

Lobsang Rampa: The Lama of Suburbia

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I recently used *The Third Eye* in a seminar for first-year undergraduates ... having them read it without telling them anything of its history ... The students were unanimous in their praise of the book, and despite six prior weeks of lectures and readings on Tibetan history and religion ... they found it entirely credible and compelling, judging it more realistic than anything they had previously read about Tibet ... When I told them about the book's author, they were shocked, but immediately wanted to separate fact from fiction. How much of the book was true?¹

That question, raised by Donald S Lopez's university students, is one that critics have asked of Lobsang Rampa's controversial *The Third Eye* since Secker & Warburg first published it in 1956. Its general readership, however, was immediately entranced. *The Third Eye* details the childhood experiences of the Tibetan lama Tuesday Lobsang Rampa, from his monastic life, which began at the age of seven in the Chakpori lamasery of Lhasa, until the time he left to study medicine at Chungking University in China. The wealth of spiritual knowledge with which the book is packed, and its conversational tone, rendered it an instant hit. The fact that Tibet was something of an exotic locale to many Westerners probably contributed to the book's appeal; Tibet's occupation by Communist China made it a difficult place to access in the 1950s.²

Yet events soon took a very strange turn. Secker & Warburg was not the first publishing firm to have been offered *The Third Eye*. That honour went to E P Dutton, who, upon receiving the manuscript, sent copies of it to a number of scholars in the study of Tibet, its religion and its culture. These scholars included Hindu monk and South Asian Studies scholar Agehananda Bharati; British scholar Marco Pallis; Heinrich Harrer, author of *Seven Years In Tibet*; and Hugh

¹ Donald S Lopez, Jr, *Prisoners of Shangri-La* (Chicago, 1998) 103-104.

² Famed French female traveller, Alexandra David-Néel, entered Lhasa in 1920-21 and later became a lama herself. Her travel writings were well-known in the 1950s. See Tiziana and Gianni Baldizzone, *Tibet on the Paths of the Gentlemen Brigands: Retracing the Steps of Alexandra David- Néel*, (London, 1995) 10-12.

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Richardson, officer-in-charge of the British mission in Lhasa for nine years. The reports from these scholars were not favourable. Bharati and Richardson both told Dutton the book was a fraud and should not be published; the others concurred. When Dutton rejected the book, *The Third Eye* was offered to Secker & Warburg.

The new publishers received similar responses from their panel of experts and advised the book's author to publish it as a work of fiction. Rampa insisted, however, that *The Third Eye* was completely factual. Coupled with the book's undeniable sales potential, the author's insistence led Secker & Warburg to publish *The Third Eye* regardless of its critics, printing only a small, non-committal preface to cover them for any inaccuracies in the text. It was an immediate success, raking in a tidy sum for the three hundred thousand copies that sold throughout Britain and Europe in its first eighteen months.³

The scholarly community was outraged. Lopez summarises the scandalised reactions:

Snellgrove's review began, 'This is a shameless book'. Pallis declared the book to be a wild fabrication and a libel on both Tibet and its religion. Harrer denounced the book in a scathing review, occasioning the threat of a libel suit from the German publisher.⁴

Outraged by the success the book met with on its publication (and by the fact that the publishers had printed it at all), Pallis and other European scholars united to hire Clifford Burgess, a private detective who, in the words of Bharati, was 'to trace and subdue the writer'.⁵ Burgess was soon hot on Rampa's trail and eventually discovered him. It was then that the name which is now seen alongside that of Rampa in encyclopaedias was revealed: Cyril Henry Hoskin, son of a plumber and himself a surgical goods manufacturer and sometime photographer.

³ *Ibid*, 96-97.

⁴ *Ibid*, 97.

⁵ Aghananda Bharati, 'Fictitious Tibet: the Origin and Persistence of Rampatism', *Tibet Society Bulletin* 7, 1974, accessed 22 April 2006, <http://www.serendipity.li/baba/rampa.html>.

Burgess may have successfully traced Rampa but, as time has shown, he was certainly unable to subdue him. Hoskin had a ready explanation for his predicament: yes, he had indeed been born Cyril Henry Hoskin. That good gentleman's soul, however, had long since fled its corporeal form, so that the soul of a Tibetan lama, namely Tuesday Lobsang Rampa, could move in. Rampa's own body had failed him before his worldly task was complete due to tortures he had suffered at the hands of the Communists in China and of the Japanese in World War Two. In New Age terminology, such an occurrence is somewhat inelegantly termed a 'walk-in'.⁶

This was an astute assertion. When faced with true believers in Rampa's identity, even the most sceptical scholars find themselves unable to prove him wrong. Hoskin's claim that his own soul had moved on, but that of the Tibetan lama was still going strong, is not a claim that can be tested in any empirical way. It is a simple matter of faith, of belief or disbelief, and such faith is exactly what Rampa's followers (or with a less benevolent eye, his target audience) can provide.

Before examining the nature of Rampa's appeal to his devotees, let us explore a little further the lives and claims of Lobsang Rampa and his host Cyril Hoskin. Hoskin, it seems, always had a keen interest in esotericism, spending much time in public libraries devouring works of science fiction and the occult. At about the same time he grew his much-mentioned beard, Hoskin adopted the name of Dr Kuan-Suo. It was under this name that he first approached Secker & Warburg with his manuscript. Sometime after this he made the full transition to living as the Tibetan lama Tuesday Lobsang Rampa.

Lobsang Rampa's own history is an extremely colourful one, and took much time in the telling; Rampa's autobiography alone takes three volumes. *The Third Eye* tells of his birth into a wealthy Tibetan family, his entry into Chakpori lamasery at the tender age of seven, and his intense training with his guide the Lama Mingyar Dondup.

⁶ Michael F Brown, *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, 1997), 21-22.

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This training includes the notorious surgical procedure to open his third eye. During this time Rampa rapidly ascends through the various levels of monkhood, attaining the rank of abbot shortly after reaching the age of twelve. He enjoys several visits with the thirteenth Dalai Lama and finally heads to the Chinese town of Chungking to study medicine as prophesied.⁷

This is the point at which Rampa's second book, *Doctor From Lhasa* (1959), opens. In this, Rampa spends several years training both as a doctor and as a pilot and is captured by the Japanese during World War Two. After being severely tortured at their hands (which lends him a distinctly anti-Japanese outlook that is apparent throughout his following works), he escapes on the day the Allies drop the atom bomb on Hiroshima.⁸ Rampa's travels through China and Europe constitute the main body of his third book, *The Rampa Story* (1960), which also describes his transferral to the body of Cyril Hoskin and the start of his life with Hoskin's wife Sarah Anne Pattison, soon to become known as Mama San Ra-ab Rampa.⁹

Rampa's books act as a kind of compendium of a wide range of subjects generally classed as 'esoterica'. They include descriptions of such beliefs and practices as: meditation; astral travel; the lost land and people of Atlantis; the population and surveillance of Earth by a benign and intelligent alien race referred to as 'the Gardeners of the Earth'; yetis; prophesy and crystal gazing; astrology; breathing techniques and mnemonic devices; reincarnation and the afterlife; parallel worlds; hollow earth theory and Agharta; and man-lifting kites.

Rampa claimed that knowledge of all of these topics constitutes 'Lamaism', a particular form of Tibetan Buddhism which he and an elite core of lamas practice.¹⁰ In Lamaism, Rampa presents a further claim which it is difficult to refute: while most Tibetans, including

⁷ T Lobsang Rampa, *The Third Eye* (London, 1956).

⁸ T Lobsang Rampa, *Doctor From Lhasa* (London, 1959).

⁹ T Lobsang Rampa, *The Rampa Story* (London, 1960).

¹⁰ Rampa, *The Third Eye*, 132-133.

some lamas, practice the form of Tibetan Buddhism which is familiar to many, a select group of lamas with very particular training carry out the highly secret and restricted practices which Rampa describes in his books. Lamaism lends the topics Rampa discusses the authority of a tradition that is several thousand years old and is distinctly ‘other’ in the eyes of the West, rendering New Age memes such as alien abduction and Atlantis the weight of Buddhist ages. As Lopez notes, the blending of all this ‘garden variety spiritualism and Theosophy’ provides ‘an exotic route through Tibet back to the familiar themes of Victorian and Edwardian spiritualism, in which Tibet often serves as a placeholder’.¹¹

For those with little background in Tibetan religion or culture, Rampa’s books can at first present a believable picture. As the opening quote demonstrates, even undergraduate university students with six weeks of Tibetan study behind them were fooled. Certainly *The Third Eye* moves along quite gently until the actual operation to open Rampa’s third eye takes place. The young monk is fully conscious for the entire operation and therefore able to describe the sensation of having a sliver of wood inserted far between the hemispheres of his brain:

For a moment there was a sensation as if someone was pricking me with thorns. To me it seemed that time stood still. There was no particular pain as it penetrated the skin and flesh, but there was a little jolt as the end hit the bone. He applied more pressure, rocking the instrument slightly so that the little teeth would fret through the frontal bone. The pain was not sharp at all, just a pressure and a dull ache ... the operator, with infinite caution, slid the sliver farther and farther ... there was a blinding flash ... For a moment the pain was intense, like a searing white flame. It diminished, died, and was replaced by spirals of colour, and globules of incandescent smoke.¹²

The sliver was left in place for two weeks and, even before its removal, Rampa was able to see people’s auras even more clearly than could the Dalai Lama.

¹¹ Lopez, *op cit*, 103.

¹² Rampa, *The Third Eye*, 99-100.

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Rampa follows this account with a description of Tibet's man-lifting kites, huge structures of silk and wood in which the monks of a particular lamasery fly. Two monks actually meet their deaths by tumbling from the kites during Rampa's stay at the lamasery. The most doubtful part of this tale is the implication that the monks disregard the danger inherent in this remarkable leisure activity due to their Buddhist belief that reincarnation renders any loss of life immaterial.¹³ Later in this same book Rampa joins a herb-gathering expedition to the Chang Tang highlands, a verdant valley heated by volcanic springs 20 000 feet above sea level. It is in these highlands that the young Rampa sees his first yeti.¹⁴

Yet it is two later books of Rampa's – *The Cave of the Ancients* (1963) and *The Hermit* (1971) – which offer the greatest surprises. For those with little grounding in the subject, both present as quite believable descriptions of the life of a young Tibetan monk, but both quite suddenly and unexpectedly veer from this course. *Cave of the Ancients* describes an expedition into the Himalayas made by Rampa, his guide the Lama Mingyar Dondup and a small party of monks. Affairs proceed normally until the monks reach the cave itself, at which point the reader discovers it to be full of highly advanced technology; it is, in fact, a sort of time capsule left by the citizens of Atlantis. These artefacts are older than humanity itself yet still function and include a kind of projector on which the monks are able to observe Atlantis's destruction at the hands of its quarrelsome, warring inhabitants:

As we watched we saw a vivid flash in the sky, and one of the largest bridges collapsed into a tangle of girders and cables. Another flash, and most of the city itself vanished into incandescent gas. Above the ruins towered a strangely evil-looking red cloud, roughly in the shape of a mushroom miles high.

... [W]e saw again the group of men who had planned the 'Time Capsules'. They had decided that *now* was the time to seal them ... We heard the speech of farewell which told us – 'The People of the Future, if there be any!' – that Mankind was about to destroy itself, or such seemed

¹³ *Ibid*, Chapter 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, Chapter 15.

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probable, 'and within these vaults are stored such records of our achievements and follies as may benefit those of a future race who have the intelligence to discover it'.¹⁵

(We must remember, at this point, that readers are being asked to accept all these things familiar to the New Age movement as an ancient part of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.)

The Hermit is even more surprising. It tells of a young monk (whom we know to be Rampa) seeking tutelage from an ancient, blind hermit. At first the hermit describes his blinding at the hands of the Chinese and his consequent struggle to survive. Yet barely has he launched into his tale when (on page fourteen of the book) he reveals that he was rescued by an alien spaceship belonging to a race who refer to themselves as 'the Gardeners of the Earth'. These Gardeners rescued him in order to teach him Atlantis's tragic history. They also describe to the hermit the manner in which they watch over the earth and occasionally put humanity back on track by seeding the population with new, highly advanced races. The Minoans, the Aztecs and the Sumerians are several of the races the Gardeners planted in this way.

The Hermit may seem incredible, yet among followers of Rampa it is a favourite. His devotees seem to have no difficulty accepting the trials and tribulations of the hermit's life, and consider the book to be fascinating. In fact, this is very much a pattern with Rampa: no matter what he wrote, no matter what his detractors (who are generally academics and the media) said against him, and certainly regardless of the revelation of his identity as Cyril Hoskin, he has always enjoyed a healthy following, one that continues today, over a decade after his death.

Hoskin is not the only author to have written about many of these topics: the writings of the founders of the Theosophical Society, especially Madame Blavatsky, are full of similar claims about the spirituality of Tibet and the existence of Atlantis. Several branches of

¹⁵ T Lobsang Rampa, *The Cave of the Ancients* (London, 1963) 93.

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alien religion are available and texts on Agharta abound. Yet Rampa's appeal is unique: so far he is the only author to write about all these topics together in modern twentieth century prose, with a particular emphasis on plain speech and a definite avoidance of polysyllabic and foreign-language terms. His works are therefore highly accessible, as one devotee notes:

Once you begin to read Rampa, it's hard to put him down. His narrative is full of life, color and exciting adventure ... His style of writing puts you at ease immediately and you feel as if you are hearing these stories first hand from a close friend revealing these accounts in front of a crackling fireplace on a winter's evening. It's truly wonderful reading.¹⁶

Rampa's books are, however, not particularly scholarly: his thoughts are sometimes disordered, he never quotes references and refers to texts extremely rarely. None of this appears to be a problem for Rampa's followers, fuelling Bharati's low opinion of them as a 'depressing crowd of partly well-meaning, totally uninformed, and seemingly uninformable votaries' who have an 'extreme dislike of hard theological, scriptural, commentatorial argument, a dislike that characterizes all followers of the neo-Hindu-Buddhist, and the pseudo-Asian movements of a millennial type'.¹⁷ There can be no doubt that Rampa supported this lack of questioning into textual sources. Despite the fact that the religious education he describes was heavily dependent on intense familiarity with a large volume of scriptures, Rampa almost never quoted from these and certainly did not encourage his readership to obtain and scrutinise them. Hoskin himself could not read any Tibetan.

This is all part of Rampa's appeal. He presented esotericism with simplicity and his books as a reasonably complete source of knowledge, requiring readers to undertake no further study. The following post, from an internet discussion group on the topic of Rampa, summarises the pervasive attitude that Rampa's claims do not

¹⁶ Ken Adachi, 'T Lobsang Rampa', *Educate Yourself*, accessed 22 June 2006, <http://educateyourself.org/cn/lobsangrampaintrograybarker07oct05.shtml>.

¹⁷ Bharati, *op cit*.

need investigation but should be accepted wholly and without question:

Nobody really understands Dr. Rampa because everybody is wasting time looking for evidence. Who cares if he was Tibetan and he took an English body? The important thing is, he speaks about things we all should know in a language that is really foolproof instead of hiding behind 'ESOTERIC' terms. His work is valuable because of this. Our world is collapsing due to our lack of trust in other people, and this is another example of such things. Too bad for us.¹⁸

This post also expresses a prevalent belief that it doesn't actually matter whether Rampa was Rampa or Hoskin. His teachings on astral travel and similar topics are held to be spiritual truths that cannot be denied and do not need the validation that a Tibetan spiritual figure might be seen to provide. This was one of a large number of posts, only one of which spoke out against Rampa, calling him a fraud.

Similar attitudes can be found on mailing lists formed for the discussion of Rampa and his works. I have participated in a number of Rampa mailing lists and online forums in general, and Rampa_List2@yahoo.com in particular. These lists indicate the sorts of people who still follow Rampa. They are those often described in the study of comparative religion as 'seekers': seekers after universal spiritual truths behind human existence, truths that transcend the dogma of individual religions and generally offer hope and promise for the future. Rampa's works certainly offer this. The afterlife, for example, is described as a benign place where you may linger for as long as you choose before returning to earth for another cycle. In this place it is only possible to meet those with whom you are compatible. Pets may even join you on the astral plane after death. Rampa clearly stated that Lamaism does not conform to Buddhism: in the tenth chapter of *The Third Eye*, he claims of Lamaism that it 'departs from Buddhism in that ours is a religion of hope and a belief in the future. Buddhism, to us, seems negative, a religion of despair'.¹⁹

¹⁸ 'Discussion: Lobsang Rampa', *Gnooks*, accessed 26 April 2006, <http://www.gnooks.com/discussion/lobsang+rampa.html>.

¹⁹ Rampa, *The Third Eye*, 132.

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Rampa's followers are united by their quest for the truth, by their rejection of dogma and indoctrination, and by their hope for a better afterlife, which all humans and animals will automatically receive. From Rampa_List2@yahoo.com, it is apparent that many of Rampa's followers are intelligent, but do not fit well in society, often associating with those many years their senior when they are themselves young, and happy and willing to offer their own guidance to later generations. There is a general interest in conspiracy theories and apocalyptic prophesies pursued on the list. But there is also an interest in the various ways of giving back to the spiritual community: forms of healing such as reiki, naturopathy and Bach flower remedies, and the sharing of creative endeavours, meditations and prayers. Despite some disparity in points of view, there is much warmth and openness between members, and all are united in the belief that Rampa's teachings are part of a larger spiritual whole which would unite humanity, were every human ready to be a part of it. Amber, the group's moderator, describes her list members' general attitude towards Rampa: 'We don't see him as a guru we worship. Just a kind human soul who tried to share the metaphysical lessons he had mastered in his daily life'.²⁰ Donna, a list member, captures the overall feeling of the group:

There is no question in my mind that what [Rampa] teaches is true, as I have experienced some of it myself ... He was a kind and gentle soul, who wanted to be of service to future generations, and it seems as though he has accomplished that task quite well, judging from this list.²¹

The appeal of Rampa's works lies in their plain-language presentation of what his followers believe to be universal spiritual truths. Yet how was this apparent fraud from Plympton able to inspire such dedication and warmth? The answer to this must remain conjecture. However, from careful and close reading of Rampa's works, it seems likely that, regardless of how he felt when he wrote *The Third Eye*, by the time he died and probably for a considerable

²⁰ Amber, 'Another New Member!', Rampa_List2@yahoo.com.au, 13 September 2004, accessed 23 June 2006.

²¹ Donna Torres, 'Another New Member!', Rampa_List2@yahoo.com.au, 13 September 2004, accessed 23 June 2006.

time before that, Rampa truly believed his own claims. He lived his life as Lobsang Rampa and even his wife supported him in his choice, going on to write books of her own under her new name about living with the lama. Until his death Rampa remained vehemently opposed to the media and appeared bitter and hurt by the arrows and slings of his detractors. He even attributed the death of his beloved Siamese cat, the Lady Ku-ei, to persecution by the press.

The picture that emerges of Rampa is conflicted but poignant: by his later books he was so ill as to be bedridden or at best confined to a wheelchair. Yet he still attempted to answer every letter that came his way (although in later days he only replied to those which included adequate postage) and was known to send telegrams to readers at his own expense in situations considered to be urgent. Although often making seriously sexist remarks in his books, it was clear Rampa held his wife and their adopted daughter Sheelagh Rouse in the highest regard and he also spoke very highly of his intelligent female correspondents. One woman on Rampa_List2@yahoo.com has a recording of Rampa and his wife singing together, and it is not unusual to find his correspondence, painstakingly typed, posted by faithful correspondents on the net.

Rampa was a keen animal lover, regarding animals as persons in their own right, and was always surrounded by a bevy of Siamese cats. He frequently comforted bereaved pet-owners with the assurance they would meet their pets again in the afterlife. In *Feeding the Flame* (1971), one correspondent enquired, ‘Can you tell us what happens to our pets when they leave this Earth? Are they utterly destroyed, or do they eventually reincarnate as humans? The Bible tells us that only humans go to Heaven. What have you to say about it?’²² Rampa’s testy reply (‘Madam, I have a lot to say about it!’) takes six pages, but he summarised his reassurances in one paragraph:

Yes, animals go to Heaven, not the Christian Heaven, of course, but that is no loss. Animals have a real Heaven, no angels with goosefeathers for wings, it’s a real Heaven, and they have a Manu, or God, who looks after

²² T Lobsang Rampa, *Feeding the Flame* (London, 1971) 34.

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them. Whatever Man can attain or obtain on the Other Side, so can an animal – peace, learning, advancement – anything and everything.²³

This is a prime example of Rampa's provision of reassurances of which the major religions are devoid, strengthening his image as a guru for the everyday world.

Rampa's love of animals was so great that he even claimed his fifth book, *Living with the Lama*, was dictated to him by his beautiful blind Siamese cat, Mrs Fifi Greywhiskers, and was transcribed by him for her. This fact was ingeniously handled by the book's publisher, Corgi. The cover proclaims in bold letters *LIVING WITH THE LAMA: the latest episode in the astonishing story of LOBSANG RAMPA*. It is only on the title page that we read that *Living with the Lama* is in fact 'by Mrs. Fifi Greywhiskers PSC, translated from the Siamese Cat language by T Lobsang Rampa'.²⁴

To scholars such as Bharati, Lobsang Rampa is 'the arch-paradigm of esoteric phoniness',²⁵ the man in whom an entire tradition of glorification and romanticisation of the Far East culminated, the point at which Theosophy and its ilk blossomed into a widely accessible, easily disseminated, faith-based religion. To Rampa's followers, he is the first and only man able to consolidate all the truths they had hoped for in one set of comprehensible texts, a man of apparent generosity and warmth whose ultimate origins are of little or no consequence. There can be no doubt that Rampa has encouraged beliefs about Tibetan culture and Buddhism among his followers that are difficult to rectify. One can only hope that the damage to historical fact is balanced by the comfort Rampa affords his followers, who, it seems, are unable to find solace in traditional, more disciplined forms of Buddhism.

Regardless of the accuracy of his writings, it is as a poster-boy for Tibet that Rampa is attributed lasting value, even by his fiercest

²³ *Ibid*, 37.

²⁴ Mrs Fifi Greywhiskers and T Lobsang Rampa, *Living with the Lama* (London, 1964). 'PSC' stands for 'Pedigree Siamese Cat'.

²⁵ Bharati, *op cit*.

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detractors: the scholarly community. I end as I began, with a quote from Lopez, this time speaking not of his students but of his teachers:

Many [Tibetologists and Buddhologists] confessed that *The Third Eye* was the first book about Tibet that they had ever read; for some it was a fascination with the world Rampa described that had led them to become professional scholars of Tibet. Thus, some said, despite the fact that Rampa was a fraud, he had had 'a good effect'.²⁶

²⁶ Lopez, *op cit*, 112.

