

## BOOK REVIEW

*Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors. Village Religion in Sikkim.*<sup>1</sup>  
 Anna Balikci. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library 17, Leiden-Boston, Brill  
 2008, 403 pp., hardcover, ISBN 9789004167063

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The relationship that the great religions maintain with local religious practices constitute a privileged area of research in anthropology for good reasons: it is indeed necessary to take into account historical, economic, sociological and political data in addition to religious considerations in order to capture these complex phenomena, and the anthropologist has made it a speciality of combining these different approaches, often thanks to a prolonged fieldwork experience. The work of Anna Balikci presents a particularly successful example of what this tradition can offer. *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors: Village Religion in Sikkim* is a monograph of a Himalayan Buddhist community that, by following different modalities in the course of its history, developed a form of village religion whereby its shamanic worldview persisted quite independently alongside the Buddhist religion.

The Buddhist Kingdom of Sikkim was founded in 1642 by Nyingma lamas—the “unreformed” school of Tibetan Buddhism. At that time, this small mountain state was populated by the Bhutias or Lhopas who had migrated from Tibet at an earlier date, as well as the Lepchas, an indigenous shamanistic population that, until now, has attracted ethnologists' attention far more than the Tibetan immigrants ever did. Although Buddhism attempted to absorb the cult of ancestral gods and territorial deities, these rituals have nonetheless remained at the heart of ceremonies performed by both Buddhist village lamas and local religious specialists, or ‘shamans’, who are related to *Bon*—the native religion of Tibet, retrospectively reconstructed, which preceded Buddhism. The author suggests that these different specialists share the

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<sup>1</sup> First published in French: Anne de Sales, « BALIKCI Anna, Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors. Village Religion in Sikkim », *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* [En ligne], 40 | 2009, mis en ligne le 30 décembre 2009. URL : <http://emscat.revues.org/index1637.html>

same conception of reality: the bodies of individuals (including the notions of health and illness), territory, society and the supernatural are not areas of social life independent of one another, but rather in constant interaction. This worldview, qualified by Balikci as shamanic, is the basis of a division of labour between the religious specialists who coexist without conflict: lamas perform funerary rituals whereas shamans are consulted to postpone the final outcome.

The first part of the book introduces readers to the political and religious history of Sikkim and to 'village religion' and its actors: first the village lama, who practises a non-dogmatic form of Buddhism and, secondly, the clan shaman (*pawo*) and the specialist (*bongthing*) who deals with local deities. The next two sections present the contexts in which these religious specialists interact within a specific village, Tingchim, where the author focuses her monograph. Thus the second part develops the villagers' relationship with their land in terms of its agricultural economy and rituals. The third part centres on the domestic rituals that ensure fertility and prosperity. The household then provides the framework within which members renew their membership of the community and where the shamanic vision of the world remains alive. The last part focuses on the role played by conventional Buddhism in village relations with the state and the outside world. If there were any conflict, it would be between the representatives of conventional Buddhism and the supporters of a more pragmatic form of village Buddhism rather than between village lamas and shamans.

What is especially interesting about this study is that it promotes an understanding of how different elements of social life can converge to produce a particular religious configuration at a certain period, then change into another to produce a new configuration while still preserving certain distinctive features. Thus the persistence of the shamanic worldview is partly due to the fact that Sikkim remained, from its foundation in the seventeenth century until its integration into the Indian Union in 1975, a relatively decentralised state with a weak monarchy that was unable to impose the Buddhist religion on its subjects strictly. The large celibate monasteries, which provided broad political support to the Buddhist monarchy in Central Tibet, could never have been maintained in Sikkim for reasons which are partly demographic: slash-and-burn cultivation is labour intensive, and a family could not afford to lose a son to the monastery. Also, ritual life in Tingchim remained entirely in the hands of the *Bon* ritual specialists until 1910, when a lama came to settle in the village for the first time. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the introduction of

cardamom, a cash crop, combined with the immigration of agricultural labourers from Nepal, changed the situation. The resulting savings in money and time saved allowed the Lhopos, the sole owners of the land, to invest in forms of worship that were both more expensive and more prestigious. The village then “started producing cardamoms at the same rate that it started producing lamas.” In the 1930s, the lamas’ influence spread from funerary rites to community rituals, though the shamans preserved their monopoly on healing rituals until the death of Tingchim’s last shaman in 1997.

Though the Lhopo community’s social life, formerly structured on slash-and-burn cultivation, was based on exchange, the cultivation of cardamom is dependent on Nepalese workers and Indian traders. Since the economic relations that provided the fabric of social life lost their *raison d’être*, the unity of the community now relies upon the ritual sphere, particularly the rituals of the land (such as those held at harvest time) and the life cycle of the household. Membership in the community depends on participation in these often expensive rituals. Furthermore, the domestic rituals reaffirm the shamanic worldview by involving the ancestral gods and deities of the land as the primary supernatural partners. If the end of Sikkim as a kingdom and its integration within the Indian Union in 1975 was to signal the end of state Buddhism, the 1990s nevertheless witnessed a revival of the religion due in part to its growing international popularity, coupled with increasing attention given to the nation’s sacred sites. So, according to the author, the shamanic roots closely associated with Sikkimese identity presently survive in this concern for the environment and in these domestic rituals.

Insofar as the areas of social life respond to and transform one another, the author could have seen the outline of a system that was open to innovation. She preferred instead to focus on the anthropological debate surrounding the relationship between Buddhism and shamanism. The particular value of this work lies in its presentation of an unusually well-documented case study concerned with the social and religious transformation of a Sikkimese village in the twentieth century, something the title does not reveal, but that emerges clearly in the course of reading the book. The plan chosen to expose this complex reality leads to a few repetitions, but the ethnographic material is exceptionally rich, varied and well described. It also opens many avenues for comparison with other Himalayan communities. Anna Balikci’s book is essential reading for anyone interested in this region.

