



Beyond East and West: the Meaning and Significance of Kim's Great Game

by Alessandro Vescovi

Jeffrey Franklin, commenting on *Kim's* critical approaches points out a polarization between

(1) those who celebrate the novel's accomplishment in portraying Indian peoples and Eastern religions with an evenhandedness and sympathy that transcends its author's well-known prejudices, and (2) those who focus on the implicit racism of the novel, its assumption of British superiority, and its polemic to the effect that wise Indians must recognize the God-given rightness of British colonial rule. (Franklin 2008: 128)

Indeed as early as 1941, Edmund Wilson struck the keynote when he wrote that

Kipling has established for the reader – and established with considerable dramatic effect – the contrast between the East, with its mysticism and its sensuality, its extremes of saintliness and roguery, and the English, with their superior organization, their confidence in modern method, their instinct to brush away like cobwebs the native myths and beliefs. (Wilson 1941: 123-124)

In his essay Wilson also inaugurates the fortunate metaphor of East and West (epitomised by the lama Teshoo and Colonel Creighton) as parallel worlds that never meet, less than ever at the end of the novel. Subsequent criticism, including Said's highly influential introduction to the Penguin edition of *Kim* – later republished as part of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) – owes much to Wilson's take on the text, so that its



ideological biases have been expounded more often than the themes it is built on. Said, for instance, concludes his brief outline of the plot saying that Kim eventually joins the imperial game, as though it were written in so many words in the novel.

In order to investigate the meaning and the significance of the Great Game, it will be useful to linger a while on its fictional antagonist, Buddhism, which is perhaps less elusive, and has recently won non-undeserved critical attention. I am referring especially to Franklin's (2008) comprehensive study of the impact of Buddhism on Victorian England, which devotes a whole chapter to *Kim*. Granting that Kipling portrays two worlds apart, the choice of having India represented by a Tibetan red lama strikes one as odd, as Buddhists have always been a minority in India and therefore by no means representative of Indian cultural heritage. Moreover Kim's spiritual guru, Teshoo, is not just any lama, but is defined as a "Red Hat" lama, namely a member of a particular Tibetan inland sect, while in India "Yellow Hats" would have been far more common (Hopkirk 1996: 42). If verisimilitude is not the main reason that compelled Kipling to opt for a Buddhist lama, what then were his reasons?

There may be different answers to this question, depending on the viewpoint. On a religious level, Kipling was, like many other Victorian intellectuals, fascinated by Buddhism (Franklin 2008, Thrall 2004); on an ideological level, the discipline of the lama was exactly what the high spirited Kim needed to get ready for the Great Game (Villa 2003); on a narrative level, the syncretism of Buddhism would help the integration with western values and with the different Indian communities. As Wilson notes, Kipling's poetics move from straightforward realism in his earlier production, most noticeably his short stories, towards a kind of allegory in his later fiction, which features animals and even engines as protagonists. Wilson contends that this shift "is evidently to be explained by his need to find characters that yield themselves unresistingly to being presented as part of a system" (Wilson 1941: 153). This may or may not be the case; what is certain is that Kipling at the time when he wrote *Kim*, was experimenting with allegory – *The Jungle Books* was published in 1894, seven years before and more animal stories would follow. Thus, the relationship between Buddhism and India is probably more metaphorical than it is metonymical. No matter how accurate the description of the lama may be, his character and creed are not only an instance of Indian reality, but they stand for spirituality in general, and more particularly for the importance of spirituality in the formation of the young hero's self,¹ as we shall see.

The reasons for choosing the so-called Great Game as a counterpart for Buddhism are even less clear. To take it simply as a metonymy for European culture would be rather belittling for the west: according to this interpretation, the best that India can offer is Buddhism, while the best that Europe can offer is espionage. Also in

¹ Franklin goes even further than this and takes Buddhist doctrine as a cue to read the whole novel. His theory is fascinating, but in my view lacks evidences, especially in that he attributes to Kipling a much deeper knowledge of Buddhist philosophy than he actually could have at that time (Zorzan 2013).



this case, a metaphorical reading seems more rewarding; the Great Game may stand for active life as opposed to contemplative life. This interpretation seems all the more persuasive because the Great Game as it is described in the novel did never exist; it is almost entirely Kipling's invention. At the time when the story is set (i.e. in the late Eighties), Britain did not have an intelligence service, nor an Ethnographical Department; there was only a governmental task force called "Survey of India" that was entrusted with the task of charting all India in response to a typically English anxiety of control (Said 1993, Baucom 1999).

Surely, the work of the "Survey of India" was not associated with the fortunate phrase "Great Game", which Kipling almost certainly took on from Captain Arthur Conolly, a remarkable man half spy half diplomat, beheaded in Bukhara (a hundred miles west of Samarkand) in 1842. Conolly, an Irishman like Kim, first arrived in India a sixteen years old cadet and was very impressed by the Reverend Reginald Heber, the newly appointed Bishop of Calcutta. As a consequence of this encounter, joining Christian zeal and adventurous spirit, he undertook the personal mission to win the Muslims to a kinder view of the Christians. He first demonstrated his intrepidity – or recklessness – when he decided to come back from a leave travelling overland through Persia and Uzbekistan under the assumed (punning) name of Khan Ali. Conolly himself recounted his adventures in a book entitled *Journey to the North of India, Overland from England, Through Russia, Persia, and Affghaunistaun*, published in 1834 and followed by a second edition in 1838 (Becker 2012). Along with the author's adventures, the book advocates British intervention in Central Asia in order to civilize the area, abolish slavery and protect British dominions from Russian aggressions – with the desirable side-effect of opening up the area to British traders.

Once in India, Conolly insisted on being sent to gather intelligence in Central Asia, and eventually obtained a mission to Kabul "for the sake of adding to the information possessed by the government about those countries" (Becker 2012: 64). There he halted for some time waiting for the situation to clear up. In the meantime, a British soldier, Charles Stoddart, himself on a diplomatic mission, was reported captured and forcefully converted to Islam in Bokhara. The news made quite a sensation among the English troops, and murmuring went around that the military chiefs did not care for his fate. Eventually Conolly was allowed to leave in order to try to rescue Stoddart. Just before leaving, he enthusiastically wrote to Sir Henry Rawlinson, thus summing up his hopes about the "grand game":

If the British Government would only play the grand game – help Russia cordially to all that she has a right to expect – shake hands with Persia – get her all possible amends from Oosbegs – force the Bokhara Amir to be just to us, the Afghans, and other Oosbeg states, and his own kingdom – but why go on; you know my, at any rate in *one* sense, *enlarged views*. *Inshallah!* The expediency, nay the necessity of them will be seen, and we shall play the noble part that the first Christian nation of the world ought to fill. (Meyer and Brysac 1999: 127)



In a later epistle to the same man, he furthers his point, and for and the grand game becomes the great game, albeit uncapitalized:

You've a great game, a noble game before you, and I have strong hope that you will be able to steer through all jealousy, and caprice, and sluggishness, till the Afghans unite with your own countrymen in appreciating your labours for a fine nation's regeneration and advancement. (Becker 2012: 63)

On the way to Bokhara, Conolly met several people who earnestly tried to discourage him from his purpose, but to no avail. Despite an initial display of friendliness on the Emir's part, a few weeks after his arrival in Bokhara, Conolly was accused of being a spy and was imprisoned together with Stoddart. Despite the grim situation, the two were somehow able to smuggle a few messages out of their prison before they were finally executed in 1842. Hopkirk argues that the metaphor of grand game and great game refers to the game of Rugby and not chess, as some maintain, as Conolly had been at school in Rugby. Be what it may, the phrase, felicitous as it was, never caught up until Kipling made it popular (Becker 2012).

Kipling had probably a political agenda in mind when he decided to drive attention onto the English policy in Central Asia. Like Conolly fifty years earlier, he was preoccupied by the Russian policy, especially after the first two Afghan wars (1839-1842 and 1878-1880 the first was a disaster for the English, while the second was more favourable, but did not succeed in securing the area). Besides, as with the case of the Boer war, Kipling was critical of what he considered a lack of initiative on the Government's part and thought that only a military action on the borders could preserve the integrity of the Empire (Kling 2002). Although recent historiography has pointed out that there are no historical reasons to believe that Russia ever posed a threat to India (Hamm 2013), Kipling was certainly convinced of the contrary.² Besides, Kipling had been a witness to the difficulties that the English troops faced during the Boer war because of their lack of reliable intelligence and maps (Parry 1994) and therefore fostered any action that would improve the knowledge of the neighbouring potentates.

These are two reasons that may have suggested the Great Game as a scenery for *Kim* – one political, stressing the importance of the control over central Asia, and one ideological, acknowledging in Conolly the almost forgotten champion of the game who had long before taken upon himself "the white man's burden". Besides, it goes almost without saying that the alliteration of the two guttural Gs in Great Games – always capitalized in the text, as Hopkirk (1996: 122) points out – must have appealed to Kipling the poet.

² When he was a student in Westward Ho!, he proposed a petition against Russia, which his headmaster opposed to no avail.



So far this historical recognition would seem to lead to a downright realistic reading of the novel, but the struggle for the control of central Asia was not carried out the way Kipling describes; historians insist that what we read in *Kim* is purely fictional, in spite of some clues he may have picked up when he was a journalist in Lahore. In order to comprehend the poetical reasons of Kipling's inventions it will be necessary to examine what these clues were and the significance of the Great Game within the framework of the novel.

Never mind how proud they were, ever since the "Mutiny" the English felt that the Empire was a giant with clay feet. The only forces that kept it together were a well-established administration and a fair amount of diplomacy to deal with the local kingdoms, some of which as big as England itself. As Said points out in *Orientalism* (1978), knowledge was a crucial element both in exercising and in legitimating power over subjugated people; so much so that British officers would spend a lot of money and energies in trying to gather knowledge. Colonel Creighton himself criticizes those civil servants who do not know the natives and feign not to understand them, concluding that that "there is no sin so great as ignorance" (Kipling 2002: 102). Still there was no central agency that organized intelligence, let alone an organized ethnical survey; intelligence work was mostly amateurish.

In fact, in India, paid informants called *harkaras* were travelling up and down the country long before the British took over, to gather and sell information to various local rulers and merchants. Besides, rulers used to send informants called newswriters out to distant courts in order to report on gossip and intrigue. However the identity of these informants was usually well known and their presence tolerated (Kling 2002: 303-304). By the end of the Eighteenth century, every British high officer had his own team of personal informants, and it is reported that even prostitutes were employed in that capacity (Kling 2002: 304). Nevertheless, as seen from the British viewpoint, one of the reasons that had made the Mutiny possible was the lack of intelligence, so that the British had lost touch with the natives. As a result, in the following years they set up a number of devices aimed at gathering information: local press was translated into English, and official groups like the Indian National Congress (later Gandhi's party), were encouraged in order to keep the debate under control (Kling 2002: 305). However, it is important to point out that these intelligence operations had no dedicated department and were not conducted by spies undercover. Moreover, they had nothing to do with the struggle for the control of Central Asia but for one man. This man caught Kipling's phantasy, which turned him into Colonel Creighton. The original was Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Montgomerie (1830-1878), head of the Royal engineers, and later, as if fulfilling Creighton's own ambition, Fellow of the Royal Society thank to his researches in India (Hopkirk 1996: 191). At that point mapmaking and surveying outside the British territories was too dangerous for Europeans, so Montgomerie had the idea of sending agents in disguise to survey territories in Afghanistan and Tibet. These agents were not Europeans, but "natives", and they



would travel either as merchants – like Mahbub Ali – or disguised as monks. As they could not go about with measuring rods or theodolites, they were trained to pace up and down with a regular cadence and annotate distances according to the number of their steps. Fake monks, in particular, carried 100 beads rosaries – while true lamas would have 108 beads on theirs – so that they could pretend to be meditating while keeping count of their own footsteps. These Indian-born English agents were half-mockingly called *pundits*, a title which usually designates a knowledgeable or erudite person. Peter Hopkirk (2006) underlines that these *pundits* were never more, and probably much less, than a dozen, and their existence was limited to that particular episode. Although they were working undercover, they were not meant to spy, or do any diplomatic work, but only to draw maps.

Another source of inspiration for the Great Game as depicted in *Kim* is freemasonry. Given the semi-secret ways of the masonic lodges, we do not know much of Kipling affiliation with freemasonry, and we still know very little of the history of Freemasonry in India. According to the Indian Freemasonry official website, a lodge had been opened in Calcutta as early as 1774, but it was not until the second half of the Nineteenth century that Indians took active roles in the organization. However, at the time when Kipling, who was then living in Lahore, joined the lodge Hope and Perseverance, in 1885, Masonry was one of the few spaces where young and like-minded intellectuals could meet to discuss regardless of their race. Kipling believed in a common ground for all different religions and “Freemasonry offered a system that gratified both his craving for a world religion and his devotion to the secret bond that unites the men who bear the burden of the world’s work” (Carrington 1955: 55 cit. in Thrall 2004: 47). This is how Kipling commented on this experience years later in *Something of Myself*:

Here I met Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, members of the Arya and Brahma Samaj, and a Jew tyler, who was priest and butcher to his little community in the city. So yet another world opened to me which I needed. (Kipling 1937)

It is very likely that Freemasonry provided a model for the ethnic diversity of the Great Game’s agents and their spirit of brotherhood, as well as for the secret codes and amulets that they used to recognize one another when they were travelling in disguise,³ even though they had never met before. Colonel Creighton is as much a military chief as a Grand Master. Furthermore, two details of *Kim’s* Great Game seem to make more sense in a freemason lodge than in a governmental department; one concerns recruitment, which consists in the presentation of a novice by a senior member, the second is the initiation ritual. Both feature in the novel; it is Mahbub Ali who insists with Colonel Creighton that Kim is ready for the Game: “[Kim] has

³ Freemasonry informs also other stories by Kipling, the most significant being probably “The Man who Would be King”.



[experience] already, Sahib”, pleads the horse dealer, “as a fish controls the water he swims in” (Kipling 2002: 147), thus convincing Creighton to enrol him. At this point Kim is given his first official mission, but before starting off, he is secretly initiated in a den up a filthy staircase by a blind sorceress called Hunifa, who paints his body and invokes a number of demons to give him protection. At the end of the ritual, which Hurree Babu observes with anthropological curiosity, Kim receives the amulet that all agents carry with them.

To make a long story short, the phrase “Great Game” in *Kim* takes on a distinct meaning; it is neither the political and cold war-like struggle for the control over Central Asia, nor an intelligence service aimed at the control of the natives – as Said would have it – nor the simple Survey of India, nor a colonial version of the masonic organization. Apparently Kipling drew inspiration from all these to create his own fictional Great Game. The question that remains unanswered is “why?”. Why did he invent a kind of British India of his own that did not actually exist to confront it with a well-established Oriental religion? *Kim* was written long after Kipling, who remained a traveller throughout his life, had left India for good. Kipling had strongly believed in an ideal Raj ruled by generous men who administered the Law, ready to devote their lives to the welfare of India, but the reality he confronted was far different. He disliked the petty provincial officers that were his countrymen in Lahore, and they heartily reciprocated. Involuntarily, by making up his own version of it, Kipling endorses a critical attitude, as if nothing that actually existed in British India was good enough to compete with the lama’s spirituality.

In fact many critics have described Kim’s dichotomy and Kim’s doubts about his identity – “who is Kim?” the boy often wonders – in terms of competition between East and West, often arguing that the whole novel was written to justify English imperialism in India by asserting the superiority of the English race. However, as an assertion of the Western superiority the novel is rather weak, considering that it has to invent its own brand of imperialism. I am not denying that there is a sort of competition between Oriental and Western values, but this competition, at least in the retrospective, nostalgic mood of the novel, does not suggest the superiority of the West. It is simply the competition of two earnest debaters confronting each other on an equal level – it does not matter that such level may only exist in the utopic space of the narrative. There is no internal evidence in the novel to prove that the Great Game is superior to Teshoo’s spirituality; and even the Great Game is hardly a good champion of “the West” as such, considering that, apart from Creighton, all agents are Indian. Moreover, Kim’s love is not divided between Teshoo and Creighton, but between Teshoo and Mahbub Ali, between a spiritual guru and a practical teacher – both natives. Creighton himself interacts very little with Kim – and rather cynically – and teaches him practically nothing. It is Teshoo who pays for Kim’s schooling and Mahbub Ali who actually introduces him to the Game and teaches him a few lessons on how to survive on the road.



Another source for the phrase “Great Game” is to be found in *Waverley*, Scott’s historical *Bildungsroman*. Actually the expression is in French and occurs at the end of chapter 29: “Ah, Beaujeu, mon cher ami,’said he, as he returned to his usual place in the line of march, ‘que mon métier de prince errant est ennuyant, par fois. Mais, courage! C’est le grand jeu, après tout.” (Scott 1814). Matteo (2000) points out that there are several structural analogies between *Waverley* and *Kim*, in that both heroes develop along similar lines establishing similar relationships with their respective milieus. When we consider *Kim* as a *Bildungsroman*, Teshoo and Mahbub come to represent two parts of any youth’s adolescence attracted both by spiritual development and by the sheer energy of physical creativity. In a perfect world, the two halves may offer different options, but should not conflict: *mens sana in corpore sano* might be Kim’s motto. The open ending of the novel has been interpreted as a way to avoid choice on the part of the author, while it is obvious, Said and many others claim, that Kim will become an Imperial agent. Someone has also gone so far as to point out the irony of the lama paying for the education of a man who will work to subjugate his people (Suleri 1992). However, in the narrative space, Teshoo does not see a conflict between his teachings and St Xavier’s School, which he paid for Kim. Mahbub, the practical teacher, is actually jealous of the lama and despises his lack of practical knowledge, but eventually he too is forced to see that there is no real conflict between their teachings and that Kim will benefit from both.

Both Mahbub and the lama love Kim, their apprentice and *chela*, like an adopted son. Indeed, after finding his river, the holy man decides to go back to show the way to his disciple, re-enacting the so-called *Bodhisattva*,⁴ like Gautama Buddha before him, he deliberately delays the achievement of his own liberation in order to save his disciple, too. The denouement of the novel is not in the words of either Kim or the narrator, but in the encounter of Kim’s two putative fathers, the secret agent and the monk, while he lies unconscious. Mahbub is rather sceptical of the lama’s faith and is worried lest he takes Kim with him. But Teshoo reassures Mahbub telling him that, after bathing in the river, Kim will become a teacher. The Pathan responds somewhat disconcerted that, actually, Kim is wanted as a “scribe for the State” (Kipling 2002: 236). To which Teshoo replies:

“To that end he was prepared. [...] He aided me in my Search. I aided him in his. Just is the Wheel, O horse-seller from the North. Let him be a teacher; let him be a scribe—what matter? He will have attained Freedom at the end. The rest is illusion.” (Kipling 2002: 236)

⁴ I am following Franklin’s (2008) view on this point; for a different interpretation of this particular issue see Sullivan (1993).



The practical horse dealer does not share the lama's point of view, but in the end, he rises contentedly:

"No matter at all; but now I understand that the boy, sure of Paradise, can yet enter Government service, my mind is easier. I must get to my horses. It grows dark. Do not wake him". (Kipling 2002: 237)

This is how, at the end of the novel, the hero comes of age, not to abandon either spiritual or practical life, but to live through it with the detachment that comes from the knowledge that practical life is ultimately an illusion. During his formative years, Kim is indeed poised between practical and spiritual life but there is no evidence that he cannot find a balance as an adult.

Thus, on a narrative level, the Great Game is the epistemological equivalent of Buddhism. Between the two worlds there are analogies that make it consistent that a grown up Kim may encompass both Buddhism and the Great Game. The gist of the lama's teachings presented in the novel is that life is an illusion from which we must endeavour to free ourselves; while ordinary people are still bound to the illusion of passions and materiality, the wise man knows that all this is just Maya, delusion. In other words, the wise man can see through the illusions of life, knowing that there is a deeper truth concealed from most. Likewise, secret agents, and for that matter diplomats, are aware of a number of truths that are hidden from the general public, and so their outlook is lucid and disenchanted. In fact, those who handle top secrets are supposedly entrusted by common people with the task of managing them on their behalf, like modern secular priests. Only exceptional people achieve enlightenment, like Teshoo, and only exceptional people become members of the Great Game, as Creighton tells Kim on introducing Hurree Babu. Kim's exceptionality is underlined several times from the start of the novel, both by Mahbub and Teshoo. The merchant likens him to a pony that "has no equals" (Kipling 2002: 93). And later adds:

"As regards that young horse,' said Mahbub, 'I say that when a colt is born to be a polo-pony, closely following the ball without teaching – when such a colt knows the game by divination – then I say it is a great wrong to break that colt to a heavy cart, Sahib!" (Kipling 2002: 94)

While Teshoo believes that Kim has a divine origin:

"But thou wast sent to me – wast thou sent to me? – for the merit I had acquired over yonder at Such-zen. From beside the cannon didst thou come – bearing two faces – and two garbs." (Kipling 2002: 32)



Kim therefore seems to have both the intellectual and the moral standing to handle truths that are above other people, be they practical or spiritual. If we look at the novel from this viewpoint the term "Game" takes on a further meaning, that of amusement, entertainment. No matter how seriously we may take it, an adult knows that a game is after all simply a game; likewise, no matter how seriously the Great Game may be taken by the players, an adult Kim will always see the ultimate futility of such an enterprise.

The significance of the Great Game cannot be disjointed from the significance of Buddhism; both serve as complementary forces to shape Kim's character. Spying, playing the Great Game, is not important in itself, though it provides the plot with a certain thrill. The challenge for Kim is to play the Game with the dedication of Mahbub Ali and the detachment of Teshoo.

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