

Problems of Tibetan Integration in Switzerland

1. PHASES OF INTEGRATION

THE TERM INTEGRATION is often employed in a euphemistic manner. Everybody — generally even the people concerned — ignores the fact that it is a long, complex and painful process.

The host population generally prefers to skip over the potential problems and repress them.

The minorities — often exotic immigrants — cannot possibly foresee the difficulties they will face before they are integrated in the host country. They have no notion that all their norms will be challenged and their fundamental values become unstable or even shattered and abolished. Nor do they know how pretentious and irrefragable the norms of the majority are; nor, finally, how harsh the conditions imposed by the receiving ethnic group will be. The immigrants have the choice of living in ghettos or abandoning most aspects of their culture and losing their ethnic identity.

I have investigated such mechanisms and the process of integration among Tibetan refugees who had been settled under unsatisfactory conditions in India or Nepal for 1—14 years and who were then flown to Switzerland between 1960 and 1974. At the end of 1974 there were 1123 Tibetans settled in various parts of Switzerland, mostly in the German speaking sector.

The policy of the Swiss Red Cross who cares for most of them until they can make a living on their own was and continues to be to encourage all of them to adopt German as their new language, so that in the second generation they will have no difficulties in communicating with one another.

But Tibetans are very mobile. Many led a semi-nomadic life in their home-country. So they feel an urge to wander from one part of Switzerland to another. In addition 5 boys have been brought up in the French speaking part and 28 Tibetans were placed directly in the Romansch speaking part of the country.

Not surprisingly this leads to difficulties in communication between Tibetan children from various parts of the country who have partially or entirely lost their original language. In particular those children who have been reared by Swiss families have not retained their ability to speak, understand or read the Tibetan language. The children who live in Tibetan families, but were born in Switzerland, learn to speak Tibetan first. However, after a few years, they adopt the Swiss dialect from their playmates and in most cases German when they go to school¹. At this point they begin to feel ashamed of their mother tongue, speaking it in rudimentary fashion and with the older generation only. When they meet other Tibetan children they prefer to communicate in a Swiss language, usually a Swiss German dialect.

1. The difference between the spoken dialects and the written language as taught in Swiss schools is really great and adds to the complications for foreigners.

These examples of language problems faced by Tibetan children in Switzerland already show the complexity of the process of integration. Therefore any generalizations about integration, a process of varying speed and intensity, are bound to be complex as well. Integration appears in many shades. It has a different meaning for every group and individual. (It is a tune with many variations, sometimes played in a major but more often in a minor key.) The process of integration evolves in three phases which show qualitative differences.

Adaptation

The pressure to adapt begins as soon as the Tibetans arrive. In India no one thought the less of them for sitting on the ground. But as soon as they leave the aircraft, they must learn to sit on chairs at the airport which is all too clean and orderly for their liking. In their new homes they are expected to use a table and chairs for their first meal. It takes a social worker of great understanding to encourage them to do as they like, i. e. sit on the floor and eat with chopsticks or their fingers.

Maybe it is just as well to enforce European habits and clothes from the beginning because Swiss people are not exactly tolerant of strange ways. Also within at least six weeks the immigrants, now in factories, have to be able to accept instructions which cannot always be translated into Tibetan by an interpreter. Men and women, hitherto used to manual work only, have to learn not to feel scared by the motions of the huge machines nor by the noise they make.

Adaptation is superficial. It contributes to survival in completely strange and puzzling surroundings. But at the same time it creates a need to cling to the group and to one's roots in the traditional culture. Because of this need the older Tibetans get hold of their string of prayer-beads and murmur their om ma-ni padme hum for hours on end. With these and other religious practices they try to prevent the uprooting (Zwingmann and Pfister-Ammende 1973) of their personality and the loss of cultural substance.

So adaptation and the pressure to adapt cause a regression² into previous modes of behavior. This obstructs the beginning process of integration, but is necessary for the psychological wellbeing of the Tibetans.

Acculturation

Soon after their first superficial adaptation the younger and, much later, the older Tibetans begin to internalize more and more elements of Swiss culture. Anything that will restore their lost self-esteem or enhance their mobility is gladly accepted. The refugees strive after any status-symbols that seem to them to symbolize Swiss superiority. They welcome anything, even worn European clothing, that could make up for the fact of having been degraded or discriminated against.

2. Like all other terms used this one is meant to be free of valuation.

However, the selection and acceptance of European cultural elements do not disturb the Tibetans' ethnic identity. They still feel that they belong to their original ethnic group and are different from the Swiss. A sound ethnic and personal identity is a highly desirable factor in, or even the basis for the well-being of displaced persons like the Tibetans. It protects them from being uprooted. If a Tibetan can be sure of what he is, and is stable and in harmony with his culture and his social group, he is not as vulnerable as an individual who has lost his identity.

As the Tibetans are strongly attached to their religion, it is of considerable importance for them to be allowed to celebrate their cults in a monastic centre and (although butter-lamps and silk baldachins seem utterly dangerous to visitors) they construct their altars in every home. To keep religious and cultural elements from deteriorating is of importance not only because it helps to preserve this culture from disappearing, but because it prevents a disintegration of the Tibetan personality as well.

In conclusion acculturation is a phase that requires time and should not be hastened too much by employers, neighbours, teachers or even social workers regardless of how desirable this might seem to them. The surrounding group should learn to understand that pressure in the direction of assimilation only causes anomie.

Assimilation

In contrast to the process of acculturation, assimilation causes a severe loss of ethnic identity. Those Tibetan individuals who have a high level of aspiration, i. e. young people — male more often than female — and members of a high social stratum — male or female, laymen or clergy — strive towards assimilation at great speed. They dress according to the latest European fashions. Women wear make-up and a few have even cut their hair, a very unusual thing to do for a Tibetan woman, especially if she is married. They still have their altars, but some of them are lit up by neonlight. On work-days the women use tinned foods and cook in an uncharacteristic European way. They almost appear to have forgotten that they are Tibetans. When reminded of the extent to which they have accepted European values, assimilated Tibetans tend to react with strong protestations. They feel that assimilation is tantamount to deserting one's "Heimat"³, a crime which provokes considerable feelings of guilt. The Tibetans' attitudes alternate between a desire to be like the Swiss and severe nostalgia (Zwingmann and Pfister-Ammende 1973: 19—47). Their attempt to be like the Swiss often has its counterpart in overcompensatory behaviour in wanting to be proper Tibetans as soon as their feelings of guilt are stirred up.

A girl who had been in love with another Tibetan told me: "I want to remain a good Tibetan daughter, so I shall marry the man my parents chose for me".

3. "Heimat" cannot be translated adequately. Therefore the German term is used in scientific English texts, e. g. Zwingmann C. A., Pfister-Ammende M., Uprooting and After, 14, 17.

Except on sacred days she had seemed perfectly assimilated. But below this surface she had remained so Tibetan that she decided to make a success of this forced marriage, which she did.

On the other hand a young girl wanted to help revive Tibetan customs. This is often the case in children whose parents are already assimilated to a certain extent. Such peripetias of the young generation are frequent. This girl learned to dance the Tibetan way. She shows great talent and produces dances with Tibetan names and music. Her movements however are often inspired by Balinese dances and classical ballett which she sees on television. The Tibetan audience is enthusiastic. Many prefer these modernized dances to the original ones not realizing that they have undergone cultur-change.

Tibetans fluctuate in many different ways between being true Tibetans to being assimilated individuals. They temporarily accept the Swiss scale of norms and sooner or later, often abruptly, turn back to the Tibetan norms. They wear their fine red string — which is laden with mana because the Dalai Lama gave it to them with his blessings — as a necklace hidden under a modern shirt or blouse. The same adolescents may confess that they hope to become Swiss citizens and want to join the Swiss army, a decision which might cause grave conflicts of conscience for Tibetan Buddhists.

The wish to be Swiss certainly is an indicator of advanced assimilation, but the Tibetans wrongly assume that Swiss citizenship will mean an automatic equalization with the Swiss. They hardly ever ponder the consequences of political rights in a direct democracy of the Swiss type. They do not always see that jobs, housing and advanced schooling for children can only be obtained on the basis of accomplishment and not of just being fellow-citizens.

Tibetans who have given up their attempts to remain Tibetans find it easier to strive for assimilation. They internalize the Swiss scale of value, e. g. the fervour for accomplishment which has been proved to bring success. They are conscious of the fact, that their appearance causes curiosity and sometimes aversion and they try to do their best to look like the local population covering their typical eyes with sun-glasses. It seems to me that this is an act of self-protection as well as of hiding from possible unpleasantness.

These highly assimilated Tibetans of course are the ones who tend to have Swiss friends and to intermarry with them. The girls definitely feel a greater restraint in choosing a Swiss partner than the men. But even they are reluctant to intermarry because they sense that by doing so they will become isolated from their own ethnic group as well as from the Swiss who will hold a grudge against them for intruding. In so far as assimilation is a process of loosening the ties to a Tibetan's original identity it sets his personality afloat. Therefore the Tibetans go through a phase of great uncertainty during this period. Eventually it seems to them that the only way to survive without apathy or depression is to give up their original identity and to accept a new one in spite of all its disadvantages. These are the Tibetans who can be integrated by the indigenous population.

Integration

Integration may be seen as the sum of all the above processes, but it can also be taken as their product. When a Tibetan has been able to identify himself with the Swiss, and has adopted and internalized the Swiss scale of values, he can be integrated not only partially, e. g. at his work-shop, but completely and in every sphere of life.

One of the ultimate measures of the Tibetans' degree of integration into Swiss society is the manner in which they behave at home. The person who acts exactly like a Swiss outside his home, changes subtly and gradually when he returns to his family. The movements of his limbs become smoother and more elastic, his gestures less abrupt, the sound of the language more musical and his eyes no longer look straight at you. An integrated successful student of linguistics can bear giving up smoking as soon as she comes back home for vacations because it is just unimaginable for her parents that their daughter should smoke. So every single Tibetan who is integrated in the Swiss majority keeps a small Tibetan reserve in order not to be overwhelmed by feelings of guilt.

There are the 156 young grown-ups, adolescents and children who have been reared by Swiss families. They came to Switzerland in 1961—64 and have been completely integrated in the meantime. Some have become Christians, some refuse to have any contact at all with their relatives and other Tibetans. In a few cases this was the foster-parents' will. As mentioned before, these Tibetan adolescents do not understand the Tibetan language any more. It is likely that many of them will marry Swiss partners. Some of the older ones have already done so.

Foster-parents often receive a bad shock when their children grow up. Sooner or later their charges discover that they have lost their real identity and have neglected their relatives and fellow-Tibetans. They feel a deep urge to make up for this. They usually want to go and find their relatives in India or Nepal. Thus foster-parents who had hidden the fact that a real parent had come to Switzerland are despised by their foster-children for having denied the contact.

Some Tibetan foster-children have been happily integrated in Swiss society without being faced with such conflicts. But they are precisely those who keep up their contact with their group, culture and religion. Even if they can no longer speak their mother tongue they still have the wish to learn it again and often do so during weekends and holidays spent at the Tibetan Monastic Institute.

It is difficult to foresee what effects integration will have on children who live in Tibetan families, but have gone to Swiss schools and have been integrated there. Surely they will be further integrated through their professions, and some will intermarry with Swiss partners. But many among them will find themselves Tibetan partners and will try to maintain a Tibetan refuge in their homes. They will not thereby be able to prevent the next generation from becoming entirely Swiss.

2. ANOMIE

DURING MY INVESTIGATION it became evident not only that the minority involved is bound to produce symptoms of anomie (Merton 1968: 185—248; Williams 1951: 532—538), of which a few examples have already been given, but also that the Swiss majority develops such symptoms as well.

Anomie of the Swiss Population

Swiss people who employ, work with or live next to Tibetans are very sentimental about them when they first arrive. But this attitude usually changes after a few weeks of everyday contact.

Until the beginning of the recession in 1975 there was no plausible reason for Swiss workers to fear that the Tibetans would push them out of their jobs, and yet they often seemed to be envious, partly because the Tibetans got help from the Swiss Red Cross, when they needed it, or because they celebrated their festive seasons with much gaiety, in spite of being refugees who ought to be sad and humble in the opinion of the average Swiss.

A Swiss foreman told me he would not object to Tibetan labourers if they did not have so many more festive occasions than the Swiss. The fact is that Tibetans take a week's holiday for their New Year in February and one for the Dalai Lama's birthday in July. At least one of these weeks is part of their regular vacation. Of course it is inconvenient that these times are not the same as those claimed by Swiss workmen. But Tibetans certainly have fewer holidays than Roman Catholics and about the same amount as Protestants. So it is not fair that anyone should be annoyed about their "many feast days".

Often rejection takes more serious forms. The wife of an industrialist, who would have had to close his factory for lack of labourers had he not been able to employ Tibetans, said contemptuously that she thought there were too many of "these faces" to be seen on the road. She did not like the looks of them and contended that Tibetans were slow to learn. Considering the fact that any unskilled labourer needs time to learn how to operate machines, such statements seem to prove that they originate from anomic tensions in Swiss persons. A few ritualists or retreatists who cannot adapt as quickly as most Tibetans do, should not be abused for generalizations on all immigrants.

A small exotic and exposed minority is very vulnerable when the surrounding majority is unfriendly. Unfair judgment of their working capacity, unfair taxing of their children's intelligence, without considering their language and cultural background difficulties, contemptuous undervaluation because of different cultural behaviour are the cause of real traumatic experiences. The immigrants have no understanding of pedantic criticism that trespasses into their sphere of intimacy, such as criticism of their gardening which to them seems to be adequate as long as the vegetables they produce by it are satisfactory. Of course not every individual of the Swiss majority shows anomic tension and speaks with contempt. Some are very friendly to the Tibetans. But the others create an atmosphere of

hostility towards all non-Swiss minorities which poisons interaction with the immigrants.

Modes of Individual Adaptation and Anomie of the Immigrants

The conformist (Merton 1968: 195) among the Tibetans accepts the cultural goals in his own subculture or that of his surrounding as well as institutionalized means to reach them. But some individuals may suddenly give up being conformists and choose a different mode of adaptation (Merton 1968: 193—211).

Young Tibetans who have been educated in Swiss schools but live in Tibetan families find themselves in a great dilemma. They are forced to be conform to their own culture especially during important religious seasons in order not to feel uprooted.

In everyday life they must conform to the norms of their Swiss friends who are of vital importance to them. This leads to partial integration at school, in the playground, at the swimmingpool (the greatest attraction for Tibetan children) and in the street.

They must continuously live in two worlds at once. When they grow up, in puberty or adolescence, some tend to desert the Tibetan group and accept the Swiss socio-cultural conditions. Others turn back to their original culture, neglect the contact with Swiss friends and dream of returning to India or Tibet. This is not unrealistic for a Tibetan who believes in reincarnation. "If we cannot go back in this life we certainly can in the next one."

Adult Tibetans also try to be conformists. But if they accept Swiss values they become isolated from Tibetan society and if they turn to their original culture they are alien to the Swiss population. In addition they are lonely because their colleagues are members of other minorities, immigrants themselves with similar problems, speaking yet other languages. There is no solidarity at all between these Italians, Spaniards, Greeks, Turks etc. and the Tibetans. The Swiss colleagues in their ranks, if any, do not want the foreigners to stand up for their rights. The Tibetans get no help from them. Only one Tibetan joined a trade-union. So there is no solidarity between Swiss and Tibetan labourers either. Even conformists have difficulties in building meaningful contacts with Swiss persons. At work the foreman is usually the only Swiss they have direct contact with. He feels superior and therefore has a discriminating attitude.

When the Tibetans go shopping after work, they give preference to self-service shops where they need not speak the language. So they miss another good opportunity for contact. In small Swiss towns the shops play an important role in establishing contact between members of the population.

In the apartment buildings there is hardly any contact between Tibetans and Swiss neighbours. Only highly assimilated Tibetans dare to ring the door-bell of Swiss families and ask for a favour.

When a young Tibetan woman was due to have her baby and suffered from a heavy loss of blood, her husband did not dare to go to a neighbour for help. He did not ask to use somebody's telephone. Instead he ran to the next public telephone and when he heard the tape of the doctor's alibi-phone he simply gave up. So the sib gathered round the woman's bed and prayed. Thanks to a conscientious social worker who looked in to see if all was well, the young mother was taken to a hospital in time to save her and the baby's life.

Innovating (Merton 1968: 195—203) is rare among Tibetans in Switzerland. Only some "shrewd, smart and successful" individuals from the top social stratum in Tibet are innovators. They have a high level of aspiration and a strong drive to overcome the humiliation that they had undergone by being used as unskilled workers at the beginning of their stay in Switzerland.

According to R. K. Merton ritualists (1968: 203—207) are found frequently in societies "which make one's social status largely dependant upon one's achievements" (1968: 204). The Swiss are an example of such a society. Therefore it is not astonishing to see that many adult Tibetans in Switzerland are ritualists; apparently content with their fate, always ready to give the answer they think is expected, all smiles at any time, very humble and very polite. They do not dare to criticize any Swiss person, foreman or boss, social worker, doctor or nurse. If they do it at all they do it in a back-handed way. The Swiss in turn judge their behaviour as hypocritical.

One cultural goal even acculturated Tibetans continue to strive for is a better reincarnation after death. This fulfills the elder generation and prevents it from sinking into final apathy.

It is difficult to tell the difference between ritualism and retreatism, however. Most Tibetans have a strong nostalgia for the past and apathy can be seen in all older individuals. When anomic tension is solved by rejecting cultural goals and institutional means they become retreatists, thereby always remaining aliens.

The fifth mode of individual adaptation — rebellion (Merton 1968: 209—211) — is hardly known among this group of immigrants. Only one individual showed symptoms of rebellion. But the question remains whether this person might not have become mentally deranged and exhibited similar symptoms even if he had not been uprooted.

In conclusion, it is evident that anomic tension of a minority would be considerably decreased if the majority did not show anomie and were capable of real tolerance.

Interaction and Partnership

Successful integration seems possible only on the basis of interaction between minority and majority. H. Blumer (1973), referring to G. H. Mead, described the principles of symbolic interactionism.

These principles cannot be applied in anthropological methodology alone. They absolutely must at the same time become the basis for co-existence of the Swiss majority and the Tibetan minority — denied a return to Asia out of political reasons — which must sooner or later (if only after two or three generations) integrate in Switzerland.

Whenever a Swiss person is really interested in the way the Tibetans live and does not withdraw into himself when the Tibetans readily offer him their salted butter-tea and their to his taste strange, highly spiced dishes, but shares food and drink with them as if he were one of them, the miracle of interaction happens. The Tibetans are so grateful for the step the Swiss person makes towards them that they will not let him go without loading him with packets of puffed rice for luck, of Tibetan khab-se, a biscuit of tree-like shape, etc. They may even decorate him with a lucky scarf and they will certainly expect him to come again and again.

Further interaction implies that the Swiss person gives up his insistence on being entirely Swiss in his behaviour. He can profitably learn from the Tibetans, for whom symbols have a greater value.

I have seen Swiss people make an intense and successful contact by learning to use certain gestures from the beginning. This was more important than language. Instead of giving the Tibetans typically Swiss gifts, they tried to think of things that were equally Tibetan and Swiss, essential to both.

These first steps towards interaction seem very simple. But due to the ethnocentric attitude of most Swiss, they are taken with astonishing rarity. Nevertheless a few do make a big effort to convince the Tibetans that they do not want to be just charitable and always the ones who do the giving, but that they want to accept Tibetan culture as equal — or often as superior because they are interested in Asiatic mysticism and religions — and that their aim is an exchange of values. The Tibetan Monastic Institute in Rikon is a centre for genuine partnership and the meeting of two cultures. The monks hold lectures for Swiss and foreign scholars and students.

But the average lonely Tibetan hardly knows of these meetings and thus forfeits valuable contacts. He never feels that he has riches to give us just by telling us about his life. Nor does he understand that he could and should be paid for giving information. Instead he refuses to accept money and feels crushed if payment in kind is made. All that he silently wishes is to be accepted as a human being. Although the concept of partnership is foreign to him, he may express the establishment of a meaningful relationship in other ways. Thus a Tibetan woman asked me to be her sister.

Without interaction and consequent practice of partnership on the part of the majority, the minority is unable to contribute towards a happy symbiosis. If complete integration of an exotic minority is at all desirable it can best be reached by these means.

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