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(S E C R E T T I B E T)
A N D T H E
“G E R M A N T I B E T
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Geheimnis Tibet (or: *Lhasa–Lo – Die verbotene Stadt*) (*Secret Tibet or Lhasa–Lo – The forbidden city*) Directed by Ernst Schäfer and Hans-Albert Lettow 1943 b/w documentary 1 hour 41min Courtesy ARRI Media, Munich

On *Geheimnis Tibet*: Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam in conversation with Colonial Neighbours Interview 38min 2019

Geheimnis Tibet (directed by Ernst Schäfer, Hans-Albert Lettow, 1938–39/1943) documents the German Tibet expedition conducted under the leadership of Ernst Schäfer in 1938–1939. Schäfer and his team being the first Germans to ever enter the Tibetan capital, the “forbidden town” of Lhasa, the film illustrates how common western imaginaries and fantasies had been projected onto Tibet at the beginning of the 20th century, before the country was invaded and occupied by China and the CIA became involved in its resistance movement. Fluctuating between documentary and Nazi-propaganda film, *Geheimnis Tibet* was shown to a broader audience no earlier than in 1943, in the middle of WW2.

In 1938, the young German zoologist and ornithologist Ernst Schäfer and his team embarked on a two year long scientific expedition to Tibet with the goal of examining the entire “Lebensraum” of the Inner Asian country, which he assumed to be an environment filled with archaic life forms of humans, animals, and plants. Schäfer’s team included Ernst Krause, an entomologist, photographer and cameraman, Karl Wiener, a geophysicist, Edmund Geer, who accompanied the expedition as its technical leader, and Bruno Beger, anthropologist and ethnologist who was promoted by Himmler himself for this trip. Beger, most likely the only Nazi by his own conviction, later conducted anthropometric measurements of inmates in concentration camps who were killed and their bodies were used as anatomical specimens. A member of the SS (Schutzstaffel) since 1933, Schäfer found his most important supporter in Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS, and his research institute *SS–Ahnenerbe* (ancestral heritage) whose task was to promote the racial doctrines of the Nazi-Party specifically by supporting the idea that the modern Germans descended from an ancient Aryan race which was biologically superior to other racial groups. Himmler tried to ideologically and financially incorporate the expedition into the *Ahnenerbe* program but Schäfer eventually found sponsors in the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), the

Universum-Film-Agentur (Ufa), the Werberat der Deutschen Wirtschaft, and IG-Farben.

One objective of the expedition is said to be the racial categorization of the indigenous peoples of inner Asia. During the research trip, Bruno Beger carried out numerous anthropometric measurements of the indigenous population, apparently trying to find “skeletal remains of earlier Nordic immigrants” and “the Nordic race among the population” (quoted from Neuhaus, 2012, 106–107) as formulated in his research program prior to the expedition departure. The expedition in approximate numbers: Schäfer and his team brought with them from Tibet around 2,000 ethnological objects, 20,000 black/white photographs, 2,000 color photographs, 16,000 meters of black and white film footage, 1,500 meters of color film footage, 4,000–5,000 seeds of plants and grain, 3,500 bird skins, 2,000 bird eggs, various photogrammetric measurements for geographical maps, and meteorological measurements.

Although it has been proven that Himmler supported the expedition, the details and extent of the SS and the *Ahnenerbe* involvement in the scientific planning and controlling of the trip remain a subject of controversial discussion. What cannot be denied is that Schäfer greatly benefited from support by various actors of the Third Reich when planning and conducting this expedition. At the same time – as Irsun Engelhardt had pointed out in a critical survey on the speculations surrounding the expedition, in her quest to demystify the expedition and offer a more pragmatic view on alleged Nazi-Tibet connections – a symbolic finding in Schäfer’s diaries proves that he “(...) cleverly used the swastika symbol to create the idea of an identity shared between the Germans and the Tibetans, thus linking the two nations – West and East – even on the symbolic level.” (Engelhardt 2007, 61)

Researching Tibet in Western Imagination, Tom Neuhaus has pointed at the period between 1853 and 1959 as the “most evocative one in the history of Western contact with Tibet” (Neuhaus 2012, 6), whereas Tibet is described as a “blank canvas” for Europeans, on which individual fantasies and fears could be projected on (Neuhaus 2012, 9). Up to the beginning of the 20th century, Tibet remained one of the most unknown, isolated and therefore enigmatic countries from the perspective of the West. Theories of Tibet as an occult, dark, and mysterious state were circulating in Germany and all over Western Europe, based on western fantasies and

projection, and often on fiction and novels as Isrun Engelhardt stated:

Remarkably, the “occultization” of Tibet was not set in motion by those who had actually been there; instead it was attributed to sources who never set foot in that country and who had not even existed.

Engelhardt 2008, 62

Adding to the show an earlier example of visual presentations of Tibet from an western perspective, *Geheimnis Tibet*, like other anthropological films from that period, carries forward this “occultization”, depicting Tibet and its people as mysterious, primitive, barbaric and thus inferior. Not only is the documentary constructing a westernized image of the “Other”, Tibet, it also participates in the formation of a certain self-representation of its maker, portraying its protagonists in an idealized way, and in all respects superior. The films therefore served not only as a mirror for those who made it, but also for the German audience who got to see it only years later for propaganda purposes in the middle of WW2.

And so, this film serves as a stark reminder of what happens when dominant narratives mask themselves as fact and when misunderstandings transform into violence. With this awareness, it is crucial that we continue to do the work of resisting these claims of objectivity, destabilizing the camera, shifting the focus, and piecing together a more accurate and inclusive account of our local and collective histories.

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ON GEHEIMNIS TIBET: RITU
SARIN AND TENZING SONAM IN
CONVERSATION WITH COLONIAL
NEIGHBOURS

Interviewed by Monilola Ilupeju and Marleen Schröder, with additional commentary from curators Natasha Ginwala and Krisztina Hunya.

MI-CN: You recently finished rewatching *Geheimnis Tibet* (1943), a film documenting the Ernst Schäfer-Tibet expedition of 1938-39, and I am curious to know, when did you first discover the film and when was the last time you watched it?

RS: I think we watched the film in like 1985 or so?

TS: Yes, 1985. We were students in the Bay Area and Ritu and I used to organize film screenings and found this film.

RS: We were looking at a lot of Tibet related films at the time and so we screened the *The OSS Mission to Tibet*, a film which documented the Tibet mission conducted by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) of the US (1942), and *Geheimnis Tibet* on 16mm.

MI-CN: What were your first reactions to the film?

RS: At that point, to see footage from Tibet was really interesting because there was no other footage, as Tibet was closed completely. I think one amazing thing was just how completely different it was, and of course we reacted to the voice over.

MI-CN: Yes, the narration! I also found it to be very wild, its affect was impossible to ignore.

TS: Watching it today I realized that I don't remember almost anything about the film from that time, but one thing I do remember are those scenes of them measuring the faces of the Tibetan people and the woman pushing their hands away. That left a real, lasting impression on us. And today we were looking at the film, and we realized that this scene actually is just a small part of the film, but that's what stayed.

MI-CN: I found that scene to be very intense too... she was laughing but she obviously did not want to do it.

TS: She was completely uncomfortable.

RS: And everytime they were touching, then there were cut-aways to these people, other people from the village laughing. But we aren't sure they were laughing at her in that scene--perhaps they were just edited in a way so that it looked like they were laughing, like it was all a game. But it definitely seems to have been altered in such a way that we really don't know how she felt, something felt covered up.

MS-CN: While watching the film, I was skeptical of how far can we trust the images and to which

extent is the film a construction...

MI-CN: Did you have other suspicions of this re-editing while watching the film?

TS: Totally, I mean a film like this is completely manufactured because you just have to accept whatever they are saying and whatever they are showing. Especially at the time when they first showed this film, there would have been no way of corroborating what they were saying or finding out the facts for yourself. But then, most of the films from that period, these so called anthropological film expeditions, were like that. They were made with a certain perspective and that perspective was what was presented in *Geheimnis Tibet*, and the footage was usually there to plaster around that commentary.

MI-CN: What were your intentions with including the film in your exhibition, *SHADOW CIRCUS* at S A V V Y Contemporary?

RS: Many people today still think of Tibet as a kind of Shangri La idea: the peaceful Tibetans. People always wanted to conquer it...I mean even in the film, how the narrator said, "*Our goal was Lhasa!*" There was always this kind of sentiment, and I think in a sense, the idea of the Shangri La does Tibetans a disservice, because then they have no agency. They are not people who have their own ways of thinking, their own political ideas, they are just these people from Shangri La. And we've always thought about this, and we've been working, especially in the early years, because everyone only thought of Shangri La and everyone who made films about Tibet was doing so from a very Western, outside perspective. Those were the only films being made, until we started doing work.

TS: Of course, this film is not one that presents Tibet as a Shangri La; quite the contrary, it presents it as this superstition-ridden, magical demon-infested place.

MI-CN: Yes, even the animals become these spiritual agents, props, to push this agenda.

TS: Exactly, the view of Tibet as really backwards, totally out of touch with the modern world. But I think the interesting thing for us was that our show is about another kind of Western involvement (the CIA) in Tibet and about Tibetan resistance, which is as far away from that Shangri La idea of Tibet as possible. We are already upending some preconceptions about Tibet just by the nature of the subject that we are touching.

We thought it was important to remind people of the different ways in which the West has engaged with Tibet. The CIA's engagement is yet one example of this type of western engagement, which was clandestine, war-centered, geopolitical involve

ment, but there were these other kinds of involvement as well, like the OSS Mission film *Inside Tibet* (1943) and other films made before 1959, before the Chinese invasion of Tibet. So yes, we essentially wanted to present different perspectives on Tibet from the West, and of course with *Geheimnis Tibet*, depicting a German expedition, in Berlin.

MI-CN: – and in S A V V Y 's Colonial Neighbours archive whose mission is to address, demystify, and educate people about Germany's colonial history... TS: Yes, it seemed perfect to have that as a potential access point for the audience coming to the show.

MI-CN: What are your opinions on whether or not the expedition was directly tied to the Nazi-Regime? I found it a hard to pinpoint exactly what their motives were for travelling to Tibet.

MS-CN: In Isrun Engelhardt's texts, you have this perspective of Ernst Schäfer: he was opportunistic, but he wasn't a real Nazi by conviction. Tom Neuhäus presents a different view in his book, *Tibet in the Western Imagination*, and it is a very controversial question. How important is it for us to actually find out if the expedition was connected to Nazism by some conviction or not, and how does it change the movie and the expedition?

TS: Frankly, this could have been a film made by any western expedition in a sense, the patronizing attitude, "poor natives" kind of outlook. In that sense it doesn't have to be connected to Nazism in particular...

NG: – but via an imperial power...

TS: Exactly. But the notoriety of this film rests on the fact that it was supposed to have been a Nazi-funded expedition and one of the rumors that we have always heard is that the idea was to search for the source of the Aryan race, and that was why these expeditions were funded and executed.

MI-CN: Maybe that's why they were measuring people's faces...

RS: Yes, and also I just think of the voices. In *Geheimnis Tibet*, the difference in the voiceover in contrast to the *OSS Mission* film is very stark; they are always conquering nature, everything is always so difficult and dangerous. It has a very different narration style compared to that of the American mission or even the British missions. There is always an air of superiority, in all of the expeditions, but in this one in particular, the way that Germans are posing themselves against nature, nature is fighting us, everything is like a war to them.

MI-CN: Perhaps this psychological distancing from nature is how they falsely ascertain this sense of superiority, because western perspectives tend to see people who are actually in touch with the land

and with nature as being primitive or sub-human because they associate them with animals. Personally, I never understood that connection...I found the expedition's relationship to nature in this film to be very bombastic and perverted for this reason. RS: And they said things like, "the native's naive mind," especially when they were putting the casts on them...

TS: Or the moment when it gets very dark and there is a kid crying, and the narration starts talking about how this symbolizes the demons overtaking their minds...

MI-CN: Yes, I was very curious about how they used religion and spirituality as another tool to other the Tibetan people.

RS: They really didn't get it, even for a second. Even when the Tibetans were being peaceful, the narrator would use very strange language when the natives were just sitting there, "they have so much time on their hands". Other cultures will go and say, oh these people are so peaceful, peaceful Buddhists, but here it was always interpreted as so evil.

NG: I think it is important to recognize that the history of German fascism has always had a strange relationship to the Occult, to spirituality, and to possession. It has a very skewed relationship with these specific aspects of what could be a broader bastion of religion and religion as part of a cultural conditioning that is not part of the western idea of the sacred. I mean this goes very far and part of it is to do with this kind of attitude of conquering Tibet and trying to rationalize what kind of spiritualism exists and what are the borders of it, in this Cartesian sort of way. But the other thing is ripe from parts of philosophy. So there is this obsession with trying to comprehend but at the same time draw lines between spiritual practices.

MI-CN: And then when they cannot comprehend something, that's when they make it perverted or distort its true meaning in order to make it more manageable.

MS-CN: Of course, and it was also used in order to build a certain image of Germans; like Germans are never lazy, always productive...

RS: Out with their camera always shooting, always recording...

MS-CN: Most of the Germans were fighting on the fronts at the time the film was first publicly shown and they needed this kind of identification. There is Ernst Schäfer and his team, always fighting, brave...

TS:riding on the importance of being the first scientific expedition to reach Lhasa.

RS: And when they reached Lhasa, the way they de-

alt with the locals I thought was very strange. For example, when they went to meet the city officials, the narrator said something along the lines of, be careful, you have to word things in a certain way, or you lose face, or you cannot get something from them if you upset them. The way it was said with no type of self reflexivity at all, they believed that you just have to tell the natives what they want to hear.

TS: And then they gave us examples of the things they were supposed to say: “Your Highness, I hope you have had a good issue of male children”— or something like that.

MI-CN: This was a very scary moment in the film because it hinted that the expedition team was never actually trying to get to know these people as human beings, even if they had these montages of them running around and laughing with the locals, connecting, having meetings, going to the festival, etc. I think it all just exemplified that if you enter into an interaction not because you are actually open to an exchange, but because you are strategically conspiring and trying to get something out of the other party, the basis is completely dishonest.

RS: And they didn’t even try to mask that. Other expeditions from other countries, they may want something, like the British, who wanted trade and control, but in that case there is a lot more masking.

TS: Also, there is a lot of misinformation when it came to describing the culture but particularly in describing religious practice. Whether that was genuine ignorance and a need to then make up for it by analyzing it in their way or willful misinterpretation, I’m not sure. But anytime it had to do with religion, it was always couched in terms of superstition, demonism, the masses being completely persecuted by the Lama...

MI-CN: That’s very ironic.

TS: Yeah, exactly, very ironic if you think about it, and there was no attempt to look at the philosophical underpinnings of Buddhist practice, what these rituals and symbols actually mean.

But again, it’s interesting because these are tropes that occur over and over again when it comes to Tibet, so you’ll have the disposing of the corpse by feeding the remains to vultures, which is quite a macabre ritual. And that holds a huge fascination for not just Germans, but also the Chinese, even today. You watch a Chinese movie about Tibet and you see scenes of them chopping up the body and it is always interpreted as something barbaric. The interpretation of the ritual is : the body has to be dissolved and there must be no traces of the body left behind, so that is why they feed it to the

vultures. This is completely untrue. Or the other thing that is often repeated is the masked dancer. It is a Buddhist ritualistic dance where they wear frightening looking masks and that’s always interpreted as demons or the world of the supernatural coming. The film pushes this sentiment, and also that the Tibetan people are being held in constant fear of these forces. This motive comes up again and again, not just in *Geheimnis Tibet*.

RS: And the ending was interesting too, because it refers to the fact that these people are totally unaware of the war, of the situation going on in the rest of the world. So it left a certain comment and brought up the war, referring to what was happening back at home.

MS-CN: It was published in Germany in 1943, in the middle of the war....

TS: Although the film was made in 1938-1939.

MS-CN: Yes, so 5 years later.

MI-CN: Why do you think it was released during that time?

MS-CN: I’m not completely sure, but somewhere it says that Himmler tried to prevent the film from being published because he was planning an alliance with Tibet and that it was a strategic decision to wait. But this is pure speculation...

MI-CN: After watching *Geheimnis Tibet* in the US, what was it like going back to Tibet for the first time?

KH: For you, seeing Tibet was not something you had grown up with, so this image was brought to you from these videos. And then one of the films in the exhibition shows you going back to the native land of your father...

RS: We did go to Lhasa eventually, the ultimate pilgrimage, and you see that in *Geheimnis Tibet* as well. Obviously it is completely, completely altered. And we went in the mid 90’s, so as you can imagine, now it is much different.

MI-CN: It’s interesting how it is the same medium of film, but just a drastically different approach to how you are trying to tell a story or the truth. Because Schäfer’s team was also just making a documentary about Tibet and so are you, but it really does feel worlds away.

KH: I think Schäfer’s team made a documentary about their expedition, not Tibet. They try to retain this objective position at all times. This Schäfer guy is this hunter, the conqueror, so in their film, they are clearly the protagonists. I don’t feel that Tibet is the main point for them.

TS: Yes, it could have been the Amazon, Cambodia...but going back to your question about seeing the footage and then going back to Tibet for the first time, I think as a Tibetan who was born and

grew up in India as a first-generation Tibetan refugee who had never seen Tibet, these images of old Tibet were all we had to hold onto in terms of some kind of visualization of what Tibet may have been like before the Chinese occupied it. However, I am under no illusion that all that we see in this film is in some sense very superficial, because firstly when the expedition team went to Lhasa, the kind of people they would interact or have meetings with would all be upper-class, aristocratic people. So people more like them in some sense, maybe people who had studied in India, so they are not an accurate reflection of what the society was like. And of course Tibet was a medieval society; it had a lot of negative aspects in regards to the way the religious institutions were way too powerful, the aristocrats were controlling everything. So there were a lot of problems in old Tibet that of course the Chinese now talk about all the time and use it as evidence of them “liberating Tibet.” With that knowledge, it nonetheless shows you what the land, the people, and the situation was like in that period and of course, when we went back to Tibet, we could see how drastically that situation had been revoked, destroyed, and transplanted by something even worse, in a sense. It was occupation and colonization.

MI-CN: Do you know if the movie had any type of life in Tibet? Could such a thing even be possible?

RS: No, I don't think anyone's seen it.

TS: Until 1959, until the Chinese came to Tibet, there were barely any cinemas. I think maybe there was one in Lhasa, which started in the 40s, so no, there was just no way of watching movies. And in exile, the time we saw the film in the early 80s in the US was probably one of the first times the film had surfaced. Even now, I don't think most Tibetans have seen this film.

MI-CN: In many ways, this exhibition is exploring a very sad phenomenon, that is a dominant voice having the power to rewrite the story of an entire country of people. What are your personal, political, or philosophical hopes when it comes to *SHADOW CIRCUS* being here in Berlin at SAVVY Contemporary and having many viewers learn about this piece of history for the first time? RS: It is very important to us because we shot the film *Shadow Circus* 20 years ago...and we were researching it for like 10

years before that. It's affected Tenzing's life since he was born, so just to bring it back to the public, just even to have people suddenly learn about it, that itself feels very good and important.

TS: This exhibition is important to us for two

reasons: firstly, as Tibetans, this whole history of the armed rebellion against China has been suppressed over the years. At the beginning of the 1970s, the movement came to a close, and when this happened it kind of got brushed under the carpet. One reason for that was because the Dalai Lama himself was never in favor of an armed struggle. But in the early days when it started, he was young—he didn't have that much control over what was going on and things were already escalated, so once it shut down, he had them change their whole policy of how the struggle was going to be, and it was going to be based completely on nonviolence. It was going to be a peaceful movement, based on Buddhist values. So that was promoted very strongly and after a while, it seemed like this episode of armed resistance was something that we should be ashamed of, because we were not good Buddhists—we actually fought and killed. So the resistance was actively repressed but it just gradually disappeared, to the extent that when we made the film (*A Stranger in My Native Land*, 1998), most young Tibetans had no idea that this had happened, even though it had happened in their lifetimes. So it was important for us at that time to resurrect the story and pay homage, to remember that this had happened and that these people had fought for the country and had defended themselves. It wasn't right for them to just be erased from our own history, let alone the Chinese history or the larger history. Twenty years have passed, and in a sense it's all disappeared, even among our own community. We know more about it now, but no one talks about it, it's not taught in our Tibetan schools, it's not an important part of our history—it's neglected.

Secondly, in recent years, the whole Tibet question in the international arena has really diminished. There was a time in the late 80s and 90s, where wherever you went it was all: FREE TIBET, from the Beastie Boys to Richard Gere, everyone was talking about it. And now it's just gone, disappeared, partially because China has become so powerful that they have succeeded in muzzling all of the other minorities. But the situation in Tibet hasn't improved—in fact it's gotten worse, so in that sense, we simply want to remind people that Tibet still exists. There are Tibetans who are now studying in Berlin; if they ever had the chance to come and see a show like this, it would be spectacular, but they would have to be very careful. Because, they probably won't know anything about this history, having grown up in Tibet.

NG: When we present this project in Berlin, we still don't know what kind of impact it will have

and that's why we are also thinking, how does one connect this historical film of the German relation to Tibet, going many decades back. But also how does one connect it to the more recent interest in telling the Cold War narrative from Germany, which has been happening in cultural institutions as we know. But it's not the story from the "third perspective" or a minor history. It's coming from the major players, from those who were part of this power axis. It opens up a personal archive, but it is also about opening up a dialogue with all of the stakeholders involved, including the CIA handlers, including the guerrilla fighters who are still alive. And then of course hopefully with the community that will come in during the show. We have made the initiative to also acknowledge the 10th of March (Tibetan Uprising Day), etc., so there are different ways in which we are trying to tie all of these elements together.

RS: With Geheimnis Tibet, I know it's very strange footage from the past, but it serves as a reminder. We always think everything is happening somewhere else and that we are not connected. And so we want to remind the public that at a certain moment in history, people in Germany, in Berlin, were thinking about Tibet for whatever reasons, strategic or otherwise. We were all touched by it, as Natasha brought up before, and I think Tenzing and I were really interested in this idea of resistance; how does one resist and continue resisting, especially when you know that the power on the other side is so huge, they will kill you, displace you — so what does one do? And how?

TS: The main thing is that, as overwhelming and as hopeless as it can seem at times, resistance should never disappear. Because once the oppressor succeeds in effacing you, then in a sense, that's when all hope is truly lost. Part of it is keeping it alive and reminding people constantly of the injustices happening all over the world.

MI-CN: Yes, people need to know that this is happening, has happened, we must look at it and deal with the reality of the situation.

TS: Absolutely. That's why I partially find Post-Colonial studies to be very interesting. Colonial Neighbours is also most likely concerned with this field of study too. Normally, we tend to look at colonial history as post-colonial situations through the lense of retrospection, looking back and seeing. But the reality is actually that it is still happening, and Tibet is a really good example of the fact that all of the colonial processes that were inflicted on countries in the past are taking place even now — building railways and walls, extracting mineral

wealth and using the railways to ship them out, flooding people, destroying the language — all of that is happening and so in a sense, it is not Post-Colonial Studies, it's just this ongoing situation that is constantly reminding us of its presence.

NG: In regards to Colonial Neighbours and the conquisition of what makes S A V V Y the place it is, the fact is that this question of freedom or resisting colonial mechanisms in all of their effects that come — be it economic, social, linguistic, etc. — it is so much about building the endurance that takes the outside and the inside. Within the essay, *A Stranger in My Native Land*, there is this section which is also about the question: is it possible to imagine freedom from within, or is there so much re-engineering of the mind and of circumstances in that territory that just don't allow for the imagination to take over. This material is censored so heavily that you don't have the images to imagine, to try to fix the circumstance even if its to a small degree. At the same time, this whole community that we keep saying we work with, are in touch with, that is forming this network — that is also part of what it is to keep reminding. That's also the role of this show, it's a type of recall.

RS: Yes, that's right. And so, we have to imagine, re-imagine, and keep that process going.

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