BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Hermann Kreutzmann

The long-awaited publication of Hermann Berger's studies of the isolated language of Burushaski has finally appeared after more than 35 years of work. Together with his previous tome on the Yasin-Burushaski (Das Yasin-Burushaski (Werchikwar): Grammatik, Texte, Wörterbuch, published as Vol. 3 in the Neuindische Studien series) which belongs to the same group of isolated languages, this means that a most extensive collection of texts and lexemes is now available. The work comes in three volumes: a grammar (271 pp.), a collection of texts (273 pp.), and a dictionary (646 pp.). Based on Berger's own collection, the 67 texts are provided in transcription and in German translation. The material consists mainly of ghost stories and was recorded in 1959 and subsequently checked (mainly in 1961) and analysed.

The dictionary was extended substantially through the provision of entries by Allama Nasir-ud-din Hunzai, who features as co-author of the dictionary (Volume III). Allama Nasir-ud-din Hunzai is the best known and most respected local scholar of the Hunza Valley who independently had started the compilation of a dictionary which can now fortunately be merged with Berger's work. Certain aspects of the Nager-Burushaski and local variants
were contributed by Hugh van Skyhawk. Thus we are now in a favourable position to use the most comprehensive language study of Burushaski to date.

Burushaski still remains an unwritten language: although some efforts have been made by local scholars to provide it with a script, these are not widely accepted. This would be necessary for the further collection and preservation of texts and poems, for the provision of Burushaski classes to young students, and for the processing of material for transmission by the local radio station at Gilgit as part of the Burushaski medium programme. Although the release of the three volumes was greatly appreciated when they were formally launched in Gilgit recently, some expectations of the interested public (not necessarily only the academic public) should be mentioned. It was suggested that an English-Burushaski version of the dictionary would be more helpful than a German one, because the language of academic institutions in Pakistan, and increasingly the medium of instruction in schools as well, is English. Some professional advice and support for the introduction of a written form of Burushaski remains a desideratum. Obviously it was not the aim of the present publication; none the less, expectations are high. Now it has finally become available it is to be hoped that Berger’s contribution will provide a sound foundation for further publications on Burushaski which fulfill the expectations of the Burushaski speakers. They are the only ones who can preserve and develop their language and use it as their domestic medium of communication and for the maintenance of their cultural heritage.


Reviewed by Philippe Ramirez

At first sight, this book looks like a monograph about a Nepalese monastery occupied by Kanphata yogi renouncers. As such, the monograph in itself would have constituted a very respectable contribution to Indian and Himalayan studies. However, its bearing is much wider. The Caughera monastery, which was founded at an uncertain date by Ratannath, a follower of Gorakhnath, played a major role in the history of the Rapti region, but has never been described before. Véronique Bouillier reveals its spatial organization, which reflects a ternary religious landscape wherein Gorakhnath, Siva’s ascetic form, sits beside the terrifying Bhairav and the Goddess. The ritual life of the monastery, carefully reported hour by hour and day by day, occupies an astonishing importance, suggesting that ritual may well be the prime vocation of this institution. It is unfortunate that the density of the description leaves little room for individual figures and experiences; the reader would have like to have read a couple of life stories, making him understand how the monastery’s dwellers reached it, and the radical break with their previous life that was involved in the renunciation.

Starting from this ethnographic sketch of a regionally significant monastery, Véronique Bouillier has managed to raise a number of issues which pertain to fundamental aspects of the anthropology and history of Nepal and India: the figure of Ratannath, the position of renouncers in a Hindu kingdom’s ritual complexes, land tenure history—these three themes constantly interweave.

The saint ascetic Ratannath, the founder of Caughera monastery, is the hero of a rich mythology which provides evidence for relations between the Hindu monarchy of the so-called medieval period (14th-18th centuries) and the disseminators of Sivaite tantrism. A fascinating aspect of Ratannath, which is brought to light remarkably well by Bouillier, opens some very promising perspectives: this figure is situated on the boundary between Hinduism and Islam, in a position which greatly blurs such a boundary and inspires renewed approaches to the religious as well as the political history of the subcontinent. Going from myth to ritual, the Ratannath figure puts on the clothes of sovereignty. The author suggests in fact that he might be none other than “the real sovereign of a territory under the authority of the monastery and the symbolic sovereign of Dang valley whose administration he delegates to the king...” The staging of the sovereignty reaches its climax when, following the annual election of the monastery chief (pir), a procession of all the yogis walks through the Dang-Dekhuri area to finally reach Patan Devi shrine, in the Indian district of Gonda. This visit, which is important not only for the yogis but for Dang Tharus as well (Giselle Krauskopf has given a major contribution on this question) inverts the political configuration prevailing elsewhere where the one who comes to see the Goddess is the subordinate. One may wonder if the procession as it exists today is not an adaptation or a reinterpretation of a similar ritual which formerly signified the submission of Dang to an authority centred on the Indian side of the present border.