

Trance, Besessenheit und Amnesie bei den Schamanen der Changpa-Nomaden im ladakhischen Changthang [Trance, possession and amnesia among the shamans of the Changpa nomads in Changthang of Ladakh] by Ina Rösing. Gnas: Weisshaupt Verlag 2003. Pp. 270, bibliography, glossary of indigenous terms, four appendices, two sketch-maps, 43 colour plates. No index. ISBN 3-7059-0174-5.

Reviewed by András Höfer, Heidelberg

The book presents the findings of two journeys to the Changpa of Ladakh and is a sweeping combination of life histories of shamans, descriptions of their rituals and a kind of research diary. Only two of the six chapters are devoted to Changpa shamanism. The rest include a discussion of the ecology and economy of Tibetan nomadism (which makes up more than one quarter of the book); furthermore two chapters dealing with the shamans among the Ladakhis proper; and finally detailed appendices. The latter contain reflections on the shamanic calling, on the author's working hypotheses and method of investigation, along with a linguistically rather unpretentious introduction to the language and the problems of its interpretation, and a useful preliminary comparison between the practices of the Ladakhi and the Changpa shamans.

What Rösing refers to as "shaman" throughout the book is the ecstatic healer called *lhaba* (male) and *lhamo* (female). While the word "shaman" might be acceptable as a rough translation for the sake of simplicity, it is questionable whether the beliefs and practices of the *lhaba* and *lhamo* derive from a "shamanistic religion" (p. 164), and whether everything, above all the ecstatic ritual techniques, that cannot be unequivocally identified as "Buddhist" must by necessity be immediately regarded as "pre-Buddhist" elements (pp. 72 ff., 162). It is more correct to say that pantheon and ethos of the *lhaba/lhamo* are part of a widespread oral tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which exists in regionally varying configurations, and in which clerical Buddhism and local cults, partly of pre-Buddhist origin and partly connected with ecstatic practices, interpenetrate to form a complex symbiosis, but in such a way that the supremacy of the former remains unchallenged. Indeed, a specialty in the case of Ladakh is that the *lhaba* and *lhamo* are bound to act under the spiritual guidance of the monks (as pointed out first by P. Dollfus in her *Lieu de neige, lieu de genévriers* 1989, p. 91). It might also be recalled that the *lhaba/lhamo* do have their cognates, variously named *lhapa*, *lhabon*, *lhawa* or *lhakama*, etc., both in Tibet proper and in several communities of Tibetan linguistic and cultural affiliation in the Himalayas. In Nepal alone, their occurrence has been

attested to among the inhabitants of Dolpo, Gyasumdo, Khumbu, Shorong and Khembalung ...

What intrigues Rösing the most in her quest for the function and authenticity of ecstatic experience (trance) are two questions, namely (i) to what extent may trance be regarded as a staged performance (“theatre” in her somewhat pat terminology), notwithstanding its efficacy for the client/patient; and (ii) whether what she terms as “post-trance amnesia” is a genuine psychic state or simply pretended and thus part of a strategy to fend off the unwelcome curiosity of the alien scientist. The answer to the first question Rösing believes to have found not among the Ladakhis proper, but thanks to her encounter with the Changpa shamans. Overwhelmed by her mere sensory experience of the physical intensity with which a cooperative Changpa specialist executes his ritual, she thinks she has at last succeeded in “grasping” – intuitively, rather than rationally, as she puts it – the authenticity of trance (pp. 182-183). Quite justifiably, she has been prompted to seize the shaman’s ecstatic experience, for want of a better access, in its verbal manifestation as recorded on tape. Yet here she faces the difficulty many of us are likely to run into when we attempt to transcribe an oral performance of this kind or even to establish it as a text in its own right. In the end, a brief section of the recitation (identical in all of the four different versions transcribed by her educated local assistants) is found to be of central relevance. What it reveals, to be sure, is not something about the nature of trance in terms of a psychic state or process, say, on the subliminal level, but a “message” (*Botschaft*) of the shaman possessed by a goddess to the clients within and the world without. His admonitions with reference to traditionally Buddhist values – purity of mind and body, individual self-determination for the sake of salvation, renunciation of greed and violence, etc. – are shown to be paralleled by Western psychosomatic concepts and at the same time also interpreted, with a rather modish touch, as warnings against the threats posed by “modernity”, including market economy, environmental degradation and cultural alienation.

As an answer to her second question concerning the reason for some shamans’ striking evasiveness about trance (by imputing their ignorance or loss of memory to the fact that it is the gods who act through them), Rösing detects a more or less close correlation between “deep [genuine] trance” and “deep [genuine] amnesia” on the one hand, and between staged trance and pretended amnesia on the other, not without admitting the impossibility of drawing a clear-cut distinction between “deep” and “staged” in certain instances at least (pp. 198 ff.). Still, the reader is left wondering how, by means of what objective criteria, the “depth” of the trance could be “gauged”. The physical intensity of a performance alone cannot serve as a standard, since extraordinary energy input in creating “dramatic” effects by dancing, posturing, mimics, acoustic or bodily virtuosity and the like can also be observed in many cultures in those types of performance which

Rösing would presumably regard as staged ones. Conspicuously, Rösing's approach has received hardly any inspiration from A.-L. Siikala's notion of "role-taking" (developed further by R. Hamayon) or from the writings of the Performance Studies school.

Much of what Rösing reports beyond her principal field of interest is of ethnographic importance and awaits further corroboration. It is also interesting to note, e.g., that the Tibetan (originally Chinese) term *spar-kha* is employed with the denotation of 'spiritual energy' (pp. 140 ff.); that in recent times the number of shamans in Ladakh has known an unprecedented increase (pp. 129 f.); or that a Ladakhi shamaness was caught at learning modern colloquial Tibetan with the obvious aim at "improving the language" of those gods of Tibetan provenance, who frequently speak through her when she is in trance (p. 144).

The entire book is written in the first person singular. Rösing takes the reader by the hand and guides him through her experiences and reasonings, as it were. In so doing, she remains distanced throughout the narrative of her encounters with the shamans and dwells at some length on her own dilemmas in interpreting what she sees and hears. Her own research method is dubbed as "speaking anthropology" or "dialogical anthropology" with explicit reference to the theory of "writing culture" (pp. 231 ff., 252). She writes very well, having adopted a smartly spontaneous style, but the readability is sometimes achieved to the detriment of terminological precision and analytical penetration. Here and there, the translation of quotations and text samples appears to contain some minor inaccuracies. The bibliography lists a total of about 280 titles; a few of the cited sources relating to shamanism and ecstatic phenomena are critically evaluated.

Rösing is a psychologist and psychotherapist with academic affiliation, and her book addresses primarily the reader with similarly specialized interests. Her merit is to have paved the way for further research – preferably to be carried out, to mutual benefit, in collaboration with a Tibetologist or an adequately qualified anthropologist. This would assure completion of the ethnographic documentation and help to widen both the theoretical and the comparative perspectives.