emperor] who has shown such mercy to poor strangers notwithstanding such preposterous proceedings.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Hodgson to Swinton. Kathmandu, 2 September 1831. OIOC F/4/1384/55154, p. 89.

<sup>69</sup> Translation of a letter from the Chinese Authorities on the frontier of Lepcha thro' the medium of a Persian translation which accompanied the original. Dated 25<sup>th</sup> July 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, pp. 64-68.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

The first act of contemplation on the part of the Governor-general's colleagues was to consult official files in order to work out who exactly Ahmed Ali was, and whether he had really been acting upon government orders.

### *The original documents*

The main outlines of the story emerged bit by bit between June and September 1831. On 15<sup>th</sup> June, soon after their initial meeting, Hodgson explained to Ahmed Ali that he was “deceived, no doubt, in fancying he ever had a commission from the government to furnish information relative to Tibet”, but at the same time sought further clarification from Calcutta.<sup>73</sup> On 22 July George Swinton, the Chief Secretary to the Government, prepared a summary of the files concerning Ahmed Ali's proposed mission to Lhasa in 1815-1816.<sup>74</sup> From Calcutta's perspective, the position was clear: Ahmed Ali's proposals had failed, and the government therefore had no formal obligations towards him.

Ahmed Ali responded to the Governor-general's disclaimer “with every appearance of extreme dejection”.<sup>75</sup> However on 25<sup>th</sup> July, shortly before leaving Kathmandu for India, he changed his tack, admitting that:

... he had never been authorised or directed by Government to collect information relative to Bhote [Tibet] and that he could not, consequently, ground any claim of right upon his doings and sufferings there. But he insisted that he could and did rest such a claim upon his secret services during the Nepal war, services never yet remunerated notwithstanding promises to that effect.<sup>76</sup>

Hodgson upbraided him for confusing matters by “laying the stress in the wrong place” by alluding to Tibet instead of Nepal “as the scene of those acts upon the merit of which he desired to be base his pretensions to favour or reward.”

Hodgson continued to correspond with Ahmed Ali after his departure for India and, over the following weeks, a coherent picture emerged of the papers confiscated by the Lhasa authorities, and of Ahmed Ali's relationship with British officialdom. In August Hodgson summarised his findings as follows:

- The three volumes confiscated by the Chinese authorities were Ahmed Ali's manuscript account of what he had seen and heard. No other book was found upon him.
- The Persian-language papers included a sanad (grant/decree) from the government, which was most likely a rough draft of the agreement under which it had been proposed to send Ahmed Ali to Lhasa.
- He also had a copy of the peace treaty between the East India Company and Nepal, which he had obtained from the munshi of Major Bradshaw, one of the British negotiations.
- In addition, he had a “scrap of paper containing queries relative to the people and country of Bhote”. This came from “one Habeeb Oollah, a fellow merchant”. Ahmed Ali supposed that it came from Edward Gardner,

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<sup>73</sup> Hodgson to Prinsep, Kathmandu, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 49.

<sup>74</sup> Note by the Secretary, Calcutta, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, pp. 55-59.

<sup>75</sup> Hodgson to Prinsep, Kathmandu, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 71.

<sup>76</sup> Hodgson to Prinsep, Kathmandu, 26<sup>th</sup> July 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 82. Underlining in the original

the former British Resident in Kathmandu, although he had nothing to confirm this.<sup>77</sup>

Hodgson commented that both Gardner and he himself had used Kashmiri merchants as a source of information on Tibet and the routes to China. Ironically enough, it occurred to him some weeks later the paper of queries from Nepal might be the same as one that he had himself—as a private individual—given to a Kashmiri merchant called Ahmedullah in 1826, and that it might have been passed on to Ahmed Ali at third or fourth hand.<sup>78</sup> He duly sent a copy of his list of questions to Ahmed Ali who promptly confirmed the questions were indeed the same as the ones that he had received, although Hodgson commented that he still had some doubts given that the Kashmiri was always seeking “to give to his researches the semblance of acts done by something like official authority...”<sup>79</sup>

The overall conclusion was that no British official had formally requested Ahmed Ali to collect information on Tibet, but that he has been given to believe that he might in due course be rewarded for doing so. This belief was plausible enough given that both Hodgson and other officials had in the past sought information from Kashmiris travelling from Tibet. In Hodgson’s view, there was one other personal factor:

... the simple truth appears to be that Mr Moorcroft had fired him [Ahmed Ali] with a spark of his own ardent curiosity.<sup>80</sup>

Like his patron, Ahmed Ali had developed a personal enthusiasm for geographical discovery and information gathering.

As it happened, Hodgson himself subsequently published a report on the route from Nepal via Tibet to China, apparently based on information from another Kashmiri/Tibetan called Amir.<sup>81</sup> The report contained a shorter version of the kind of information that Ahmed Ali must himself have collected, including—for example—information about the 500 troops (musketeers and archers) stationed at the Nepal/Tibetan border town of Kutti, and the fact that the gates of Lhasa are “cautiously guarded—especially that leading to China – to get through which costs the traveller a whole day of solicitation, and sundry rupees in presents”.<sup>82</sup> It is a matter for regret that Ahmed Ali was never able to share his own findings.

### ***The role of the Nepal government***

In the 1830s—as still today—Nepal’s sensitive strategic location meant that it was keen to avoid provoking either China or India. Ahmed Ali’s original letter had suggested that the British might ask Bhimsen Thapa, the most powerful minister in the Nepal government, to help secure his release.<sup>83</sup> In the event, Bhimsen Thapa’s

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<sup>77</sup> Hodgson to Swinton, Kathmandu, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 81.

<sup>78</sup> Hodgson to Swinton, Kathmandu, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1831, p. 101. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, pp. 101-102.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Brian Houghton Hodgson, ‘Route from Kathmandu, in Nepal, to Tazedo, on the Chinese Frontier, with Some Occasional Allusions to the Manners and Customs of the Bhotiahs, by Amir, a Cashmiro-Bhotiah by Birth, and by Vocation an Interpreter to the Traders on the Route Described’ *Asiatic Researches* 17 (1832), pp. 513-534. The coincidence of dates raises the question whether ‘Amir’ could have been a pseudonym for ‘Ahmed Ali’, but I have found no information to confirm this.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid: p. 516, p. 531.

<sup>83</sup> Urzee of Khaja Ahmed Alli, Lhasa, 21<sup>st</sup> August 1830. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 28

intervention was not needed, and it is in any case unlikely that he would have responded to Ahmed Ali's appeal for fear of provoking the Chinese.

When the Chinese authorities expelled Ahmed Ali they requested the Nepalis to ensure that he proceeded on to British India without delay. At Hodgson's request the Nepal government wrote to Lhasa proposing that Ahmed Ali's departure should be delayed until later in the year when there was a reduced risk of succumbing to malaria in the Terai (the forested lowland area between the Nepal hills and the Indian border). However, they received an unfavourable answer. The Ambans pleaded "the Emperor's Commands as an insuperable reason for Ahmed Ali's instant departure to the plains".<sup>84</sup> Hodgson felt that he had no choice but to comply with the combined requests of the Chinese and the Nepal governments, but provided Ahmed Ali with "elephants and doolies for his speedy and comfortable passage of the malarious tract".<sup>85</sup>

The Nepal government's wish to avoid provoking the Chinese authorities in Lhasa was also reflected in their initial reluctance to forward a letter from Calcutta to Lhasa giving the British response to the Ambans' accusations that Ahmed Ali had been a spy, although they did eventually agree to do so.

### *The British response to the Chinese*

The message contained in the British reply was polite but forthright.<sup>86</sup> It began by stating that Ahmed Ali held no office and had never been employed to collect information. Somewhat ingenuously, it claimed that there was no need to do so since such information was readily available in books published in all parts of the world, and from the "gazettes and official records of Peking, which are translated into English, and from many other sources." Merchants were free to come and go in British dominions, and no one prevented them from gathering information. The letter therefore asked rhetorically:

Why should you punish Ahmed Ali or any other merchant for taking notes of roads and countries and writing what they see and hear? Such things have always been and always will be done, so long as trade is not carried on by the blind and the deaf and by people who cannot write.<sup>87</sup>

Nevertheless the letter concluded by stating that the government was "sensible of the consideration" which led the Chinese authorities to refrain from publishing him. With that—in the British view—the matter was closed.

### *The question of compensation*

There was one more piece of unfinished business. Ahmed Ali was a respectable merchant who—however unwisely—had acted with the best of intentions. How—if at all—should he be rewarded? The official view was that his services in the Nepal war had been too far in the past for there to be any question of compensation now. At the same time, if the government rewarded him for his unsuccessful information-gathering in Tibet, it would lend credence to the notion that he had after all been a spy. However, there was one further possibility. Ahmed Ali had lost almost all of his

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<sup>84</sup> Hodgson to Prinsep, Kathmandu, 16<sup>th</sup> July 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 76.

<sup>85</sup> Hodgson to Prinsep, Kathamandu, 26<sup>th</sup> July 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 82.

<sup>86</sup> Copy of letter to Lhasa authorities. Prinsep to Hodgson, 7<sup>th</sup> October 1831. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, pp. 91-93.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

property in Lhasa, but had managed to take with him three chests and one large leather bag containing samples of goods produced and sold in Tibet.<sup>88</sup> In the hope of winning some form of recompense, he now offered them for sale to the government.

On Swinton's instructions, Ahmed Ali's Tibetan goods were sent to Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1880), the Secretary of the Asiatic Society, with a request that he should examine them and report "whether any of them would be acceptable as curiosities to be deposited in the Museum of the Asiatic Society".<sup>89</sup> Wilson consulted Csoma de Kőrös (1784-1842), who was then serving as the Asiatic Society's librarian. They reported that the principle goods were "articles of dress worn in the countries beyond the Himalaya and specimens of woollen cloths and silks, the latter of Chinese manufacture." There were also samples of tea and a few dried fruits. Wilson suggested that the perishables should be sold and that Society might select a few items for its museum.<sup>90</sup> The remainder should be sent back to London "either for the Museum at India House, or as samples of the manufactures for which there is a demand in Tibet."

The final question concerned the amount to be paid to Ahmed Ali. He had asked for Rs 5,000. Wilson and Csoma had valued the items at Rs 1618 and 8 annas. The government settled for Rs 2,500, apparently out of consideration for his "respectable character and distressed circumstances."<sup>91</sup> At least from the British perspective, honour had now been satisfied. Ahmed Ali's view is not recorded.

### *Wider repercussions*

As Moorcroft had made clear in 1814 Ahmed Ali risked the hostility of his fellow-Kashmiris when he openly sided with the British during the Anglo-Nepal war. In doing so he put their interests at risk, as well as his own, because of the possibility of reprisals against Kashmiris in Kathmandu. Similarly in the 1830s, by appearing to be too close to the British, he ruined his own position in Tibet, and other *Kha-che* Muslims in Lhasa must have feared that he would damage the reputation of the entire community.

In practice this does not seem to have happened, perhaps because there were Kashmiris on both sides of the affair: his own brothers had denounced him to the Chinese authorities, and other members of his community helped translate his Persian manuscripts for the Ambans. No doubt the incident placed the Chinese even more on their guard and, at the behest of the Manchus as much as the Tibetans themselves, the official bar on European travellers in Tibet remained in place until the Younghusband expedition of 1904. However, the *Kha-che* community as a whole continued to prosper.

It also continued to serve as a source of information both for the British and for the Chinese. To cite two illustrative examples, in 1846 Chinese officials in Lhasa reported back to Beijing that Muslim traders had passed on information about the 'Senpa' (Sikhs) on Tibet's western borders.<sup>92</sup> And in July 1877 Major Henderson, a British official in Kashmir, passed on information on Chinese and Tibetan government

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<sup>88</sup> W.R. Jennings, Collector of Customs Patna to Thomas Pakenham, Private Secretary to Lord William Bentinck. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 119.

<sup>89</sup> Swinton to Wilson, Calcutta, 13<sup>th</sup> August 1832. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, p. 153.

<sup>90</sup> Wilson to Swinton, Calcutta, 13<sup>th</sup> August 1832. OIOC. F/4/1384/55154, pp. 229-234.

<sup>91</sup> Political, 25<sup>th</sup> March, No. 4 of 1834. OIOC. E/4/470. Reprinted in Peter Marczell, *Alexander Csoma de Kőrös. Volume 2*: p. 395.

<sup>92</sup> Schuyler Cammann 'New Light on Huc and Gabet: Their Expulsion from Lhasa in 1846' *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 4. (Aug., 1942), pp. 355-356.

policy as reported by Gholam Shah, a Ladakhi Argon merchant who had left Lhasa three months previously.<sup>93</sup> When Khwajah Ghulam Muhammad (1857-1928), a Kashmiri based in Kathmandu, travelled to Lhasa in 1886, he found that the *Kha-che* Muslims were both prosperous and well-respected by the Tibetan host community.<sup>94</sup> Western travellers to Lhasa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century painted a similar picture.<sup>95</sup>

### **Epilogue: Ahmed Ali and William Moorcroft's 'afterlife'**

As for Ahmed Ali himself, once his affairs had been settled to the Governor-general's satisfaction, he disappears from Western records. Or perhaps not quite. A decade and a half later, two European travellers in Tibet picked up what may have been a final echo of the sensation surrounding his arrest.

In 1846 two French priests, Régis Évariste Huc and Joseph Gabet travelled from north-west China to Lhasa. The leader of the Lhasa *Kha-che* community was deputed to look after them—yet another case of a member of the Lhasa Muslim community playing a sensitive role as an intermediary between the Tibetans and Western travellers. Huc reports that the Tibetans were welcoming, but that pressure from the Chinese authorities—as represented in Tibet by the two Ambans—meant that they were forced to leave Lhasa after only a few weeks. However, before doing so, they collected some surprising news concerning the fate of Ahmed Ali's old patron, William Moorcroft.<sup>96</sup>

Far from dying in northern Afghanistan, Moorcroft had—according to Huc's sources—travelled on to Lhasa in disguise as a Kashmiri Muslim, arriving some time in 1826. He spoke Persian so fluently that he was able to fool his Kashmiri 'compatriots' into taking him as one of their own. From his Lhasa base he purchased some herds of goats and yaks, which were entrusted to shepherds in the surrounding mountains. On the pretext of inspecting his livestock, 'Moorcroft' frequently travelled through the Tibetan countryside, and took advantage of the opportunity to make drawings and maps. Finally, after a dozen years in the Tibetan capital, he set out for Ladakh but was attacked and killed by robbers in the western Tibetan province of Ngari. It was only when the robbers inspected his baggage and found the maps that 'Moorcroft's' true identity came to light.

Huc had never heard of Moorcroft before his stay in Lhasa, and he reports that the story was corroborated by several sources, including 'Moorcroft's' former Lhasa servant Nisan who had himself been taken in by the disguise. Nisan had been given a letter of recommendation, apparently written in Roman characters and to be used in case he ever travelled to Calcutta. However, Nisan had destroyed it after the discovery of his master's maps and drawings.

Over the years Huc's account has prompted wide speculation. Moorcroft's journey to Tibet in 1812 points to his taste for disguise and intrigue. So might his 'after-life' in Lhasa just possibly be true?

Perhaps disappointingly, in a careful review of the evidence, Robert Fazy argues that the story is implausible because—among other reasons—it is hard to

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<sup>93</sup> Major P.D. Henderson to T.H. Thornton Esq., Secretary to Government of India Foreign Department, Kashmir, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1877. Ney Elias Papers. Royal Geographical Society, London.

<sup>94</sup> Gaborieau, *Récit d'un Musulman*.

<sup>95</sup> See for example: Austine Waddell, *Lhasa and its Mysteries*, p.346; Charles Bell, *Tibet Past and Present*. (Oxford, 1924): p. 243; F. Spencer Chapman, *Lhasa: the Holy City* (London: Readers Union Ltd by arrangement with Chatto & Windus): p. 96.

<sup>96</sup> Régis-Évariste Huc 1924, *Souvenirs d'un voyage dans la Tartarie et le Thibet* (Peking: Imprimerie des Lazaristes, 1924 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. published in 1850]) Vol. 2, pp. 318-322.

believe that Moorcroft could have mustered the necessary language skills to persuade the local Muslim community that he was one of their own.<sup>97</sup> In a more recent assessment, Philip Denwood makes a similar point, and suggests that the murdered man could have been a Kashmiri who had been commissioned by Moorcroft to gather information. The discovery of letters or papers bearing his name might have led the Tibetans to assume that the victim was Moorcroft himself.<sup>98</sup>

If Denwood's theory is correct, then Ahmed Ali is certainly a potential candidate. The Tibetans clearly associated Ahmed Ali with Moorcroft, and the discovery of hidden maps and documents is a key element of both stories. Ahmed Ali's story does not match that of Huc's spy in all respects because of course he lived to return safely to British India. Nevertheless, it seems plausible to suggest that Huc had picked up a garbled version of the Ahmed Ali affair 15 years earlier.

The Calcutta authorities had always been concerned with matters of representation: how far could they trust Ahmed Ali to identify with—and speak for—British interests? Ultimately, it seems that the Kashmiri trader came to represent his old spymaster to a degree and in a fashion that no one ever expected.

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<sup>97</sup> Robert Fazy, 'Le cas Moorcroft, un problème de l'exploration tibétaine', *T'oung Pao* 35 (1940): pp. 155-184.

<sup>98</sup> Philip Denwood, 'William Moorcroft – an Assessment' in Henry Osmaston & Philip Denwood (eds.) *Recent Research on Ladakh 4&5* (London: School of Oriental & African Studies, 1995): p. 53.