

LETTER OF FIRST WESTERNER TO VISIT
BHUTAN - TIBET - NEPAL
(JOAO CABRAL, S.J., 1599-1669)

Nancy M. Gettelman
Seattle, Washington

Among the many dedicated and adventuresome early Jesuit missionaries, few have a more colorful and strenuous history than Padre Joao Cabral, born in Celorico, Beira, Portugal in 1599. Cabral died in Goa, India, on July 4, 1669, and between those two dates lies a story seldom paralleled.

After joining the Society of Jesus at the age of sixteen, he left for India in 1624, and until his death was engaged in mission work in such far-off places as Cochin, Tonkin, Malacca, Macao, and Japan.

But before those experiences Cabral's first undertaking was an attempt to open a new mission-field in central Tibet¹ with Father Estavao Cacella, also a Portuguese, and 14 years his senior. In April 1626 they journeyed from Goa to Hooghly, then to Dacca and Cooch Behar on the Brahmaputra waterways, assisted by the many Portuguese trading posts along the way. However, from Cooch Behar to Paro, in western Bhutan, they continued unassisted--the very first Westerners in that hitherto

1. Father Antonio Andrade, who had opened the first Christian mission-field in Western Tibet in 1624, at Tsaparang, had written to his Goa superiors suggesting the attempt to reach Utsang should be made from Bengal. Wessels: p.120.

T I B E T

KHAM

DBUS

G T S A N G

N E P A L

M B H U T A N

M O G G O R

B E N G A L

INDIA

ADAPTED FROM
C. WESSELS, 1924

Leh

Sutlej R.
Tsaparang

Shigatse

Lhasa

Tsang R.

Gyantse

Kathmandu

Agra

Jumna R.

Patna

Rajmahal

Ganges R.

Dacca

Hugli

Calcutta

Brahmaputra R.

Cooch

unknown country,² as well as in central Tibet and Nepal, through which country Cabral, alone, traveled on his return to Hooghly.

During their stay in Paro, from February to October 1627, the two Jesuits had met, and come to know quite well, the first King of Bhutan (Zhab-drung), described at length by Cacella in a letter already examined by Wessels, and partially translated by Aris. (See bibliography.) The King was the reincarnation of the famous Padma-kar-po, the greatest scholar of the 'Brugpa sect, whose authenticity as the reincarnation was contested by a candidate in Tibet supported by the Gtsang rulers, causing the Zhab-drung's (the Lama Rupa of Cabral's letter) flight to Bhutan and the King of Gtsang at this period is attested by Cabral's account.

Both men sent letters describing their journeys to their Provincial superior, Father Alberto Laertius, head of the Jesuits at Malabar, on the east coast of India. Their letters were discovered in the Jesuit archives in Rome by Wessels only in 1924. It is with Cabral's Portuguese letter, the only one of his extant, that this paper is concerned. It is the first complete English translation of the earliest Western account of Shigatse and its King. The account is annotated with further information concerning the people, places, and events which Cabral encountered after he left Paro and went to Shigatse, the then-capital of Tibet, goal of their mission.

2. The reference in Bhutan's own earliest history (1759), the *Lho'i chos-'byung* (fol.34a), to the men who visited the Zhab-drung from a country called "Pur-dhu-ka," and offered presents of guns, cannon and powder, and an eyeglass, from their king can rightly be said to be Portuguese, but hardly referring to Cabral and Cacella. This is not only because of the peaceful nature of the Jesuits' mission, but because all their goods were stolen from them enroute to Paro from Cooch Behar, as Cacella describes. See Wessels, p. 137. A more likely understanding would be that the route which the two missionaries opened up was seized upon by Portuguese traders, who already were established in Bengal. See Campos.

[Tibetan spellings for Cabral's Portuguese pronunciations and their English equivalents]

Cam (Kham) = Khams
Chaparangue (Tsaparang)
Deba Camba = Sde-pa Chen-po
Gigaci (Shigatse) = Gzhis-kha-rtse
Lama/Lamba = bla-ma
Paro = Spa-gro
Ucangue (Utsang) = Dbus-Gtsang

Account of the mission to the Kingdom of Bhutan,
written by Father Joao Cabral of the Company of Jesus

In the letters of last October we wrote Your Reverence about the success of our mission up until our arrival and stay with Droma Raja³ or Lama Rupa, which is his proper name. In this letter I will account for our move to the Kingdom of Ucangue (Utsang),⁴

3. Dharma-raja is the Sanskrit for "religious king" (Tib.: chos-rgyal), an ancient title for a king dedicated to spreading the Buddhist teaching. It refers to Zhab-drung (Ngag-dbang rNam-rgyal), who was born in mGar-grong, Tibet, in 1594. He fled to Bhutan in 1616 because of the dispute over the legitimacy of his reincarnation of Padma dkar-po (1527-92), one of the early reincarnations of the 'Brug-pa school, and its greatest scholar. It is with this Zhab-drung that Bhutan becomes a political entity. For a complete history of Bhutan, see Aris' *Bhutan*.

4. Dbus-Gtsang (Utsang) is central Tibet, i.e., Gtsang comprising the area south of the Tsangpo River, with Shigatse and Gyantse as its principal cities, and Dbus the area north of the river with Lhasa as its capital. At the time of Cabral's visit the King of Gtsang was the most powerful ruler and had as his official allies the Karma-pa sect. As there was little unity in Tibet at the time, some of the Tibetan sects were seeking the aid of Mongol armies to gain power--an intrusion of foreign help decried by the Gtsang rulers. It was Gushri Khan who had been impressed with the fifth Dalai Lama, and who gave support to the Gelugs-pas. By 1642 they had defeated the King of Gtsang and made the Great Fifth Dalai Lama the first spiritual and temporal ruler of Tibet, with Lhasa as his capital.

(ruled by a king) called Deba Camba⁵, which we have already mentioned previously. I will relate everything in brief summary as this is going by the (next) ship (patamar).

We decided to move ahead because we found that all the favors of Lama Rupa, in the zeal of his false sect, were only excuses to hinder us in our intent. We outfitted ourselves for the journey through another Lamba (bla-ma), his enemy, whom Father (Cacella) met when he had to visit a site for the homes and church he (Lama Rupa) promised to build us. The Father used the cooperation of this Lamba who, incidentally, was a subject of the King of Ucangue, and for that reason, knowing our intent, he spared nothing to help us on our way; that is to say, he supplied people for guards, food, horses, and all that was necessary for making the journey to Gigaci (Shigatse), the court of this king. The Father arrived after 20 days' journey⁶ and was well received by the King and all his people. Immediately, he (the King) sent a man with letters of appreciation to the Lama who helped the Father, and others, also, to Lama Rupa in which he asked him to enable me, (Saying) that everything to prepare me should also be done at the house of the Lamba, his enemy, at the cost of the King himself. But the Lama Rupa would not deliver himself of any reply, and stood firm in great annoyance, declaring himself our enemy. I tried to appease him with entreaties, but everything was in vain.

5. Sde-pa Chen-po, or Sde-pa Gtsang-pa is the title used by the kings of Dbüs-Gtsang at this time. It literally means "the great man of the district." "Deba Camba" would be the Portuguese attempt at pronunciation. The title refers to Karma Bstan-Skyong (1599-1642). Cf. Tucci TPS pp.58-64. Petech, Vol. II, part I.

6. Cf. Map. "No route is mentioned in either case; but taking Paro as their point of departure the obvious route would be by Phari and Gyantse, the same as that followed by Younghusband's expedition (1904) on the march to Lhasa." Wessels, p. 153.

I left (Paro) on December 18 and arrived January 20, after being detained a few times along the way before arriving in the King's territory. On January 21, next morning, knowing of my arrival, the King sent for us, showing much joy at our arrival in the "vineyard" of his kingdom. The following day we formally explained the reason that moved us to undertake this journey, and he listened with much attention and pleasure. He informed us that we should learn his language well since he wanted to converse with us often about these matters; and in our practice-sessions, this was always confirmed. His chief Lama made a statement in which he said that our Holy Law is the best of them all,⁷ and that it is good for everyone to earn the salvation of their souls. Of this statement the King was informed, and he confirmed it.

He immediately commanded that we be given very good housing in a very pleasant place, and also be provided with utensils and people, all with much generosity. For our needs he ordered that we be given a daily ration which is provided to everyone in the fortress from the King's stores, and beyond this that rations for each month be only from his supplies. This was not only sufficient for ordinary eating, but also to give many alms. Since the King did not know our customs and what would be necessary for us, he assigned a man to inform him of what we lacked. Above all, he gave us many honors, ordering us to call on him almost every day, and encouraging us in the months of work to learn the language. Our relationship with the King was quite sincere, and much spoken about between the King and his people since this King does not easily do this, even with the principal people.

7. Cabral was perhaps overenthusiastic regarding the approval of their "Holy Law" (chos-dam-pa) by the Lama, who could easily have understood Cabral's translated explanations as simply another sect of Buddhism.

In connection with this, we met two Lamas at the court who were disciples of Lama Rupa, and as it would seem, sent there by him to prevent our staying at that court. They tried to talk to the King personally, but not being permitted⁸ to do so, they did so through his officials. They also tried to turn all the Lamas in the city-- and they are countless--against us, saying that the Fathers were sent only to destroy their pagodas, and were bad people who were going to destroy and blaspheme their Law. Thanks to the goodness of our Lord on this occasion, they did not meet at the court any of the great Lamas who speak with the King, but it got to his hearing enough so that he showed us less enthusiasm at our coming ... not in our treatment, which was always the same, but in the graciousness and affability which seemed (and not our imagination) somewhat lessened. We have to thank our Lord that a greater change was not caused, allowing that the King did not know us well, and he was much afraid of the witchcraft of the Lamas.

In the days in which that change went on, we gave him our prayers--at which he was much *quadravao* (?) and always responded with a smiling countenance, agreeing with us in everything; (that) the Lord in his infinite mercy would wish to save him also, that there will be no less favor than we had at the beginning, wherefore, that alone is enough for us to be able to hope for great fruitfulness.

I left in the month of January⁹ from the (royal) city of

8. The period held much political rivalry between the Sa-skyapas, Dge-lugs-pas, 'Brug-pas (Lama Rupa's sect), and the Karma-pas (allies of Karma Bstan-Skyong), as well as the hostility between Gtsand and Bhutan. Tucci, I, p. 62.

9. Cabral stayed a relatively few days in Shigatse. He left Cacella there and started back to Hoogly, anxious to find a better route, as well as get support for the new mission. Lack of money and supplies were often the reasons for mission failures. See Note 11.

Ucangue and arrived in Golim¹⁰ in April, due to some stops on the way. The reason for my coming was principally to discover this new way through the Kingdom of Nepal to enable ourselves to continue our mission since Cocho (Cooch Behar)¹¹ was so dangerous and hazardous. I came, also, in order to negotiate a few things for this mission, which, as I understand, can be one of the most glorious of this Company of Jesus and the door to all of Tartary, China, and many other kingdoms of the gentiles.

This king (in Shigatse) is a youth of 22 years, very well educated, fair, very affectionate, and, above all, very generous and liberal to the poor. The royal city, as this one of Gigaci, (Shigatse)¹² is situated at the foot of a mountain, on top of which is the fortress where the King lives with all his officials and a guard of soldiers. The building and plan are like the ones in Portugal, and the only thing missing is the artillery. The homes inside are all gilded and painted, and the King's quarters are worth seeing, especially the many rooms of curios of all kinds; because he is a very rich king the best of everything comes to him. He uses many tapestries in all his apartments. The plainest ones are damask from China. The others can compare with any of the good ones of Portugal. The people who serve him dress very cleanly and can be seen everywhere. The common

10. "Golim" is Cabral's spelling of "Hooghly." "The Portuguese obviously originated the name. Bocarro (1612-17 has 'D'Ogolim', 'Golim', 'Dogolim', and Faria y Souza speaking about the Siege of Hooghly has 'Golim'. Towards the end of the seventeenth century and after, 'Hughly' 'Hooghly' began to be adopted." Cf. Campos, pp. 64-65.

11. Cacella's letter describes their journey to Paro from Cooch Benar during which they were deceived and robbed. Wessels: pp. 123ff. In 1632 Cabral was to witness the siege and fall of Hooghly which was brought about by Shah Jahan's army. Campos: p. 129.

12. Shigatse, the capital of the Gtsang rulers, was the principal city of central Tibet, superior to Lhasa, prior to the Vth Dalai Lama and the Gtsang King's downfall in 1642.

people are a bit more or less (like) what we have written about the people in the first kingdom, which we now know is called the Kingdom of Mon.¹³

The Kingdom, which is named Ucangue, is very large, and from whatever direction one enters, it is said, it takes at least one and a half months to cross, and is so densely populated that in the 20 days that I traveled from the court to the border of the Kingdom of Nepal (which is the new way I went), I always went past and through villages. The climate is cold, and in January and February I crossed many frozen rivers on horseback. However, the snow is not excessive. They have great fields of wheat, and I never saw land that looked more like the Alemtejo¹⁴ in Portugal. To the north it borders with the Tartars, with whom this king is sometimes at war¹⁵ and there are many who say that their Law (religion) is the same as here. Towards the east is Cochinchina, from where a lot of merchandise comes, as well as from China, which lies to the northeast. The two latter countries border on the Kingdom of Cam (Kham),¹⁶ from where the musk comes. Xembala,¹⁷ as far as I am concerned, is not Catayo

13. "Mon" had been called "Cambirasi" by Cacella in his earlier letter. Wessels: p. 143.

Mon is an area south of Yarlung, southeast of Lho-brag, traversed by Cabral and Cacella to get to Shigatse. Cf. Map, and Wylie; p. 119, Note 51.

14. Alemtejo is the fertile area of Portugal, southwest of Lisbon, and above the Algarve.

15. Five years before the arrival of Cabral and Cacella, the King of Gtsang, in his minority, and a 10,000-man army were pursued and beseiged in Lhasa by a Mongol army in collaboration with the Dge-lugs-pas. Tucci, Vol. I, p. 58.

16. Kham is in eastern Tibet, bordering on Szechwan. Cf. Map.

17. Xembala is Shambala, in Buddhist tradition a mythical country somewhere to the north, where the famous Kalacakra Tantra came from. (See Candra, Intro., p. 7.) Cabral would have heard of Xembala not only from Tibetans but also, previously, from Jerome Xavier. (See note 24.) Cabral was correct in identifying it with Mongolia. His observations were apparently accepted by the missionary cartographers of the following century. A map found in the Vatican archives, dated 1728, depicts and names regions of Asia just as Cabral describes them here. See Petech, Vol. I, P. LXXXII

(China)¹⁸ but the kingdom that our maps call Grand Tartarea, lying more to the north.

In this Kingdom of Ucangue are all the heads of the castes (sects) of Lambas, and for this reason they call it the school of their Law. Their monasteries (here they are called Combas)¹⁹ and are not like ours, but each Chief Lama has his city where he resides with only his Lambas. The Comba of the Chaparangue Lama²⁰ is on a slope of this fortress at a distance of about two cannon shots and because of it each day we receive news of the priests²¹ who are living about a month's journey from here. The King does not pay any attention to these Lamas claiming that they belong to a bad caste.²² The Chief Lamas are treated almost like kings and among them, Lama Rupa, about whom we have written so much, is about the fifth²³ in importance, by which Your Reverence can judge what the others will be, but they are held to be so great that none of them attends upon the King. The law and the sect in these kingdoms, I now conclude is

18. Macro Polo's "Cathay" was proven to be the same as Ricci's "China" by another Jesuit, Bento de Goes, in 1606. Wessels:p.36.

19. Tibetan: dgon-pa, "a solitary place."

20. The monastery described is Tashilhunpo, a Dge-lugs-pa monastery founded in 1447, where monks from Tsaparang in Western Tibet, bordering what was then India, would have resided while studying. The custom of all large Tibetan monasteries was to have "colleges" in which monks from a certain district lived together. Tucci, Vol. I, p.63.

21. Cabral is referring to Father Andrade and five other Jesuits from Agra who were in Tsaparang. See Wessels' account of the Tsaparang mission, p. 69ff.

22. The reference is to the Lamas of Tashilhunpo, who were Dge-lugs-pas. See Note 14.

23. 'fifth in importance' probably refers to the heads of the major monastic orders, e.g., Karmapa, Gelugspa, Bka'-brgyudpa, Saskyapa, and 'Brugpa. The "importance" would have been both political and spiritual.

gentile,²⁴ because they say they are, and I have found that they have the same pagodas as the Kingdom of Nepal and some of Bengal. Only in the superstition of castes and eating habits, which they do not hold, are they different.

About Catayo (China), the more we know about that land, the less we know about it; a Lamba of the King told us only that there is a land called "Cata," whose Law he did not know for certain, but which he had heard was an ancient Law, different from the ones in these kingdoms. And the way to that kingdom, he said, was by Coscar (Kashgar), a well-known city, and that agrees with the information from Father Hieronimo (Jerome) Xavier,²⁵ in which he speaks of this same city.

This is what I can say right now to Your Reverence about this mission, from which it can be well-seen what great effects can ensue with our Lord giving us a foot in this Kingdom of Ucangue, wherefore, not only in this as I have described, but also a door to all the greater kingdoms that follow it. It remains for us to request Your Reverence to recommend us greatly to our Lord that the prayers of His servants may overcome our defects and that He bestow His blessing on what is planted and emerging.

The road to these kingdoms is not through Cocho, but through Nepal, which borders on the lands of Mogor.²⁶ In Patana and Rajamol the road is safe frequented by many merchants.

24. "gentile" was a term used at this period to designate anyone who is not a Muslim or Christian, or, in other words, one who does not hold a monotheistic religion.

25. The Jesuit, Jerome Xavier, was invited to the court of the Mogul Akbar, in Lahore, which he reached in 1595, and where he met, in 1598, a Muslim merchant, who had come from Cathay and mentioned Xambala and Kashgar. Wessels: pp. 10-11.

26. "Mogor" was the common Portuguese name for Hindustan during the Mughal rule.

The King gave me a captain to conduct me to Nepal with letters and presents for the King of Nepal,²⁷ asking him to help me in everything which he asked, since I was a person whom he respected greatly.

The King of Nepal complied with the request, and helped me as far as Patana, where I found the Portuguese with whom I traveled to Golim, from where I am writing this to Your Reverence.

About the Kingdom of Nepal I shall write to you at greater length later on as I hope to receive some news from Father Cacella about further happenings, which I shall transmit to Your Reverence.

I commend myself and us to Your Reverence's Holy Sacrifices.

June 17, 1628.

27. Which of the kings of Nepal Cabral refers to cannot be specified as the Nepal valley was divided into three kingdoms at the time.

Laksminarasimhamalla, Kathmandu (1620-41).

Jagajjyotirmalla, Bhatgaon (1613-37).

Siddhinarasimhamalla, Patan (1620-61).

See Regmi, pp. 55, 215, 268.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aris, Michael

Bhutan. (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1979).

Campos, J.A.

The Portuguese in Bengal. (Calcutta: Butterworth, 1919).

Chandra, Lokesh

Kalacakra Tantra and Other Texts. Vol. I. (New Delhi: Int. Acad. Indian Culture, 1966).

Correia-Afonso, John

Jesuit Letters and Indian History. (Bombay: Indian Historical Research Inst., 1955).

Guerreiro, Fernao

Jahangir and the Jesuits. (London: Routledge, 1930).

Levi, Sylvain

Le Nepal. 3 vols. (Paris: Leroux, 1905-8).

Maclagan, Edward

The Jesuits and the Great Mogul. (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1932).

Petech, Luciano

I Missionari Italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal. 7 vols. (Roma: Libreria dello Stato, 1952).

Regmi, D.R.

Medieval Nepal. Part II (Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay, 1966).

Tucci, Giuseppe

Tibetan Painted Scrolls. 3 vols. (Roma: Libreria dello Stato, 1949).

Wessels, Cornelius

Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1924).

Wylie, T.V.

Geography of Tibet according to the 'Dzam'gling Rgyas-bshad.
(Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente,
1962).

In Tibetan:

Bstan-'dzin Chos-rgyal

Lho'i chos-'byung bstan-pa rinpoche'i 'phro-mthud 'jam-mgon smon'tha'i
'phreng-ba. (Bhutan: 1759).