

Anne-Marie BLONDEAU and Ernst STEINKELLNER (Eds.), *Reflections of the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*, Verlag Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Vienna, 1996, 262 pp., fig., plates.

#### Review by András Höfer

Tibet is more or less open now for Western scientists; the number of Tibetan documents accessible to them has grown to an unprecedented extent; and Tibetologists are increasingly resorting to what sociologists and anthropologists have long since been doing, namely fieldwork. As a consequence, our ideas about Tibetan civilization have been broadened considerably. *Reflections of the Mountain*, so rich in new data and insights, testifies to this development. Product of a symposium of ten Tibetologists and three anthropologists, this book is most welcome - also for those non-Tibetologists who are working on areas bordering on the cultural sphere of influence of Tibet. Most of the contributions give equal consideration to sociological and philological-historical perspectives and are excellently presented. Nearly all the papers have resulted from the authors' own fieldwork, and most of the Tibetologist contributors have also been trained in anthropology. That the non-French among the authors are laudably familiar with the literature in French also deserves emphasis.

Not surprisingly, several articles revolve around the question of whether or to what extent the present-day findings conform to the "model case" that Rolf A. Stein and Ariane Macdonald [Spanien] have reconstructed for early Tibetan society. (As may be recalled, this model included the worship of a mountain, associated with a male warrior god, and of a lake, associated with a female divinity - a couple conceived of as the mythical ancestors of the descent group of the first settlers and/or of the ruling dynasty within a territory.) The answer Karmay gives - not without a certain measure of risky generalization - is essentially positive, while other authors place emphasis on the divergencies that exist side by side with certain continuities, both often astonishing. Who would have thought that in Ladakh, the divine guardians of the local territory are not mountain gods (although elevation is generally classified as the sphere of the gods, the *lha*), that an ancient category of gods, the *phyva*, has "survived" in Bhutan, or that *rMa chen spom ra* is worshipped in far-away Nepal, too? In any case, there are certain recurrent, though not ubiquitous, elements which

indeed seem to point to continuity. These are: (a) a "wrathful" or ambivalent male mountain divinity, generally referred to as *yul lha*, believed to be the owner-protector of the local territory (a valley or a group of valleys), guarantor of the social order and the prosperity of the community of his worshippers; (b) a rather allusively or metaphorically asserted "ancestral link" between this divinity as a *pho lha* or 'father', on the one hand, and the descendants of the first settler or of the local specialist of the worship, on the other; (c) a periodic worship which includes, or in the past included, animal sacrifice, and which is usually concelebrated by local lamas and a specialist acting by virtue of his charismatic "ancestral link", such as a "priest" (*lha bon*) of the territorial and clan divinities or a layman in privileged position, such as a headman and/or a descendant of the first settler; (d) the mountain divinity and a female superhuman being can stand in a kind of complementary opposition to one another, even though they are not necessarily conceived of as a couple, and the female counterpart is not necessarily associated with a lake or a river.

Several authors delve into the semantic problems posed by taxonomy. Even the old question of whether we are dealing with "divine mountains" or with "divinities residing on mountains" is raised once again. Classificatory problems stand in the foreground. For example, whether associated with a mountain or not, the divine owner-guardian of the territory is generally referred to as *yul lha*, frequently also as *gzhi bdag*, *sa bdag*, *pho lha*, *dgra lha*, *btsan* or *gnyan*, etc. at the same time. Since in the Tibetan pantheon the latter terms generally designate specific categories of beings associated with certain sites and spheres, in some instances the *yul lha*'s categorical identification remains disconcertingly vague or at least equivocal. (The same holds true of those mountain gods who are not *yul lha*, by the way.) Blondeau, in the foreword, comforts her authors with the observation that "our obsession with labelling is not shared by Tibetan societies", whose classificatory series often "co-exist or are juxtaposed without organic or logical links between them" (p. ix). Schicklgruber does not leave it at that, but contends that the multiple namings and identities have resulted mainly from the simultaneous prevalence of different vantage-points, as represented by a local/ethnic/oral (in part pre-Buddhist) and a superimposed Buddhist or Bon conceptualization, each applying its own criteria and nomenclature. He even resorts to the well-known "emic" distinction between religious-monastic tradition and lay tradition, *lha chos* versus *mi chos*. In a wider context, Diemberger aptly drives the point home

in placing emphasis on the *negotiated* and hence dynamic character of the coexistence of these more or less isolable strands or perspectives within one and the same cultic complex. Indeed, most of the contexts discussed in the book suggest that the local configurations of such perspectives have resulted from "cultural translations" that tend to remain inchoate and to include a certain amount of interference inasmuch as they require permanent readjustments of the systems of reference of the agencies involved.

With the remarkable exception of the *phyva*, whose cult was recently discovered by Pommaret in Bhutan, the mountain and territorial divinities dealt with have been integrated into the pantheon of Tibetan Buddhism. The familiar motif of their being "subjugated" by a Buddhist protagonist and bound by oath to become guardians of the Faith appears throughout the book, and is the subject of some interesting comments by the authors. As Hazod and Buffetrille point out, this "subjugation" turns out to be a Buddhist re-dedication of historically older motifs, such as the "fixation" of the earth, or the "domestication" of the superhuman masters of the natural environment by a cultural hero to the benefit of man. Furthermore, one finds the site of the mountain divinity transformed into a *gnas ri*, i.e., a holy mountain to serve as a place of Buddhist pilgrimage, or the local ancestral territory sublimated into a *sbas yul* (lit. 'hidden country'), i.e., an enclave of particular sanctity, where ideal conditions for religious life prevail. The projection of the *sbas yul* as a kind of earthly paradise to come also contributes a teleologically new conceptualization of the relationship between space and time, as is alluded to by Diemberger. For Steinmann (whose rather hasty discussion is difficult to follow at some points, though by no means lacking in intuitive sensitivity), certain rituals and myths of the Eastern Tamang, Thami, Lepcha and Sikkimese Bhotiya clearly indicate that what Buddhism did was to separate human society from its ancient tribal divinities who once had constituted an "invisible mountain kingdom" where "divine and social body" had been identical. This radical formulation - inspired, in part, by the writings of Granet, Malamoud and Stein - certainly deserves further consideration. In any case, most of the contributions seem to suggest that, in the specific field of mountain worship as well, Buddhism's role has been an encompassing, rather than a merely marginalizing or even supplanting one, as is also shown by the kind of distance-respect relationship it still maintains in some places with local practices and local ritual specialists (cf. e.g., Diemberger). On the whole, one should not overemphasize the "confessional" aspect. Change at the

level of representation and belief was not brought about by missionary activities alone; it also resulted from change at the infrastructural level, such as migration or the imposition of new systems of land tenure and political allegiance by the state administrations.

Two substantial articles focus more on the notion of territory than on that of the mountain. Diemberger shows how in Khenbalung (situated on the Tibet-Nepal border) the veneration of the mountain divinities in its political context can have "cognitive implications in shaping the concrete management of the environment, its spaces and times" (p. 219), and in particular how territory is being periodically defined - "opened", "closed", "realized" - by means of processions which can be undertaken physically or only verbally, as an enumeration of places and gods. Discussing similar kinds of definitory movements across space in Mustang, Ramble reveals a principle that underlies the perception and "utilization" of space in ritual. Of particular interest are "serial evocations" of places on the horizontal plane; following a spiralling itinerary, they either draw an imaginary political map of the territory, thus ensuring its integrity and security, or locate the terminal point, where the speaker-officiant resides, within the sacred-geographical setting of a larger area. Contrary to what one would expect after reading other authors' contributions to the volume, divinity is not necessarily a primary component of the representation of space. In some cases, a place can be a numinous entity, some sort of "intermediate stage between nature and the supernatural", without being associated with a god at all. In some other cases, the god associated with a place "called at" in the recitation lacks individuality and is only invoked as *lha*, *btsan* or *chos skyong*, that is, as an unspecified member of a category. From this, Ramble concludes that supernatural beings are not intrinsically needed for the demarcation of a territory, and that the "characteristics attributed to place gods may not be primarily qualities of the gods themselves, but of the places" (p. 152). There is much that is novel in his findings (to my knowledge not reported so far in the literature on Tibet) and that invites comparison with the verbal ritual journeys as performed among several Bodic speaking ethnic minorities in Nepal.

Nearly all contributors are concerned with the quest for structure, origins and change, but it is A. Gingrich who takes it upon himself to go to all the way in offering a hypothetical reconstruction of the development of the mountain cults. His is a courageous (albeit somewhat lengthy, at some points even top-heavy abstract) attempt at typological ordering on the basis of comparison that extends far beyond Tibet and the Himalaya.

Dichotomizations, such as "tribal"/"state", "village"/"monastery", "centre"/"periphery", "oral"/"scriptural", "élite"/"folk", "doctrine"/"heresy", and the like, are resorted to in order to venture, with eloquence, a structural explanation of historical continuities and discontinuities that account for both divergencies and similarities in the *present* forms as documented by his co-authors. Gingrich is at his best on the political context of the interrelations between centres and peripheries, and he rightly draws attention to what ones tempted to call the self-organisational component in those processes of mutual adjustments, "parochializations" and "universalizations" that have produced an array of configurations in the accommodation, by way of subordination, of mountain and territorial cults within Buddhism and/or the ideologies of the state polities in the area as a whole. Part of his argumentation comes close to Max Weber's thinking on the "innere Konsequenz" a concept or tenet may have for the development of social phenomena. One might add that precisely through their literature, Buddhism, and to a lesser degree Bon, not only transformed, but also contributed to preserving or even proliferating some of the ancient elements of a basically oral tradition; further research might reveal a similar double role played by "la tradition orale du bouddhisme", whose existence was pointed out by R. A. Stein. Drawing on Sahlins's *Tribesmen* and adducing evidence from Evans-Pritchard's study of Shilluk kingship, Gingrich concludes that for structural reasons, the conceptual foundations of the territorial cults centred around the mountain in the Himalayan regions, as well as in the "sacred kingdom" in early Tibet, must have ultimately originated in a tribal type of social organization.

Such systematic reflections *on* the mountain may indeed furnish some useful heuristic impetus for further research, provided that one avoids reifications, so likely to emerge when our technical terms tend to be treated in an essentialistic way, and when extrapolations replace the detailed knowledge of the specialist. Our reach should not exceed our grasp. What we need first of all is to fill the gaps in the empirical data by studying texts (both written and oral) and by doing more fieldwork wherever this is still possible. K. Buffetrille's monumental doctoral thesis on *Montagnes sacrées, lacs et grottes ...* (Nanterre 1996) is an exemplary demonstration of how rewarding the combination of textual and field studies can be. (Her work also contains a lucid exposé of what we know and can say at present on the history of mountain worship in Tibet.) One would like the Tibetologist in-the-field not to rely too hastily on learned lamas and their written texts as ultimate authority in matters of interpretation, but to give

equal consideration to oral texts and to the meanings the rituals in question may have to those actively involved in them: the laymen.

In view of the thematic concentration of the contributions, the book should have been supplemented with an index, and the reader wonders why the editors did not think it necessary to have the manuscripts of some of the authors revised by a native speaker of English. It is not meant to diminish the immense value of the publication if the reviewer finds that two additional articles on mountain worship in India and China, respectively, could have broadened the comparative perspective to a considerable degree, if only just by raising new questions.

