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Daily and Sacramental Bread in the Land of Tsampa: Why don't Tibetan Christians Share Their Own Staple Food?

MARTIN HANKER – PETR JANDÁČEK

The historical anthropology of food in Tibet is troublesome for two reasons. The first is that not many Christian missionaries were active in the Tibetosphere,¹ and even fewer were successful. This leaves us with only a limited number and a narrowed selection of available sources. Of course, there were the Jesuit missions in Tsaparang (1625-1635) and Shigatse (1627-1632), followed by the Jesuit and Capuchin missions in Lhasa (1707-1745).² Then there were also the Protestant and Scottish missions in Kalimpong and Darjeeling (2nd half of the 19th century),³ the Catholic mission in Bonga, Kham (from 1854),⁴ the Moravian missions in Lahul (from the 1850s) and Ladakh (from 1885),⁵ the China Tibetan

1 By Tibetosphere, we refer to the wide region of Tibetan cultural influence.

2 For further details, see Josef Kolmaš, *Tibet: Dějiny a duchovní kultura*, Praha: Argo 2004, 132-144.

3 Rafal Beszterda, *The Moravian Brethren and Himalayan Cultures: Evangelisation, Society, Industry*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. 2014, 60-61.

4 John Bray, "French Catholic Missions and the Politics of China and Tibet 1846-1865", in: Ernst Steinkellner (ed.), *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz, Vol. I*, Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1995, 83-96: 86; and John Bray, "Trade, Territory and Missionary Connections in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands", in: Stéphane Gros (ed.), *Frontier Tibet. Patterns of Change in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2019, 151-178.

5 John Bray, "Christian Missionary Enterprise and Tibetan Trade", *The Tibet Journal* 39/1, 2014, 13-39: 18-20.



Border Mission (1895)⁶ and the Protestant mission in Batang (from 1908).⁷ Still, given the overall extent of the Tibetosphere and its difficult terrain, their numbers were sparse. Furthermore, the travelogues of famous missionaries who were attempting to reach or actually reached Lhasa (like Gruber and d’Orville,⁸ della Penna,⁹ Desideri,¹⁰ Huc and Gabet,¹¹ Taylor¹² and Rijnhart¹³) are already quite well studied and none have provided us with especially valuable details about the Tibetan food culture. Maybe only a further focus on archival materials might bring some new ethnographic knowledge.

The second reason is that the available Tibetan sources, especially from the reign of the Ming and Qing dynasties, though admittedly supplying valuable material for research in fields like philology, religious affairs, history, and colonial studies, provide – like the travelogues – little information on the culture of food (except for some administrative documents on taxes or ritual manuals). Tibetans simply did not feel much need to write about their daily diet,¹⁴ which has reduced our chances of comparing

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- 6 Bianca Horlemann, “Christian Missionaries in Qinghai and Gansu: Sources for Tibetan and Mongol Studies”, in: Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz – Shen Weirong (eds.), *Xiyu lishi yuyan yanjiu jikan/ Historical and Philological Studies of China’s Western Region 6*, Beijing: Kexue Chubanshe 2013, 163-191: 176.
 - 7 Alex McKay, *Their Footprints Remain: Biomedical Beginnings Across the Indo-Tibetan Frontier*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2007, 76-77.
 - 8 Cornelius Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1924, 164-203.
 - 9 Luciano Petech, *Italian Missionaries in Tibet and Nepal*, Berkeley (CA): University of California 1992, 1-6.
 - 10 Ippolito Desideri, *An Account on Tibet*, London: Georg Routledge and Sons, Ltd. 1931.
 - 11 Joseph Gabet – Evarist Regis Huc, *Travels in Tartary, Thibet and China*, London: National Illustrated Library 1852.
 - 12 Peter Hopkirk, *Trespassers on the Roof of the World: The Race for Lhasa*, London: John Murray 2006, 96-99; and John Bray, “Stumbling on the Threshold: Annie R. Taylor’s Tibetan Pioneer Mission, 1893-1907”, *Bulletin of Tibetology* 50/1-2, 2014, 91-116.
 - 13 Peter Hopkirk, *Trespassers...*, 137-158; and Susie Carson Rijnhart, *With the Tibetans in Tent and Temple*, Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier 1901.
 - 14 For information on taxes paid in various natural products, see Thupten Sangyay – Rigzin Tsepag, “Government, Monastic and Private Taxation in Tibet”, *The Tibet Journal* 11/1, 1986, 21-40. With current developments in research of Tibetan social history, it is possible that this lack of information will soon change quite significantly. The latest example of this is Alice Travers – Peter Schwieger – Charles Ramble (eds.), *Taxation in Tibetan Societies: Rules, Practices and Discourses*, Leiden – Boston (MA): Brill 2023. But other than that, the vast majority of available Tibetan works on food relate either to medicine (*materia medica*) or religious rituals (sacrificial creating, offering, and consuming or feeding) – sometimes also a combination of both, such as healing by a “ritually enhanced” food or pacifying hunger (which is considered to be a disease). Such ritual texts concerning food-related practices (chiefly invol-

Tibetan and missionary accounts and coming to any meaningful conclusions – whether the missionaries were just commentators, expositors, or agents in the food culture.¹⁵

Consequently, we searched for a particular food which was fundamental or inevitable for all missionaries but, at the same time, largely alien to Tibetan food culture. This requirement led us quite directly to bread as a staple food of the Bible and a key concept in Christianity but somewhat unlike the omnipresent Tibetan tsampa (*ritsam pa*) – a roasted barley flour, which was and still is the Tibetan staple food and also the key ritual food-stuff (Fig. 1). And since Moravian missionaries, as the principal translators of the Tibetan Bible, were so dutiful in their work, an intriguing topic immediately manifested itself. Thus, and therefore, this paper deals with the question of how these early translators (and their successors) approached the concept of bread and its transfer into Tibetan culture, thereby asking why tsampa was not considered as a suitable local equivalent. And, by extension, is it even possible to think of tsampa as such a parallel for the Biblical bread – either as a staple food (i.e., the daily bread or food in the Lord's Prayer) or as a sacrament (i.e., the bread or Eucharist in the Last Supper)?



Fig. 1. Tibetan tsampa ready to be mixed with tea, Lower Mustang, Nepal¹⁶

ving butter and tsampa) might also be a useful source of information here, but their connection to the daily food culture is still slightly inarticulate.

15 In fact, missionaries were actively involved in agriculture, home industry, and trade. Hence, after further examination, more fruitful sources may appear together with rethinking of the interpretation of their accounts. Compare, e.g., Wim van Spengen, *Tibetan Border Worlds: A Geohistorical Analysis of Trade and Traders*, London – New York (NY): Routledge 2010, 235-239; and John Bray, “Christian Missionary Enterprise...”, 23-25; or Trent Pomplun, “Rural Tibet in Early Modern Missions”, in: Nadine Amsler – Andrea Badea – Bernard Heyberger – Christian Windler (eds.), *Catholic Missionaries in Early Modern Asia*, London – New York (NY): Routledge 2020, 142-154.

16 Martin Hanker, September 2016.

Preliminary research and context

When considering food in anthropology, there are basically two main approaches – to analyse (1) how society utilises food to express meanings and values, and (2) how food influences society itself. The former means considering food as a tool or even a language. As Mary Douglas puts it, food might be “[a] code [that] affords a general set of possibilities for sending particular messages. If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed.”¹⁷ This seems like a valuable insight, especially when considering the code’s own limitations given the available resources. Sidney Mintz, who was to some extent referring to Audrey Richards,¹⁸ famously remarked in *Sweetness and Power*:

People subsist on some principal complex carbohydrate, usually a grain or root crop, around which their lives are built. Its calendar of growth fits with their calendar of the year; its needs are, in some curious ways, their needs. It provides the raw materials out of which much of the meaning in life is given voice. Its character, names, distinctive tastes and textures, the difficulties associated with its cultivation, its history, mythical or not, are projected on the human affairs of a people who consider what they eat to be the basic food, to be the definition of food.¹⁹

Hence, an inquiry into staple food (both daily and sacramental) either as a cornerstone of the code or as its most important forming factor seems to be quite relevant for the quest of “retelling” the Gospel.²⁰

Cynthia Shafer-Elliott explains in her *Food in ancient Judah* that “[b] read was a mainstay in the diet of many ancient cultures, including Judah, as is evident from the plethora of references to it in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern texts; the Hebrew word for bread, léchem, is synonymous with food.”²¹ Just how common and important bread was, is then evident from works like the *Hymns on the Unleavened Bread* by

17 Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a meal”, in: Mary Douglas, *Implicit meanings: selected essays in anthropology*, London – New York (NY): Routledge 1999, 231-252: 231.

18 Audrey Richards, *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia*, London: Oxford University Press 1939, 46-49.

19 Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, New York (NY): Penguin Books 1986, 10-11.

20 As an example of the richness of meanings in Ladakhi culture and the permeable boundary between daily and sacramental food, see Abby Ripley, “Food as Ritual”, in: Henry Osmaston – Philip Denwood (eds.), *Recent Research on Ladakh 4&5*, London: SOAS 1995, 165-175.

21 Cynthia Shafer-Elliott, *Food in Ancient Judah: Domestic Cooking in the Time of the Hebrew Bible*, Sheffield – Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2013, 108 (transcription of the Hebrew was adjusted by the authors of this paper to make it compliant with the journal’s technical requirements).

Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373 CE), where he touched upon various dimensions of bread, including its sacrificial use during the Passover (cf. also the *Feast of Unleavened Bread* in Ex 23:15; 34:18; or Dt 16:16). Simply put, bread was a staple food among Near Eastern peasants and nomads alike. Round, flat cakes of unleavened bread made from flour and water were mostly baked on hot coals, in an oven, or over an open fire. The probable look of such bread can be seen in the experiment conducted by Shafer-Elliot and her team.²²

As bread was basically synonymous with food for the Israelites, it also signified the newness of life in the risen Christ (1 Cor 5:6-8) and consequently his body (1 Cor 11:23-24) – for many, even Jesus himself. Jesus then became the true bread from heaven, the bread of God, and the bread of life (Jn 6:32-35). As Bynum puts it: “If anything, food became a yet more powerful and awful symbol, for the bread and wine that lay on the altar were now even more graphically seen to be God.”²³ Therefore, bread is also a cornerstone of the Christian Eucharist. Importantly, in the New Testament, the Greek term for bread (*ártos*) and even its Latin equivalent (*pānis*) are used across the Last Supper and the Lord’s Prayer alike, thus connecting the physical and spiritual nourishments under one single word, one staple carbohydrate.²⁴ Yet, be aware! It is unleavened bread we are talking about.²⁵ Although some might disagree on this point, yeast symbolises pervasiveness which is rather corruptive, as the proverbial “leaven of the Pharisees” suggests (Mk 8:15; Mt 16:6, 12; Lk 12:1).

And so, since the Apostolic age, sharing a meal has become a missionary metaphor for incorporating gentiles into the Church. In Freidenreich’s words, missionaries are “telling stories about the food practices of exemplars and recounting their normative statements—to dismantle this barrier and foster a new model of interaction between Jews and gentiles within a community that would no longer regard their differences as significant.”²⁶

22 Cynthia Shafer-Elliot, “Biblical Bread: Baking Like the Ancient Israelites” [online], <<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/daily-life-and-practice/biblical-bread-baking-like-the-ancient-israelites/>>, [7. 3. 2023].

23 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast: the religious significance of food to medieval women*, Berkeley (CA): University of California Press 1987, 54.

24 Cf. *The Online Greek Bible* [online], <<https://www.greekbible.com/index.php>>, [7. 7. 2023]; and *The Latin Vulgate Bible* [online], <<https://vulgate.org>>, [7. 7. 2023].

25 At least since the 9th century AD. Cf. C. W. Bynum, *Holy feast...*, 56.

26 David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law*, Berkeley (CA): University of California Press 2011, 100.

To practice this incorporation through the materiality of food means to share stories before sharing the food, i.e., to tell the Gospel.²⁷

However, the translators of the Scripture inherently focused more on the Gospel than on the related food. They tended to pay special attention to abstract and intricate religious concepts since some of these were so hard to explain to any strangers with a different cultural background (given that these technical terms are often deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian cultural core). The British and Foreign Bible Society in London was particularly involved in these efforts or rather in their standardisation. A quick look into Girdlestone's *Suggestions for Translators, Editors & Revisers of the Bible*,²⁸ dated 1877, clearly illustrates such a focus. So, as a result, mundane words for everyday physical objects including food tended to become lost in the high theological and linguistic debates. And despite its essentiality, bread also became lost. In fact, there is not even a single breadcrumb in Girdlestone's manual.

The Tibetan Bible (New Testament)

Now let us shift focus towards the key figures associated with the origin of the Tibetan Bible. Following the earliest period of translation efforts by the Capuchins, the first “systematic” work in the Himalayas was really done by the Moravian missionaries.²⁹ They were based in Kyelang (Lahul) from 1855/56, although some authors date their presence in the region from as early as 1846.³⁰ Regardless, they became involved in this endeavour by chance – having originally tried to reach Mongolia, only to be

27 On the other hand, dealing with food can easily encode a message of separation. A nice example connected to bread is the story from 1588 on a “strange ostensory” describing a Lutheran pastor who allegedly stored his wafers in the pants of a Kasperle. Written and translated by Catholics, it was probably an attempt to present Lutherans as those who do something strange or blasphemous during the Lord's Supper. For details, see Čeněk Zíbrt, “Podivná monstrence r. 1588”, *Český lid* 26/7, 1926, 260-263.

28 Robert Baker Girdlestone, *Suggestions for Translators, Editors & Revisers of the Bible*, London: Hatchards 1877.

29 An overview of these efforts is included in Agostino Antonio Giorgi, *Alphabetum Tibetanum Missionum Apostolicarum Commodo Editum*, Whitefish (MT): Kessinger Publishing 2010 (an available reprint of the original edition from 1762).

30 Cf. Norman Driver, “The Story of the Tibetan Bible”, *International Review of Mission* 40/158, 1951, 197-203; and Piotr Klafkowski, “Towards the Complete History of the Tibetan Bible – the Lord's Prayer in Different Translations”, in: Ernst Steinkellner – Helmut Tauscher (eds.), *Contributions on Tibetan Language, History and Culture. Proceedings of the Costa de Körös Symposium held at Vela-Vienna, Austria, 13-19 September 1981*, Wien: Universität Wien 1983, 151-162.

stopped by the Lhasa government at the western border of Tibet.³¹ Then, in 1857, Heinrich August Jäschke (1817-1883), indeed a skilled polyglot, was sent there by the Mission Board in Herrnhut to oversee the translation work.³² He was primarily based either in Kyelang or Stok (Ladakh). Just two years later, the Bible Society became involved in the process. And finally, Gergan Sodnam Wangyal (*dge rgan bsod nams dbang rgyal*) and Lama Zodpa Gyaltsan (*bla ma bzod pa rgyal mtshan*; known as Nathanael) came there from Lhasa (also by coincidence) and devoted much of their later years to this project as well.³³

Despite Jäschke's already quite advanced age at that time, he began immersing himself in both spoken dialects and written language, even traveling to different regions, gradually compiling his later famous dictionary³⁴ and grammar book³⁵ – essential precursors to the origin of the Tibetan Bible. Although skilled in local dialects, he chose Classical Tibetan as an appropriate medium for the Bible. At first sight, this choice might have contradicted the Protestant objective to make the Bible accessible to ordinary people, since Classical Tibetan was mainly used by the clergy or literates. Nevertheless, it was a learned conclusion reflecting the linguistic reality of the heterogenous Tibetosphere, where Classical Tibetan evoked respect, served as a sort of a *lingua franca*, and came already equipped with some useful terminology.³⁶

Well-described are Jäschke's attempts to paraphrase some of the notoriously problematic biblical terminologies.³⁷ Being aware of the vast cultural and linguistic differences between the Tibetan and Judeo-Christian

31 For details, see e.g., Gudrun Meyer, "The Moravian Church's Educational Work in Lahul, Kinnaur and Ladakh 1856-1994", in: Thierry Dodin – Heinz Räther (eds.), *Recent Research on Ladakh 7: Proceedings of the 7th Colloquium of the International Association for Ladakh Studies, Bonn/St. Augustin, 12-15 June 1995*, Ulm: Universität Ulm 1997, 297-308.

32 For more details about his life and involvement, see John Bray, "Heinrich August Jäschke (1817-1883): Translating the Christian Scriptures into Tibetan", in: Radha Banerjee Sarkar (ed.), *Csoma de Körös: Buddhist Transcreations in Asian Literature and Art*, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts 2019, 49-69.

33 Norman Driver, "The Story of the Tibetan Bible", *International Review of Missions* 40/158, 1951, 197-203: 197.

34 First lithographed between 1871 and 1876 as a Tibetan-German Dictionary. Heinrich August Jäschke, *A Tibetan-English Dictionary with Special Reference to the Prevailing Dialects to Which is Added an English-Tibetan Vocabulary*, London: Unger Brothers 1881.

35 First lithographed in 1865. Heinrich August Jäschke, *Tibetan Grammar*, Ludgate Hill: Trübner and Co. 1883.

36 John Bray, "Language, Tradition and the Tibetan Bible", *The Tibet Journal* 16/4, 1991, 28-58.

37 John Bray, "A History of the Moravian Church's Bible Translations.", in: Gudrun Meier – Lydia Icke-Schwalbe (eds.), *Wissenschaftsgeschichte und gegenwärtige*

traditions, he put much effort into finding the most suitable semantic equivalents in the target language. Therefore, God was translated as *könchok* (*dkon mchog*, i.e., the “Holy Trinity” of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), spirit as *dangma* (*dangs ma*), devil as *dü* (*bdud*), and Holy Spirit as *tuk* (*thugs*; but the Spirit of God as *sem nyi* [*sems nyid*]). For the cross, he opted for *kyang shing* (*brkyang shing*) instead of some literal translation like *gya dram* (*rgya gram*) or a word transcribed from Italian, *tro ché* (*khro ce*), which Roman Catholics had used before. Interestingly, wine got translated in two different ways – either as *chang* (*chang*), a barley-based Tibetan beer without any trace of grapes, or as *gün chang* (*rgun chang*), which is a neologism for wine (i.e., *chang* [made of] grapes/raisins).³⁸

Generally speaking, in terms of his approach to translation, Jäschke was leaning towards “dynamic (now functional) equivalence” with the occasional use of idiomatic, or paraphrastic, translation – an approach common to many missionaries.³⁹ Still, Jäschke’s respect for intelligibility and the Tibetan culture can be considered exemplary (yet, by the way, in stark contrast with the approach of Tibetan translators of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit) – a view not shared by the Bible Society, though.⁴⁰ That said, he always aimed for consistency and precision, carefully contemplating even mundane words such as olive, which became the Sikkimese *khasha kyurpo* (*kha sha skyur po*).⁴¹

The first fruits of Jäschke’s hard work had ripened by 1861 when his early (partial) translations came off the press.⁴² In total, it took Jäschke 11 years, from 1857 to 1868, to complete the translation of the New Testament, albeit still without *Hebrews* and *Revelation*.⁴³ These last two were the work of the converted Tibetan named Nathanael, a pioneer of the Himalayan Mission August Wilhelm Heyde, and Jäschke’s pupil Friedrich Adolphus Redslob. Therefore, these appeared only later, by 1875 – seven years after Jäschke’s return to Germany. Between 1881 and 1885, the

Forschungen in Nordwest-Indien, Dresden: Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde 1990, 66-79.

38 J. Bray, “Language, Tradition...”, 32-34.

39 Eugene Albert Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating*, Leiden – Boston (MA): Brill 1964. For some criticism towards this theory see e.g., Leland Ryken, “Five Negative Effects of Dynamic Equivalence”, *Choosing a Bible. Understanding Bible Translation Differences*, Wheaton (IL): Crossway Books 2005, 11-22.

40 J. Bray, “A History of the Moravian...”, 66-79.

41 Evangelist Johannes – Heinrich August Jäschke, *Die Briefe Johannis Ins Tibetische übersetzt, Und, Nebst Erläuternden Anmerkungen*, Neustadt-Magdeburg: R. and A. Zacharias 1875, 40-41.

42 J. Bray, “A History of the Moravian...”, 69.

43 N. Driver, “The Story of the Tibetan...”, 198.

Tibetan New Testament was finally printed in its entirety under the auspices of the Bible Society.

Due to various imperfections and inconsistencies in the translation, the revisions by Jäschke's colleagues were continuous and relentless. From 1880, his followers started the next round of major revisions, aiming for the text to become easily understandable by laypeople. In 1897, this endeavour received funding from the Bible Society and by 1903, the second edition was published in Ghoom and later in Shanghai (1913 and 1933), albeit not substantially improving upon the original.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Yoseb Gergan (Sonam Tsetan by his given name [*bsod rnam tshe brtan yo seb dge rgan*], ca. 1878-1946), the son of G. S. Wangyal, picked up the work and, together with his successors, prepared the third major revision for publication in 1948. This time, despite initial forbearance by the Bible Society, this single-volume edition (including the Old Testament prepared by August Hermann Francke, David Macdonald et al.) proved to be a significant improvement.

Then, Darjeeling congregations prompted the fourth major revision. Pierre Vittoz and Elijah Tsetan Phuntshog (*tshe brtan phun tshogs*; son-in-law of Y. Gergan) began working together in 1953, and three years later, a translation committee in Kalimpong was formed. Between 1959 and 1962, all their main revisions were completed, and the entire New Testament was published as a single volume in 1970.⁴⁵ Finally, a “balanced” version of the Bible in Tibetan was available. Recently, the Wycliffe Bible Alliance took this endeavour further and, in 2018, released the modern “low-literary” Central Tibetan Bible,⁴⁶ followed by the “neo-classical” New Tibetan Bible just a year later.⁴⁷ Continuous updates, revisions, and even new features are still being created and added to these two online editions.

Towards Tibetan staple food

Compared to the ancient Israelites, the Tibetans' farming and dietary situations were quite different. At such high altitudes, mostly wheat, barley, peas, and buckwheat are found in the fields (Fig. 2).⁴⁸ Barley is then

44 J. Bray, “Language, Tradition...”, 36-37.

45 J. Bray, “A History of the Moravian...”, 75.

46 “gSungrab: The Tibetan Bible Website” [online], <<https://www.gsungrab.org>>, [13. 3. 2023].

47 “New Tibetan Bible” [online], <<https://new-tibetan-bible.com>>, [13. 3. 2023].

48 Henry Osmaston – Janet Frazer – Stamati Crook, “Human Adaptation to Environment in Zangskar”, in: John Crook – Henry Osmaston (eds.), *Himalayan Buddhist Villages*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers 1994, 99.

often consumed either as tsampa or chang – two signature elements of the Tibetan diet. In contrast, buckwheat and wheat are mostly used for bread-making. Furthermore, tsampa-based effigies and religious offerings play an integral part in both monastic and vernacular ritual traditions of the Tibetans (Fig. 3). There is also little to no evidence that any major changes in the Tibetan diet have occurred anywhere in the region during the last few centuries. In fact, Eastern Tibet is considered to be the original home of cultivated buckwheat⁴⁹ and the Shigatse prefecture is still its main farming area in the Tibetan Autonomous Region today.⁵⁰ Therefore, it is safe to assume that barley (tsampa) and buckwheat (bread) are the most probable candidates for the Tibetan's staple carbohydrate.⁵¹

THE FARMING YEAR AT STONGDE

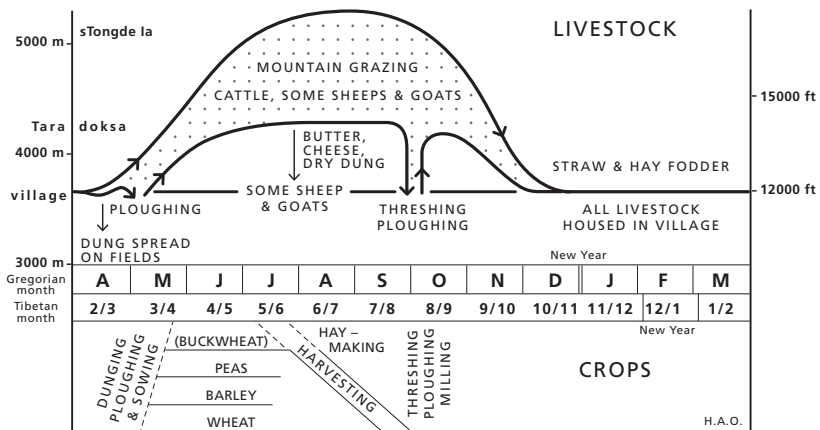


Fig. 2. Diagram of a farming year in a Zangskar community clearly showing limited opportunities for growing crops⁵²

- 49 Ohmi Ohnishi, "On the Origin of Cultivated Buckwheat", in: Iva Faberová et al. (eds.), *Advances in Buckwheat Research. Proceedings of the 9th International Symposium on Buckwheat held at Congress Centre, University of Agriculture, Prague – Suchdol, 18-22 August 2004*, Prague: Research Institute of Crop Production 2004, 16-21.
- 50 Sabine Scheucher, "Buckwheat in Tibet (TAR)", in: Iva Faberová et al. (eds.), *Advances in Buckwheat Research. Proceedings of the 9th International Symposium on Buckwheat held at Congress Centre, University of Agriculture, Prague – Suchdol, 18-22 August 2004*, Prague: Research Institute of Crop Production 2004, 295-298.
- 51 For further reading on the Tibetan diet, we recommend *Bod-kyi Nyer-mkho'i Zas-rigs Tshig-mdzod* ("Tibetan Traditional Food and Drink Dictionary"), Xining: Kokonor People's Printing Press 2000.
- 52 H. Osmaston – J. Frazer – S. Crook, "Human Adaptation...", 99.



Fig. 3. Tsampa used for effigies in an annual ritual in Lubra village, Mustang, Nepal⁵³

However, it is tsampa which is often being regarded as the Tibetan identity marker *per se* – both in Tibetan and Western discourses.⁵⁴ As early as in the 18th century, Ippolito Desideri remarked: “They do not eat wheaten bread, but zamba [= tsampa], which is the flour of ground parched barley mixed with a little water, generally hot, into very small balls which they eat with their meat.”⁵⁵ Similarly, when Berthold Laufer questioned Odorico de Pordenone’s presence in Tibet, he did so by confronting Odorico’s notes on the abundance of bread and wine in Tibet with his own experience:

A striking assertion made by the Friar [Odorico] is that “they have in it great plenty of bread and wine as anywhere in the world.” Such a statement cannot possibly be advanced by any one who has had but the slightest contact with the Tibetan borderlands and the most superficial acquaintance with Tibetan people. First of all, there is nothing like bread in Tibet, where even the preparation of dough is unknown. Parched barley-flour mixed with tea or milk into a porridge forms the staple food; and the alcoholic beverage called ཅཱ, obtained from fermented barley, is neither wine nor beer, but a liquor *sui generis*. Even granted that Odoric simply committed a mistake in the choice of his words, and merely intended to say that food and drink abound in Tibet, his statement nevertheless remains very strange.⁵⁶

53 Foto Martin Hanker, Lubra village, Mustang, Nepal, 2016.

54 Cf. Donald S. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, Chicago (IL): The University of Chicago Press 1998, 198; and Tsering Shakya, “Whither the Tsampa Eaters?”, *Himal* 6/5, 1993, 8-11.

55 Ippolito Desideri, *An Account of Tibet*, London: George Routledge and Sons, LTD. 1932, 181.

56 Berthold Laufer, “Was Odoric of Pordenone ever in Tibet?”, *T’oung Pao* 15/3, 1914, 405-418: 412.

According to Attenborough and Leeds, who did extensive field research in Zangskar during the 1980s, bread was a far less important component of the local diet there, too. Instead, tsampa, various tsampa-based dough balls (*phag phag* or *ka lag*), soup (*thug pa*), tea (*ja*) and chang came up most often during the interviews, as their index of relative food importance suggests.⁵⁷ Such findings may only confirm that tsampa is indeed the Tibetan default food option, a *de facto* equivalent to the bread of the Israelites. So, to further develop this hypothesis, we juxtaposed the data from the index with the word frequency of selected foods across Tibetan proverbs. The biggest collection of proverbs from all around the Tibetsphere was compiled in the 1990s by Sørensen and Cüppers.⁵⁸ It includes published material from various sources and, most importantly, an indispensable word index. Given the topic of our paper, we created broader food categories like “soups”, “doughs/dough balls”, “flours” (including tsampa), and “bread” based on their physical form and consistency. This was necessary not only to display the results in a meaningful way but also to consider the linguistic diversity of the region. To better understand these two aspects, it is important to first become familiar with Tibetan bread.

Baglep (*bag leb*) has countless regional variations, but is mostly a leavened flatbread made of (usually) wheat flour, baked or fried, and sometimes also filled with meat or cheese.⁵⁹ The etymology is usually explained as a combination of the word *bag* for “flour” or “dough” (*bag phye* means “wheat flour”) and *leb* (or *leb leb* as Tibetan prefers disyllabic words) for “flat” – therefore a flattened dough or simply a flatbread.⁶⁰ However, Dan Martin is somewhat sceptical towards such a simple explanation since Tibetan also likes “borrowing that slowly and unconsciously naturalizes the foreign word by spelling it in a form that lends itself to a Tibetan meaning”.⁶¹ Hence, a possible connection between baglep, bagel, and even baklava might still exist after all. Furthermore, besides the term baglep, Jäschke’s dictionary mentions a plethora of other words denoting bread which are here listed, including their spelling variations: kor (*kor*), kambir

57 R. Attenborough – M. Attenborough – A. R. Leeds, “Nutrition in Stongde”, in: John Crook – Henry Osmaston (eds.), *Himalayan Buddhist Villages*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers 1994, 383-404: 385.

58 Per Kjeld Sørensen – Christoph Cüppers, *A collection of Tibetan Proverbs and Sayings. Gems of Tibetan Wisdom and Wit, Tibetan and Indo-Tibetan Studies 7*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1998.

59 Rinjing Dorje (Rig-'dzin-rdo-rje), *Food in Tibetan Life*, London: Prospect Books 1985, 81.

60 Berthold Laufer, “1916 Loan-Words in Tibetan”, *T'oung Pao* 17/1, 1916, 403-552: 532.

61 Dan Martin, “Bagel, Baklava and Bag-leb” [online], <<https://tibeto-logic.blogspot.com/2021/07/bagel-baklava-and-bag-leb.html>>, [13. 3. 2023].

or khambir (*kam bir*), gore (*go re*), khurba (*khur ba* or *'khur ba*), drakhur (*bra khur*), tsapkbur (*rtsab khur*),⁶² tagir (*ta gir* or *ta gyi*), tendur (*tan dur*), teltak (*thal tag*), zhébak (*zhe bag* or *bzhes bag*), and baktrül (*bag phrul*).⁶³ For comparison, Catholics also included baglep (hon. *bzhes bag*, coll. *khur ba*, *'khur ba*) in their dictionary, yet under the *bag gro* entry. Interestingly, they defined it strictly as an unleavened flatbread (lat. *scriblita, panis planus non fermentatus*, or *crêpe, pain plat non fermenté* in French).⁶⁴

Nonetheless, Jäschke defines bread as baglep in Classical Tibetan even despite its only rare appearance in pre-20th century textual sources.⁶⁵ Colloquially then, he considered bread to be baglep in Central Tibetan dialects, and tagir in the West.⁶⁶ This can be again corroborated by Attenborough and Leeds, who report tagir to be a “flat unleavened bread made with wheat flour and water”.⁶⁷ Still, tagir may sometimes be identical to kambir.⁶⁸ Therefore, it became necessary to create the aforementioned categories of food, one of which included all the words for bread listed here. A similar approach was employed for the remaining categories, too, with all the known equivalents and synonyms in both colloquial and literal (honorific) forms accounted for.

The following chart (Fig. 4) shows the relative importance (“popularity”) of selected foods, these clustered in broad categories according to their physical form and word frequency in two different sources: interviews conducted by Attenborough and Leeds and proverbs collected by Sørensen and Cüppers. A few exceptions were made: (1) tea and beer were treated separately due to their unparalleled popularity; (2) the frequency of buttermilk, butter, and milk revealed substantial differences across the compared sources. Hence, these exceptions are displayed only for better context. As is evident, the foodstuffs containing tsampa were much more often thematised in both the interviews and proverbs.

62 *Rtsab* means “yeast”. Therefore, such bread is always leavened. Since there was a need to differentiate this particular bread from some others, we can assume that unleavened bread was also available or known to the Ladakhis or Tibetans in general, even if prepared only by non-Tibetans.

63 For further examples of various names for bread in Ladakh, see D. Angchok – S. K. Dwivedi – Z. Ahmed, “Traditional foods and beverages of Ladakh”, *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge* 8/4 (October), 2009, 551-558.

64 Auguste Desgodins, *Dictionnaire tibétain-latin-français / par les missionnaires catholiques du Thibet*, Hongkong: Société des missions étrangères 1899, 660.

65 Search the Buddhist Digital Resource Center <library.bdrc.io> for „bag leb“ or any other bread term.

66 H. A. Jäschke, *A Tibetan-English Dictionary...*, 617.

67 R. Attenborough – M. Attenborough – A. R. Leeds, “Nutrition...”, 385

68 “JU-LEH ADVENTURE” [online], <<https://www.ju-lehadventure.com/ladakh-information/food-ladakh-10-must-try-local-dishes-and-drinks>>, [13. 3. 2023].

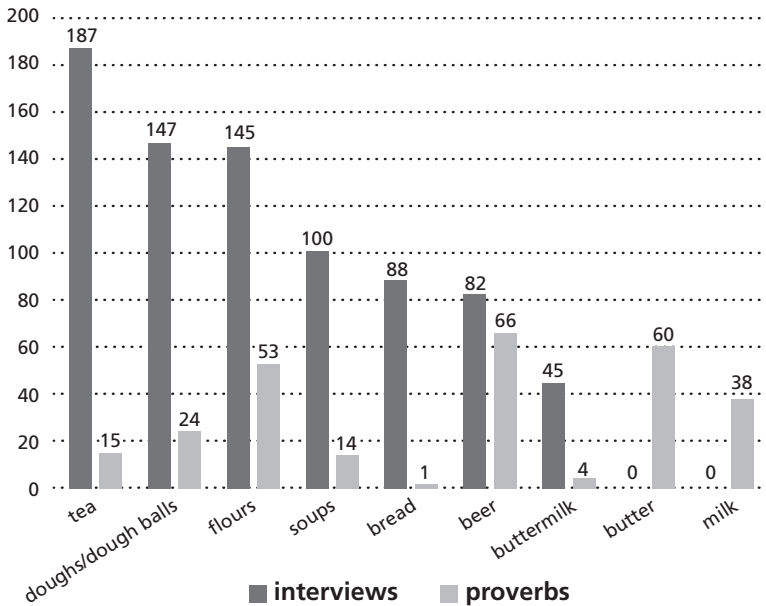


Fig. 4. Relative importance of selected food⁶⁹

Bread in the (Tibetan) Bible

So far, all the evidence and arguments presented point towards tsampa being not only the undisputed Tibetan staple food but also the “culturally rooted” equivalent of the Biblical bread, both daily and sacramental, available in all corners of the Tibetosphere. So why did Jäschke and his successors not even consider it as a suitable translation when they adapted proper Buddhist terminology in so many other cases? A possible explanation might arise when looking at the context of individual passages from the Bible itself. Hence, we identified several key verses involving bread in the hope of better understanding their decision, starting with the following quotes about the Lord’s Supper from the Synoptic Gospels in Tibetan pub-

⁶⁹ Authors’ work, based on R. Attenborough – M. Attenborough – A. R. Leeds, “Nutrition...”; and P. K. Sørensen – C. Cüppers, *A collection of Tibetan Proverbs...*

lished in the 1880s,⁷⁰ 1948, and 2023.⁷¹ For English, we used the English Standard Version of the Bible available at BibleGateway.com.⁷²

Mt 26:26 Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, [and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.”]

1880s: *yang zan za ba'i tshe na ye shu **bag leb** thogs te gtang rag mdzad cing bcag nas nye gnas rnam la byin pa dang*⁷³

1948: *de nas de dag za yin zod tshan/ye shu **bag leb** bsnams te byin rlabs zhus nas bcag ste/nye gnas la gngang te*⁷⁴

2023: *khong rnam kyis zhal zas bzhes pa'i dus su ye shu **bag leb** phyag tu bsnams shing /dkon mchog la bstod pa phul rjes dum bur bgos nas nye gnas rnam la gngang ste*⁷⁵

Mk 14:22 And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, [and said, “Take; this is my body.”]

1880s: *yang zan za ba'i tshe na ye shu **bag leb** thogs te gtang rag mdzad cing bcag nas nye gnas rnam la byin pa dang*⁷⁶

1948: *khong gis bag leb bsnams te/byin rlabs mdzad tshar ba'i tshe/bcag nas de rnam la gngang ste*⁷⁷

70 This edition printed in Berlin by Unger Brothers (Th. Grimm) is not properly dated – it was printed between 1881-1885. Some libraries have 1883 in their catalogues. At this point, we would like to express our gratitude to John Bray, who kindly provided us with excerpts from this rare book.

71 This version was originally published in 2018 as the Central Tibetan Bible. Since then, minor adjustments have been made to it. Therefore, we cite it here as the 2023 online edition.

72 Other major editions of the Synoptic Gospels are more or less similar, all using the word *baglep*. See *dam pa'i gsung rab ces bya ba bzhugs so (The New Testament in Tibetan)*, Shanghai: B.F.B.S. 1933, 66, 40, 68; or *zhal chad snga phyi gnyis kyi mdo bzugs so (The Holy Bible in Tibetan)*, Bangalore: United Bible Societies 1983, 90, 158, 266. For interested readers, further passages relevant to the topic of this paper include, e.g., Mt 26:17; Mk 14:1, 12; Lk 22:1, Lk 22:7 from Gospels and Acts 12:3 or 20:6. However, for the sake of brevity, we do not cover them in this article.

73 *The Gospel of St. Matthew in Tibetan*, Berlin: Unger Brothers (Th. Grimm) 188?, 88.

74 Chandu Ray, *The New Testament in Tibetan*, Lahore: Bible Society of India and Ceylon 1948, 43.

75 “Mt 26” [online], in: *gSungrab: The Tibetan Bible Website*, <https://www.gsungrab.org/online_tibetan_bible/bo-03-MAT-026.html>, [12. 3. 2023].

76 *The Gospel of St. Marcus in Tibetan*, Berlin: Unger Brothers (Th. Grimm), 188?, 51.

77 Ch. Ray, *The New Testament...*, 75.

2023: *khomg rnams kyis zhal zas bshes pa'i skabs su/ye shu bag leb phyag tu bsnams shing dkon mchog la bstod pa phul rjes dum bur bgos nas khong rnams la gngang ste*⁷⁸

Lk 22:19 And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, [saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”]

1880s: *yang bag leb thogs teg tang rag mdzad cing bcag nas de dag la byin pa dang*⁷⁹

1948: *de nas bag leb bsnams te/gtang rag phul nas bcag ste/de dag la stsal la nas*⁸⁰

2023: *ye shus bag leb phyug tu bsnams shing /dkon mchog la bka' drin che zhus nas dum bur bgos nas kho rnams la gngang ste*⁸¹

All these translations of the Scripture use the word *baglep* as a Tibetan equivalent for bread, with relatively consistent vocabulary around. There is, however, a slight difference in the terms used for “taking” (*thogs* vs. *bsnams*) and “breaking” (*bcag* vs. *bgos*). Still, the continuing use of *baglep* across the Gospels does not mean that the translators did not struggle with this, as becomes evident in the Lord’s Prayer (Mt 6:9-13). The following excerpts are taken from Klafłowski’s overview of different versions of the Lord’s Prayer and appended by the latest edition:

Mt 6:11 Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts.

1762: *nyin re bzhin nged rnams kyi sba' leb de rin/ nged rnams la gngang bar mdzod pa dang/*

1883: *zhag re'i kha zas de ring yang nged rnams la gngong zhig/*

1903: *nga tsho'i zhag re'i kha zas de ring yang nged rnams la gngong zhig/*

78 “Mk 14” [online], in: *gSungrab: The Tibetan Bible Website*, <https://www.gsungrab.org/online_tibetan_bible/bo-04-MRK-014.html>, [12. 3. 2023].

79 *The Gospel of St. Luke...*, 94.

80 Ch. Ray, *The New Testament...*

81 “Lk 22” [online], *gSungrab: The Tibetan Bible Website*, <https://www.gsungrab.org/online_tibetan_bible/bo-05-LUK-022.html>, [12. 3. 2023].

1913: *nged rnams kyi zhag re'i kha zas zhag re bzhin du nged la gnong zhig/*

1948: *nged kyi zhag re'i za thang ni de ring yang gnag bar mdzod/*

1972: *nged kyi nyi ma re'i kha zas/ de ring yang ni gnang bar mdzod/*

2023: *nged kyi nyin zhag re'i kha zas// de ring yang ni gnang bar mdzod//*

As Klafłowski⁸² and Beszterda⁸³ both noted, the translators distinguished here bread as a “daily bread” (i.e., “staple food”) from bread as a “ritual foodstuff” by using one of the general terms for food in Tibetan (*kha zas* or simply *za*). Only the Capuchins used the word *baglep* in their earliest translation, albeit with a less usual spelling.

Although the earlier translators were well known for their profound cultural insight and linguistic skills, it seems they wanted the language to be as simple and as consistent as possible, perhaps even more than the original. They, for example, did not reflect the slight difference between *Matthew* and *Mark* nor use the same bread/food related vocabulary across the Lord's Prayer and Last Supper. In contrast, current translators prefer to be as comprehensible and as precise as possible, using phrases like “broke [the bread] into pieces” instead of just “broke”.

Conclusions

It is well known that Moravian missionaries planted barley and wheat, introduced rye to the locals in Ladakh, and even made their own daily bread from “a mixture of these grains”.⁸⁴ However, despite the “breaking of bread” being an actual social responsibility to them, their notion of its specific form was (is) quite liberal. Initially, in the 15th century, the Brethren used “bread instead of wafer at the Holy Communion”.⁸⁵ After some early conflicts and mockery,⁸⁶ they gradually switched to using the

82 P. Klafłowski, “Towards the Complete History...”, 157-162.

83 R. Beszterda, *The Moravian Brethren...*, 214.

84 *Ibid.*, 104.

85 Joseph Edmund Hutton, *A History of the Moravian Church*, Glasgow: Good Press 2019, 42; bread bun, “chleba žemlový” according to Jaroslav Bidlo (ed.), *Akty Jednoty bratrské I.*, Brno: Historická komise při Matici moravské 1915, 585.

86 For example, Unity of the Brethren's bishop Jan Augusta (1500-1572) was depicted as “pikhart”, i.e., a heretic stepping on the wafer and pouring wine on the ground.

wafer, although not exclusively.⁸⁷ Concerning the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist,

[t]he Moravian Church has always tried to avoid being drawn into such disputes. [Their] earlier theologians sometimes spoke of a special sacramental presence of Christ that was different from a tangible physical presence but was at the same time more than merely remembering a departed friend as one ate and drank. In any case, the Moravian Church has always taught that we should thankfully receive the grace and blessings that God gives us in this sacrament without trying to specify too rigidly how Christ is present.⁸⁸

Nowadays, even gluten-free wafers are available in some congregations. Taking this into consideration, the choice of baglep instead of tsampa cannot be a surprise – even in spite of all the presented evidence from travelogues, interviews, and proverbs that tsampa is indeed (and was for the longest time) the “daily bread”, both physically and spiritually, of not only the Ladakhis but virtually all Tibetans. But Jäschke, his colleagues, and even their successors were from a denomination situated between Protestant reason and Catholic devotion, where the “true nature” of bread was simply not so strictly defined. Because of that, they probably picked a flat rounded bread equivalent just because of its visual resemblance – similarly to so many other translators.⁸⁹ It would then seem like the early translators of the Bible rather challenged problems more significant to them, as is also evident in Girdlestone’s *Manual*. We suspect this might be a kind of Moravian heritage since not even the later translators of the Bible included bread in their *Dictionary of Key Spiritual Terms*.

Yet, we must still inquire deeper – how come bread *could not* become tsampa in the Tibetosphere? Perhaps the missionaries were suspicious of this local staple food – being so far removed from bread as they knew it, with an obscure ritual usage and of a friable or even sticky consistency. Maybe our aloofness towards all slimy and sticky substances, as indicated by Sartre,⁹⁰ may vindicate their choice. Maybe they used baglep intentionally, to encode something new into the fabric of local society. By choosing

87 J. E. Hutton, *A History...*, 442.

88 “The Moravian Church” [online], <<https://www.moravian.org/2018/06/the-sacrament-of-holy-communion/>>, [12. 3. 2023].

89 In the Chinese Bible, bread was translated as *bīng* and in Hindi, it is simply a *roti* – both typically rounded flat objects.

90 Sartre remarks that the stickiness “would present the same aspect as the slimy”, i.e., “[t]o touch the slimy is to risk being dissolved in sliminess. Now this dissolution by itself is frightening enough, because it is the absorption of the For-itself by the In-itself as ink is absorbed by a blotter. But it is still more frightening in that the metamorphosis is not just into a thing (bad as that would be) but into slime.” See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, New York (NY): Philosophical library 1956, 610.

something seemingly in common to both cultures, they were trying to build bridges to future converts. Or maybe the reason was completely opposite – to differentiate the Christian ritual from local customs, thereby introducing something new, yet not so distinctly strange. Or, and quite understandably missionaries did not read the testimony of evangelists as an account of the material (food) culture of 1st century AD Jerusalem. In other words, it was far more important what Lord Jesus did with the bread, and why he did it, than what exactly the bread was like. And, last but not least, it is not easy to “break” tsampa with your peers, after all.

We simply do not know their reasons, although we have tried to understand their choice of word by uncovering not only the arguments against it, but also for it. Hopefully, this contribution will someday stimulate at least a short discussion on this topic across the learned circles examining historical efforts to translate the Tibetan Bible. In any case, the authors of this article believe that a focus on social history, historical anthropology, and the history of everyday life can enrich our understanding of the complex intercultural dialogues and struggles produced and endured by missionaries.

SUMMARY

Daily and Sacramental Bread in the Land of Tsampa: Why don't Tibetan Christians Share Their Own Staple Food?

Most people build their lives around some complex carbohydrate which often comes in the form of bread. This staple food has also become an important religious concept in Christianity, playing an integral part during Holy Communion. Therefore, missionaries were tasked with finding the most suitable translations for Biblical bread – translations that were appropriate given its various contexts while respecting the original idea and the target culture. Different missions employed different strategies for achieving the best result possible, always challenging the local food cultures.

Missionaries of the Moravian Church, the prominent translators of the Scripture into Tibetan, perceived the act of “breaking bread” as a social responsibility and were relatively liberal concerning any exact specifications of the bread itself. Their first translation of the New Testament was prepared in Ladakh by H. A. Jäschke and published in 1885. Jäschke is well known for his lexicographical perfectionism and creative ability to find apt and often locally sourced equivalents, even for words notoriously hard to translate (like the Holy Spirit or angel). Nonetheless, the Biblical bread remained simply bread, i.e., baglep, presumably ignoring the staple food and main carbohydrate of the entire Tibetosphere – the roasted barley flour called tsampa.

This article focuses on early attempts to translate the term “bread” into Tibetan and attempts to explain the possible reasons why baglep was chosen over tsampa. Following introductory remarks on the available textual material and the methodology used, the historical and cultural background of (Biblical) bread is first outlined. Second, a brief history of Tibetan translations of the Bible, including remarks on the translators’ approaches, is offered to contextualise the challenges of intercultural dialogue. Contrasting arguments favouring tsampa are also presented, sourced from folk proverbs and ethnographic research. And finally, accounts of the Lord’s Prayer and Last Supper from Synoptic Gospels in Tibetan are compared and commented upon.

Keywords: Tibet; food culture; Bible; Moravian Brethren; bread; translation

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