Looking for Interpreter Zero: Imperial Intermediaries

The quest for Interpreter Zero in modern times takes us to the Everest Expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s, and the remarkable interpreter Karma Paul.

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Recent histories of exploration and colonisation have acknowledged that early accounts tended to privilege intrepid outsiders grappling single-handedly with the unknown; scholars now recognise that these were often complex undertakings involving different kinds of intermediaries. It is interesting to consider interpreters as one of several different kinds of go-betweens as a way of understanding the role they played. The British Raj provides us with some interesting cases, allowing us to set the scene for the quest for Interpreter Zero in modern times, beginning here with the Everest Expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s.

I – Karma Paul and the 1922 British Himalayan Expedition

When he was Karma he was a Buddhist … When he was Paul he was a Christian [1]

The British Everest Expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s can be understood as a by-product of Empire. While the climbers’ ambitions were to scale the world’s highest peak in an exploit to match the conquests of the North and South Poles earlier in the century, they relied on the manpower and infrastructure of the Raj. It was in 1852, in the course of its observations of the peaks of Nepal, that the Office of the Trigonometrical Survey discovered the world’s highest mountain. Known to Tibetans as Chomolungma, it was named Mount Everest after Sir George Everest, a former Surveyor-General. It was difficult for any Europeans to plan on surveying the mountain as both Tibet and Nepal were closed to foreigners; in 1860, an officer with the Indian Survey decided to train some locals in the use of the tools of the trade and send them to the Himalayas disguised as Buddhist pilgrims or traders.

They counted their every step by the revolution of their prayer wheels, or by the beads on their rosaries. At night they would write their notes on a roll of paper hidden inside the prayer wheel. They recorded compass bearings of mountains and rivers passed, by means of little compasses cleverly disguised as amulets worn round their necks [2]. These Pundits — or indigenous explorers — endured physical and mental hardship such that no one could attempt more than two or three of these top-secret expeditions. They were able to bring back information about river courses and the area around Everest, but no one managed to penetrate its glacier valleys. Captain John Noel, who had spent summers in the area with the East Yorkshire Regiment, tried to explore the passes leading to Everest in 1913. He too was in disguise, having darkened his hair and skin in the hope of passing for an Indian Moslem. He travelled with three men from the region, Adhu, Tebsoo and Badri, trusted companions whose language he spoke. His luggage included blankets, two tents, some guns and ammunition and two cameras. [3] They had an adventurous introduction to mountaineering in southern Tibet until they were turned back by Tibetan soldiers.

After Noel lectured about Everest at the Royal Geographical Society in March 1919, British interest revived and the RGS Everest Expedition was launched to prepare to explore the mountain should it prove possible. The following year, permission was granted by the Dalai Lama, through the good offices of Sir Charles Bell, formerly of the India Civil Service, who was on a special diplomatic mission to Tibet.
Noel — who had shown a strong interest in photography — appears on the official list of participants in the 1922 expedition as photographer and movie maker. The list also includes General Charles G. Bruce, the leader, seven mountaineers, a doctor, and three men with responsibility for translation and organisational tasks: Bruce’s cousin, Captain Geoffrey Bruce and Captain John Morris, both Nepali-speaking members of the Gurkhas Regiment, and Colin Crawford, an officer of the civil colonial government. In his book *The Assault on Everest*, Bruce makes it clear that many more people were involved (as well as hundreds of mules and yaks as pack animals). He mentions the sardar, or leader of the Sherpas, a cobbler, someone to deal with tents and stores, a plant collector, four young non-commissioned officers of the Gurkhas, several cooks and 75 porters. Bruce further reports:

> We also engaged the most important subordinate member of the Expedition – the interpreter, Karma Paul. He was quite young and had been a schoolmaster in Darjeeling. He had also worked, I believe, for an office in Calcutta. He was quite new to the kind of work that he would have to do. But he was a great acquisition to the Expedition, always good company and always cheerful, full of a quaint little vanity of his own and delighted when he was praised. He served us very well indeed from one end of the Expedition to the other, and it was a great deal owing to his cheerfulness and to his excellent manners and way with the Tibetans that we never had the smallest possible misunderstanding with any officials, even of the lowest grades, to disturb our good relations with the Tibetans of any kind or class.  

Karma Paul was born in Lhasa in 1894 and raised by missionaries in Darjeeling after he was orphaned. He was fluent in English, Nepali and Tibetan, languages that were used within the expedition and to communicate with others along the way. It may be that Bruce was particularly aware of the need for clear communication — he himself had served with the Gurkha Regiment for thirty years and spoke Nepali. In any case, his account of Paul’s contribution to the expedition shows his awareness of the nature of interpreting. When they went to pay their respects to the Rongbuk Lama at his monastery just before the party planned to set up their Base Camp on Rongbuk Glacier, Paul interpreted when the Lama asked Bruce about the purpose of the expedition. These were not questions that Bruce found it easy to deal with and he chose to play on what he understood to be Buddhist immaterialism and talked about the party’s pilgrimage to the point on Earth that was closest to heaven. He then ventured to tell another “white lie” in order to avoid drinking rancid-tasting Tibetan butter tea.

> I told the Lama, through Paul, who, fortunately enough, was able to repress his smiles (an actual record for Paul, which must have strained him to his last ounce of strength), that I had sworn never to touch butter until I had arrived at the summit of Everest.
Another way of understanding Paul’s role is to see how he features in the footage taken by John Noel’s 1922 film of the expedition, *Climbing Mount Everest*. This remarkable travelogue shows the party’s entire journey through West Bengal to Tibet, giving a strong sense of the run up to the attempts on the Mount. Paul first appears interpreting between Bruce and a Tibetan governor — where he gently shows the governor how to shake Bruce’s hand — and later at the second, more solemn meeting at the Rongbuk monastery. This took place after a third attempt on the summit had ended in the death of seven porters. The Lama had been notified immediately and the party visited him on their way back to Darjeeling. Paul is shown moving between the Lama and Bruce as well as the Gurkhas and porters as the Lama blessed them, displaying the “humble and reverent spirit” that Bruce describes. The Lama acknowledged his role by making a presentation to him as well as to Bruce. The interpreter was given packets of traditional Tibetan medicines to protect his health.

Bruce makes it clear that he thought Paul was ambitious: his reason for taking the job was to travel to Tibet, make a success of his mission and get gainful employment. He certainly made a good impression on the 1922 expedition: he was recruited on the next five Everest Expeditions before going on to train as an auto mechanic.

Karma Paul came to be greatly valued by the British climbers. Numerous photographs and a portrait in oils were presented to the Royal Geographical Society by the British members of climbing expeditions, who wished to remember his contribution. However, not being a climber, his role was not much recognized within Britain itself.

He may not be central to accounts of attempts on Everest, but he is a visible instance of the kind of intermediary whose role has to be considered if we are to acknowledge the complexity of undertakings like exploration. It is not just a matter of recognising locals and their contributions to outsiders’ endeavours but of seeing just how many kinds of intermediaries could be called upon. As a trilingual Christian of Tibetan origin in India, Karma Paul was in a privileged position to assist and benefit from an imperial enterprise, forming part of a tradition dating back to early days of the Raj.

You can find all chapters of *Looking for Interpreter Zero* [here](#).

Notes

[5] Ibid. p. 46.
[6] https://player.bfi.org.uk/free...
Christine Adams is a freelance interpreter and interpreter trainer with a longstanding interest in the history of the profession.

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