



a seat on the bus

by *ernest atencio*

FIELD REPORT

UNCOMMON CULTURE

I arrive at the bus stand in Leh a half hour early, making my way through the usual frenzy and diesel exhaust in hopes of getting a seat on the nine o'clock to Rizong Monastery. Even in Ladakh – this sparsely populated corner of the Tibetan Plateau – competition can be fierce for a bus seat.

This summer I've tried to fit my Western ways into the rhythm of a nearby village, washing my clothes on a rock in the stream and shitting into a hole in the floor. I am exhilarated every day by the lost-world view of terraced barley fields spilling down the valley, a ridge-top monastery, fluttering prayer flags, 20,000-foot peaks across the Indus Valley, the smells and sounds of a centuries-old way of life.

The family I stay with works from dawn to dusk; they serenely weed their exquisite vegetable garden, cajole irrigation water into the fields, tend to yaks and goats. The toothless grandfather occasionally walks into my room without warning to poke through my belongings and rattle on in Ladakhi.

Everyone I met walking down the path this morning offered a friendly greeting. One old man softly chanted a mantra as he fingered his Buddhist rosary. But the entire way I tensed in preparation for the chaotic contest of the bus stand. It's a

bumpy three-and-a-half-hour ride to the monastery and I don't want to stand.

I purchase a 26-rupee ticket, quickly throw my pack up top, and dash into the bus. I'm the only one on it. The bus doesn't leave until ten o'clock, someone tells me through the window. So it goes. At least I have a good seat.

A group of Ladakhi women calmly cram themselves into a bus that looks already full, their traditional tall velveteen hats teetering with odd dignity atop their heads. A couple from the remote Dha Hanu Valley argue loudly with a bus conductor about hauling some lumber. On one absurdly crowded bus, women are stuffing their children in through the back windows as it's pulling away.

Passengers begin loading onto my bus and I brace to defend my seat.

It's all entertaining and even comical at times – but something's out of kilter.

Back in the villages, Ladakhis still hold to a slower pace and a long Buddhist history of sharing and reciprocity, always giving more than taking. But the bus stand transforms those ancient customs into rude competition.

In a runaway global economy, places like Ladakh are turning fast from Shangri-La into just one more impoverished neighborhood of the global village. Travelers like me from the rich developed world make the abundant simplicity of Ladakh seem like poverty and scarcity. I watch this drama play out as people scramble for a bus seat.

Then, over to one side of the dusty lot, I notice another observer, a nomadic herdsman from the high pastures. He stands quietly out of the fray with his hands clasped behind his back. A long braid emerges from under a fur-lined hat and disappears into his heavy woolen robes. With eyes deeply wrinkled by the sun and wind and distances of the wild plateaus he comes from, he looks out at the swarming crowd.

He appears paralyzed by the swirling confusion of the bus stand. But I imagine he'll learn the game soon enough and probably get a seat on the next bus. Or maybe he'll just decide on a peaceful walk home.

Ernest Atencio is a writer, anthropologist and activist trying to live the village life back in his northern New Mexico homeland.