

Michel Peissel (1937–2011)

Michel Peissel, an eminent French ethnologist, explorer, artist and author of numerous books on the Himalaya–Tibetan region, died on 7 October 2011, aged 74, at his home in Paris. His death marks the end of the traditional generation of explorers who enjoyed arduous journeys on foot or on horseback to the remote parts of our planet, who were gifted with both artistic skills and scholastic curiosity, and who loved and respected the lands and the peoples they visited. These explorers have laid the foundation of our knowledge of the world. With his nearly 40 journeys, 20 books, 22 documentary films, and hundreds of essays and interviews, Peissel played a prominent role in researching and chronicling the Himalaya–Tibetan cultures intertwined with the high landscape. He was one of the outstanding explorers who placed this vast historical and fascinating geography in the global spotlight. Peissel won several awards for his publications and expeditions, but shunned publicity. A definite volume on Peissel's biography, expeditions and contributions is yet to be written; this brief note is offered as a tribute to his life and work.

Michel Georges Francois Peissel was born on 11 February 1937 in Paris. Son of a diplomat, he spent part of his childhood in London, where his father was posted. Peissel was thus a native speaker of both English and French, and in which languages he later wrote his travel books. He went to schools in England and France. As a young boy, his heroes were explorers like Captain Robert Falcon Scott and Alexander von Humboldt. At age 18, upon reading Fosco Maraini's *Secret Tibet*, Peissel was fascinated by Tibet and started reading Charles Bell's *Grammar of Colloquial Tibetan*. For a while he attended classes at Oxford University and then at Harvard Business School. But in 1958, after an adventurous solo trekking (300 km in 42 days) along the eastern coast of Yucatan (Quintana Roo) in Mexico, where he found a number of Mayan archaeological sites, Peissel left the business school and decided to study at the Sorbonne where he eventually obtained a doctorate in Tibetan anthropology. Peissel's first book, *The Lost World of Quintana Roo* (1964), recounting his Yucatan travel, became a

bestseller, won the US National Book Award in 1965, and sparked international interest in the coastal Mayan sites.

Peissel's first trip to the Himalayas was in 1959 when he visited Sikkim with the hope of crossing into Bhutan, but for which he could not get a permit. Instead he journeyed the Sherpa region of Solu-Khumbu, south of Everest (*Tiger for Breakfast*, 1966). In the summer of 1964, dressed in a Tibetan sheepskin coat and with the help of local guides, Peissel trekked the little known Buddhist kingdom of Mustang in northern Nepal. He revisited Mustang in 1966–67. The first-hand information he collected about Mustang's culture and history constituted research materials for his doctorate thesis; he also wrote a feature article on



Mustang for the *National Geographic* magazine (October 1965). His travel book *Mustang* (1967) became an instant bestseller both in English and in French, and was translated into several other languages; it also won the Louis Castex Prize of the French Academy in 1971.

It was only in 1968 that the Bhutanese Government gave an entry permit to Peissel; his pioneering journey through Bhutan is narrated in *Lords and Lamas* (1970). In 1972, Peissel published *Cavaliers of Kham*, based on his observations and interviews in Mustang during the 1960s; the book detailed the activities of Tibetan Khampa guerrillas, who launched attacks against the Chinese Red Army for over two decades. The widely

read exposé of China's destruction of Tibetan culture (during the so-called Cultural Revolution) and the militant resistance of the Tibetans got Peissel into trouble with all the involved governments, including the Chinese who did not allow him to visit China for years. In 1974, the Khampa guerrillas were killed or captured by Nepalese forces under Chinese pressure after China and USA decided to mend their conflicts. Mustang remained closed to foreigners till 1992. Peissel fictionalized the plight of Tibet and the rise and fall of the Khampa fighters in two French novels – *La Tibétaine* (1987) and *La Khamba* (1996).

In 1972, Peissel with two friends navigated the Kali Gandaki River on a small hovercraft for 2000 km, including the gorge between the 8000 m summits of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri (*The Great Himalayan Passage*, 1974). In 1980, he navigated the Ganges using a hovercraft.

One of Peissel's best-known works is his exploration of Zanskar in the late 1970s documented in his 1979 book *Zanskar: The Hidden Kingdom* as well as in a four-part film for BBC, *Zanskar: The Last Place on Earth* (1980).

Peissel was intrigued by the account of gold-digging ants somewhere up in the Himalayas in Herodotus' *Histories*. After years of research and travel, he suggested the Dansar plain in the upper Indus as the source of the famous Greek fable. Peissel argued that burrowing marmots threw up the gold-bearing sand (*The Ant's Gold: Discovering the Greek Eldorado*, 1984). The isolated Dansar plain near the India–Pakistan border is also home to the Minaro (Dard) people, who speak the Shina language and are ethnically Aryans (not Tibetans). Peissel researched their culture and language too.

In 1986, Peissel journeyed the remote pilgrimage area of Tsari along the great bend of the Brahmaputra (Tsangpo) River in northeastern corner of the Himalaya. In 1988, modelling on the ancient boat-building technology of the Itza people (a Yucatan Mayan tribe), Peissel sailed 800 km down the Yucatan–Belize coast on a dugout canoe in order to demonstrate the ancient maritime commerce in Mesoamerica (*Itza, le mystère du Naufrage Maya*, 1989). The following year, Peissel and his crew built a replica of a

Viking long boat and sailed from the Dvina River in northern Russia down the Dnieper River that flows into the Black Sea (*La Route De L'ambre – De La Baltique À La Mer Noire Dans Le Sillage Des Vikings*, 1992). This 2400 km, 53-day long seafaring was intended to recreate that of the Rus people (a group of Nordic Varangians), who founded the Russian kingdom in the 9th century.

In 1994, Peissel and his crew explored the source of the Mekong River, Asia's third longest rivers originating in eastern Tibet. Peissel followed the more difficult and historical Dza Nak (Black Mekong) branch of the river reaching the homeland of nomadic tribes whom the Chinese sometimes sarcastically call 'the last barbarians' (*The Last Barbarians: The Discovery of the Source of the Mekong*, 1997). A decade later, however, a Japanese–Chinese team demonstrated that the White Mekong (Dza Kar) was about 4 km longer and was thus the primary source. Nevertheless, it was Peissel's work that contributed to our knowledge of the little-known landscape and tribal

cultures of upper Mekong as featured in a documentary film (*Source of the Mekong*, A&E, 1998) sponsored by the Smithsonian Institute.

From 1995 to 1999, Peissel spent several seasons in Tibet, studying the Tibetan breeds of horses, mapping caves and salt routes, and filming wildlife on the Changthang Plateau in western Tibet; and finally in 2000, he visited the Amdo region in northeast Tibet to document the 50 m tall drystone towers which have survived earthquakes for centuries, and whose origin and builders remain a complete mystery.

Throughout his life, Peissel showed great fond and friendship toward the Himalayan-Tibetan people, culture and history. In one of his last books, *Tibet: The Secret Continent* (2003), Peissel summed up his life-long explorations of the world's highest plateau and mountains.

As a young boy, Peissel liked to draw prehistoric animals. In his expeditions he drew sketches and created watercolour paintings, some of which were exhibited in Paris and New York. During the last

decade of his life, as his travels were reduced, Peissel focused more on his artworks. He published nearly 100 of his watercolour paintings of Tibetan monasteries and cliff-top buildings in *Tibetan Pilgrimage* (2005). Before his death, Peissel had just completed his first children's illustrated book about Tibet and was scheduled to promote it at the Book Fair in Frankfurt, but a heart attack at night put an end to the wonderful and fruitful career of this great explorer. His contributions and legacy will be cherished.

Peissel, who characterized himself as 'an adventurer with lots of curiosity', was a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of London and a member of the Explorers' Club of New York. He married three times and had five children.

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L. S. Srinath (1927–2012)

Laxmipuram Srinivasachar Srinath, born on 15 March 1927, passed away in Bangalore on 13 September 2012. He was a celebrated teacher and an educationist par excellence.

Srinath started his career as a Fellow at the Confederation of British Industries in UK (1953–55), then moved to the Illinois Institute of Technology as Assistant Professor of Engineering Mechanics (1958–59). He returned to India to join the Aeronautical Development Establishment in Bangalore as Senior Scientific Officer (1959–60) before joining the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur, where he worked as a Professor between 1963 and 1971. In 1971, he joined the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore as Senior Professor of Mechanical Science (1971–84) and continued after superannuation as Emeritus Professor until 1995. He was Director of IIT Madras from 1984 to 1989.

Srinath was elected Fellow of the Indian National Academy of Engineering, Indian Academy of Sciences, Society of Experimental Mechanics, Aeronautical Society of India and Fluid

Power Society of India. He has made major fundamental research contributions in the areas of experimental mechanics photoelasticity, photothermoelasticity, and stress wave propagation in solids and has over 160 publications to his credit.



He took keen interest in writing books in diverse areas and wrote 10 books in all ranging from linear programming, opera-

tions research and experimental stress analysis. His books *PERT and CPM – Principles and Applications* and *Advanced Mechanics of Solids* have become classics each running into 4 editions and more than 30 reprints!

Methods developed by Srinath in the areas of photoelasticity, holographic stress analysis and scattered light photoelasticity are standard reference books among practising engineers and have today formed the basis for many non-destructive analyses of stresses in solids. Several equations that are used are named after him. He was the first to demonstrate the potentialities of scattered light in the non-destructive analysis of stresses in solids. He was invited to deliver special lectures on his methods in photoelasticity, to practising engineers and professionals in India and abroad.

Srinath took keen interest in continuing education activities that span the domain of college teachers as well as serving professionals. Full credit should be given to him for his efforts to make the QIP schemes an effective instrument of change in transforming significantly