

# A Tibetan Night

By Annelies Wilder-Smith M.D., DTM&H

The night began to fall around us. The heavens above the grasslands shifted from deep blue, to orange, then indigo. The last light tinted air and earth with a dozen shades of violet barely reflecting the yaks and cattle on the open meadows. "For three days and nights the sky was clouded," Tsering said aloud, looking into the fire we had lit up to keep us warm. "And now the air is so clear as I have never experienced before." This was true. The clouds may have looked soft and innocent when we ascended to the plateau of newly discovered grasslands, but they were thick with snow crystals that stung our cheeks. Today the clouds receded giving way to a spectacle of endless beauty of rolling hills and grasslands. It was so clear that we were able to see miles to the horizon, so far until the earth curved out of view beyond the last snowcapped hill.

We are nomads. We move around to find yet better grasslands for our increasing herds. This was the first time we had entered this plateau. The sense of untroddenness here and the mix of expansiveness were greater than what we'd known before.

We were tired. After the darkness set over the open meadows, most of the men retired to their tents to rest. Tsering, Dorje, Geshe, myself and a few others couldn't sleep. The night was too special. The tranquillity and staggering beauty of this place were enough to refresh us. We stayed around the fire, sipped our buttered yak tea, and watched the clear star-filled sky. Normally Dorje would have taken his flute and played our favourite Tibetan tunes. But tonight we were all devoted to silence, listening to the whispers of the fire and the herds eating greens. "Elemental forces have shaped this extraordinary place," I pondered. We are all Tibetan Buddhists. "These are forces much bigger than we will ever be," I leaned over to Tsering to share my thoughts.

The ancestral darkness was setting over the horizon like the greatest meeting of land and heaven.

It was at this moment that we saw a bright light emerging behind a hill in the east. And then we heard singing. Or did we hear the singing first and then discovered the light? It flitted across the grassland, then flickered for a while until the light became

strong again. The singing sounded sweet and melodious. It was different to the tunes we use in our Tibetan culture. We could not understand the words. They sounded like a different language. And then there was this echo, around and around. It was incandescent. So we were not alone after all.

There was no discussion amongst us. We had to find the source. About ten of us went for the search in the east. We walked and walked. It was further away than we anticipated. But the night was so clear and to us it seemed as if the stars lit up the way for us.

The singing became louder and clearer but never lost its sweetness. We were all filled with a mixture of fear, awe and sheer curiosity. When we got nearer we were able to differentiate some of the words. Some songs were sung in Chinese, some in a language unknown to us. "It must be one of these other minorities from this area," Tsering whispered. "Maybe the Lisu or Yi minority," Geshe added. We often intermingle with other minorities for trading purposes. Our trading language is Chinese. The Chinese government requests that all minorities study the Chinese language. So, although our Chinese is broken, we get by with it.

Finally we reached the top of the hill. Below us the scene unfolded: there was a large, flickering fire. Behind the fire was an old shack which looked to us more like a place for animals rather than a building for people to live in. The music came from the shack. It was the most beautiful music I had ever heard. A sense of peace overwhelmed me and pushed aside any trace of fear or doubt.

When we knocked on the door, a young woman opened. She was Lisu. For a short moment the singing stopped, and the people in the shack looked at us more in surprise than in fear. There were about thirty people, all Lisu, most of them were standing and had stopped singing. Most of them were also in their festive traditional Lisu clothes. After a very short moment of quietness, the singing continued. They changed to a Chinese song. Whilst the woman took us to an elderly man who sat at the back of the shack, I tried to understand the meaning of the Chinese song. It sounded like "Glory to God in the highest" and then

something like "Peace to all people". Somehow I was not surprised about these words. I had felt so peaceful ever since I had heard their singing this evening.

We explained in Chinese to the old man that we had just arrived on the plateau of grasslands and that we had heard their singing. We apologised for intruding into their gathering. The old man just smiled. "Peace to you," he said. He then continued to explain something but we could not quite understand him. His Chinese seemed to be even more broken than ours. The young woman translated, "We are Lisu. We live in a village about two hours walk from here. Today we are celebrating Christmas. Not all of the Lisu are Christians. So those who believe in God came to this house to worship the Lord."

"What is Christmas?" Geshe asked. The Lisu woman explained, "Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was born into this world to save us."

The woman turned around to join the others in singing. We just stood there and took in the beauty and serenity of the music. There was a radiance beyond comprehension in this place. After some time which seemed to us close to eternity, we left the shack to return to our herds. We left behind gifts: a yak fur, a piece of butter and our best Tibetan knife.

The air was brisk and cold – we hardly noticed it. The music became softer and softer. But the words of peace echoed. Or did it just echo within our souls?

"Did you feel the peace?" Tsering interrupted the silence. No one replied. We silently walked back to our tents and warmed ourselves with yak fur.

I could not fall asleep for a long time. "Hearing this has opened my eyes and ears to something I thought I knew but I do not know..."

Never will I forget that night.

We left the plateau to wander to other grasslands. We never met this small Lisu group again.

I often wonder about the meaning of Christmas. I am still a Tibetan Buddhist. I do not understand what this Lisu woman meant with "Jesus Christ was born into this world to save us". But I have a strong longing in my heart to find out. I am waiting for someone to come to us Tibetans and explain it. ■



## About the author:

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