GEORG MORGEnSTIErNE AND TIBETAN STUDIES

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Due to Georg Morgenstierne's great fame as an Iranian scholar, it is probably less well-known that during the early years of his academic career he devoted considerable time and effort to the study of Tibetan texts. It is likely that this interest in Tibet can be traced back to his early youth, when, in his own words, "I was a passionate reader of books of travel . . . in particular Hedin, on whom I became quite an expert." After studying Latin and Greek for some years at the University of Oslo (he commenced work on a thesis, never completed, on "The Role of the Matron in Roman Drama"), he decided, in 1914, to concentrate on Indology which he studied in Bonn with H. Jacobi, and, from the autumn of 1915, with H. Lüders in Berlin. While in Berlin he also started studying Tibetan with Herman Beck, under whose guidance he read the Tibetan versions of the Lalitavistara and the Udānavarga. For the study of Sanskrit poetry in Tibetan translation, Beck was undoubtedly the leading expert in Europe at the time. "I also made an attempt at studying Beck's edition of the Tibetan translation of the Meghadūta. But it was tough going."

In 1917 Morgenstierne returned to Oslo (or Kristiania, as it was still called) as a Research Fellow at the University. He gave courses in Sanskrit, completed his doctoral thesis which he sent to Lüders, and continued his Tibetan studies on his own.

He returned to Berlin in October 1918 in order to pass his doctoral examination. The University was closed, but his teacher Beck, who in the meantime had become a high official in the Ministry of Education, was able to obtain for him special permission to appear before the board of examiners in private. Beck himself examined him in Tibetan. "I was the first candidate he had ever had, so he was just as anxious as I. But he was most amiable, and all went well."

Morgenstierne's doctoral thesis was a study of classical Sanskrit drama. Accordingly it was in this direction that he pursued his Tibetan studies. "I was still interested in Tibetan, and in the autumn of 1920 I copied in London Candragomin's drama Lokānanda, which only exists in Tibetan translation." It is clear that Morgenstierne prepared an edition and translation of this play, the interest and importance of which he was fully aware. The words of Professor Michael Hahn, who has, more than fifty years later, published the first critical edition and translation of the Lokānanda, testify to the discernment of Georg Morgenstierne:

"Candragomin's Lokānanda enriches our knowledge of the Indian
theatre in two ways: in the first place, it increases with a further piece the
limited number of complete dramatic works consisting of several scenes
from the early classic period; secondly, being the oldest Buddhist play
preserved in its entirety it represents a link between the works dating from
the 2nd century A.D., of which only fragments are preserved, and the
Nagānanda of Harṣadeva from the 7th century. 5

Among his papers, Morgenstierne left a complete transcription of the
Tibetan text of the Lokānanda (68 foolscap pp.) on the basis of the copies
of the Tanjur preserved in the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Na-
tionale respectively. 6 He also wrote a synopsis of the entire play, partly in
English but mainly in Norwegian (10 pp.), a translation of the prose parts
of the play with notes, likewise mainly in Norwegian (99 pp.), and an ex-
tensive card-index of all Tibetan words, with Sanskrit equivalents.

In order to provide a firm basis for this edition and translation, he made
a complete transcription of the Nagānanda (115 pp.), of which the Sanskrit
text has been preserved, and this resulted in the article “The Tibetan
Version of the Nagānanda” (Acta Orientalia II [1924], pp. 39-54). This was the
only philological article he published, but it was of the same high
philological standard which characterised all his later work.

He also turned his attention to the Jātaka-literature as preserved in
Tibetan. In particular, he transcribed the first, second and part of the
fourth jātaka of the Haribhaṭṭajātakamālā, and made an index of titles of
all 35 jātakas of that collection (in all, 45 pp.). Presumably he was en-
couraged to proceed with this work by F.W. Thomas, with whom he was
in contact and who had published an article on the Haribhaṭṭajātakamālā
as early as 1904. 7 Once again, one can only admire Morgenstierne’s sure
sense in finding worth-while and important tasks, and once again it has
been left to Professor Michael Hahn to open up the Haribhaṭṭajātakamālā,
of which he has recently published the Tibetan text and translation of two
stories. 8

A Tibetologist may be permitted to regret that Morgenstierne’s interest
gradually turned towards other fields. However, by 1920 he was already
moving towards Iranian studies. Nevertheless, he did not abandon his in-
terest in Tibet. While in Berlin, he had read Lauffer’s edition of some of the
songs of Milarepa. “I was deeply impressed by his description of the moun-
tain scenery of Tibet.” No doubt Milarepa’s love of the mountain solitudes
of Tibet struck a familiar chord, for Morgenstierne had from his earliest
childhood been accustomed to spending his holidays in the high Norwegian
mountains. In later years he translated three of Milarepa’s songs into
Norwegian. 9

NOTES

1. Georg Valentin von Munthe af Morgenstierne (1892-1978), Norwegian
Indologist and Iranist, professor in Göteborg (Sweden) in 1930,
thereafter in Oslo 1937-1962. Among his most important publications
are Report on a linguistic mission to Afghanistan (1926), Etymological vocabulary of Pashto (1927), Report on a linguistic mission to North-Western India (1932), and especially the monumental Indo-Iranian frontier languages (1929-1967, reprinted in six volumes 1973). Further publications are Orthography and sound system of the Avesta (1942) and Etymological vocabulary of the Shughni group (1974). Morgenstierne provided the first descriptions of several local languages of Afghanistan and Pakistan, including some which have now virtually disappeared. He also collected much oral literature in the course of fieldwork spanning more than fifty years. Of Morgenstierne Sir Olaf Caroe once said, "The candle of his tent burns as clearly as the lamp of his study."

2. Here and in the following I refer to and quote from an unpublished autobiographical ms., written in Norwegian, now in the possession of the Indo-Iranian Institute of the University of Oslo.


5. P. 35. Translated from German.

6. This and the following mss. are all deposited at the Indo-Iranian Institute of the University of Oslo.

7. JRAS 36 (1904), pp. 733-743.

