

October 2007

## Identity Parade

Dolma's three daughters carried another pile of turquoise and lapis lazuli stones to the table as the Ladakhi headdress (*perak*) began to take shape. Each stone was carefully inspected for shape & size before being finely drilled and sewn into the back of the *perak*. The great trade caravan routes of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries would have carried many of these precious stones across the Himalayan watershed from Central Asia & Tibet, some reaching as far

south on the Indian subcontinent as Calcutta and Chennai. Several hours of labour and considerable expense went into the making of a *perak*, which traditionally signified the wealth of the mother and was passed along to her daughter when she married.



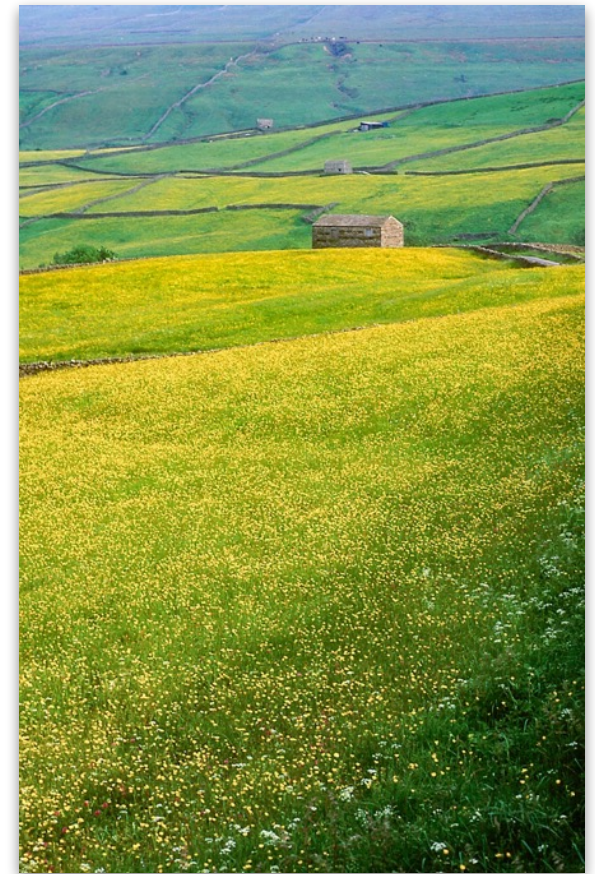
These days, Dolma only wears her *perak* during festival time or ceremonies in common with many societies, and like them, it remains precious as a symbol of cultural and national identity, recognition perhaps of our own place in a world, which is changing the effects of globalization.

Identity, nationalism, a sense of belonging; these are all ideals worth hanging on to or aspiring to, and we come across them every day, probably more so on our travels. Indirectly, they are having an effect on how we perceive & record a country or people, and the way in which we relate to the communities through which we travel. Some of the responsibility for this lies with the travel companies and tourist offices and how they go about promoting their tours, regions and countries. This in turn frequently puts pressure on some of the local people to don native costume and live in such a way, which might already have changed significantly with economic growth.

This is not to say that their sense of self has been lost or that they no longer care, but rather the practicalities of day-to-day living. Very early on in my career of shooting stock images for an American photo library, I was constantly encouraged to stay in the UK and photograph quintessential Great Britain – Yorkshire meadows, Cotswold villages, Tower Bridge, Salisbury Cathedral and cheese rolling!

I was assured that shooting in my own country rather than traveling the world to photograph the strange and exotic, would reap financial rewards. Somehow I managed to do both and I began to understand both the esthetic and commercial nature of identity at home and abroad.

Clichés were inevitable but they just needed to be done well – from the conical hats of Vietnam and tie-dyed turbans of Rajasthan to the Irish pub music scene and the Boxing Day Hunt. The images of popular cultural, architectural and scenic icons are as much in evidence today as they always have been, but are they really representative of the societies we live in and travel through? Should we as photographers and artists be paying more attention to the reality rather than the perception?



There are intriguing crossovers of identity which broaden our perception; In Vancouver, the wonderfully named Gung Haggis Fat Choy organization promoting Asian, Scottish & Canadian heritage links, appears to twist and broaden the idea of nationhood. The Scottish Tartan holds no such confusion. It is one of the most recognisable & longstanding symbols of national identity and is still worn with immense pride, daily by many and in their thousands at national & international events. Tartan makers are as busy as ever, and one recently rekindled ancient links with China.



Inspired by Chinese Consul General Madame Guo Guifang, a new Chinese-Scottish Tartan incorporating blue and white from the Saltire, red and yellow featured in the Chinese flag was unveiled in April this year. China's link with tartan goes back almost 3,000 years when an explorer in Xinjiang, Western China, discovered the burial place of a group of ancient Caucasian travelers wearing perfectly preserved tartans.

The promotion of identity or nationalism does not always work in the most positive way and we need look no further than the pages of our newspapers to see the evidence. Often the reputation of a nation or its people will precede us when we travel. This occasionally leads to prejudice on both sides, which in turn determines our impressions of a place and the reactions of those we come into contact with. I think that travelers from the UK are generally warmly welcomed in other countries (with a few notable exceptions). We are, whether we like it or not, a representative of our home & country regardless of our destination or the type of traveling we do.

Personally, I can count Iran (at the time of the Rushdie fatwa), Chile (during Pinochet's London house arrest) and Russia (towards the end of Soviet rule) as places where just being English could have got me into a lot of trouble. But traditional hospitality & personal pride outweighed any potential hostile thought or action.



It seems these days that we cannot get away from stories of nations being ripped apart by religious antagonism, animal species becoming extinct, and the trappings of modern society squeezing the life out of culture, tradition and unique ways of life. We may not be able to stop this progression, but we as image makers can certainly do our best to celebrate the unique nature of cultural identity wherever we find it.



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