

## **Review Essay: A Pioneer of Comparative Himalayan Mythology (a review of *Miyapma: Traditional Narratives of the Thulung Rai*, by N.J. Allen)**

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*Traditional Narratives of the Thulung Rai*, by N.J. Allen. Kathmandu: Vajra Publication. 2012, 264 pp., 20 black and white photos, ISBN 978-9937-506-82-3, price 25\$ / 1600 NPR.

*Miyapma* is the revised version of Nicholas Allen's unpublished 1976 doctoral thesis *Studies in the myths and oral traditions of the Thulung Rai of Eastern Nepal*. 'Revised' means here that Allen merely improved readability while refraining from any larger changes or revision of the original, as he states. Amongst other things, he justifies this in his preface by the articles that he had published over subsequent years which were based on the thesis, and declares his own book to be a 'historical document' that does not include any consideration of many of the works that have meanwhile been published on the oral traditions and mythology of the Rai or on comparative Himalayan mythology. The only major difference between the original thesis and *Miyapma* is the substantial shortening of the Thulung language transcriptions of the myths in the appendix of the published version, for which he refers to an online archive.

Allen's original thesis was hitherto known to only a small circle of scholars working among the Kirat, or on mythology and narratives in the Himalayas, most of whom obtained a copy directly from the author. In Nepal itself a copy was available at CNAS (Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University) and known to a handful of linguists working on Kiranti languages, while local folklorists seem to have had no access to it, as may be gathered from local publications on Kirat folktales.<sup>1</sup> Which means a large academic community working on Nepal and a wide culturally interested local public will benefit greatly from its publication. As Charles

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1 Personal communication from Martin Gaenzle. While in linguist circles the designation 'Kiranti' prevails, anthropologists and local cultural activists have begun to employ the designation 'Kirat' as an umbrella term to describe a superordinate entity who encompasses the local groups of the Rai, Limbu, Yakkha and Sunuwar in eastern Nepal.

Ramble rightly states in his foreword, anthropological studies on Nepal have in the last decades mainly focused on themes of development and politics. Therefore, for a whole new generation of anthropologists and other Himalayan researchers, *Miyapma* presents one of the pioneering and fundamental works in the anthropology of Nepal.

In the following, I would like to give a short overview of the contents of the book and its objectives, before briefly discussing the academic reception of the original thesis (and some of its offshoot articles) in the past.

### **Contents and Objectives**

The book has two self-declared aims, first to follow what the author considers the traditional purpose of ethnography, “to record for posterity the ideas and creations of societies that do not produce their own written documents” (p. 19), in his case the Thulung Rai who live in the middle hills of Eastern Nepal. Second, to launch a larger project of comparative mythology of the ‘Bodic’ speaking peoples, in the tradition of Georges Dumézil. For this he suggests drawing comparisons between the Rai and the pre-Buddhist and pre-Bon traditions of the Tibetan Plateau – provided such traditions can be teased apart at the sources. At the end of his analysis (p. 227 ff.), Allen feels justified in forwarding a thesis which assumes that Tibetan narratives, which over time have been ‘affected’ by the Bon and Buddhist religions, have a stronger resemblance to the Thulung tradition the further back one goes back in time. Formulated very carefully by the author, his conclusions convey that Thulung mythology and narrative traditions, and as a consequence Thulung society, could be close to what Tibetan tradition once may have been before the advent of Bon and Buddhism.

In the *Introduction* (Chapter 1) Allen introduces the Rai in general; his field research setting; the ritual specialists and an initial notion of the concept of *diluma* (religion / custom / tradition / ancestral knowledge), which he takes as justifying his focus on mythology and narratives; some ritual contexts (especially the *bhume* rites); and his comparative project. In the last two chapters, *Further Analysis and Explorations* (Chapter 6) and *Concluding Remarks* (Chapter 7) he returns once again to the concept of *diluma*, the important role of the ancestors, and the general comparison with Tibet. In the intervening chapters he presents the narratives of the Thulung, first giving an English translation of the respective narratives

in different variations, as transcribed from his audio-records, followed by an annotation and interpretation of local concepts and, where available, a comparison with closer neighbouring groups and with wider Tibetan sources. He divides these narratives into four chapters:

*The Creation* (Chapter 2) contains variations of myths concerned with the 'creatrix', who among the Thulung is known as Miyapma, hence the title of the book. Episodes include the origin of the world, the origin of Miyapma herself, and how she became pregnant and gave birth to the species of which man was the last or youngest, a circumstance that is of increasing significance in the author's later comparisons. Four of the brothers are subsequently of relevance: the tiger, the bear, the monkey and 'Mini', the first man. They quarrel and go their separate ways after tiger kills his mother. Allen compares these narratives with several Tibetan narratives of 'the first man' and 'the first king', a comparison that Ramble in his foreword sees as fruitful, where he provides a further example and thus confirms "Allen's concluding argument that the Thulung and Tibetan cases share a common heritage prior to the rise of Bon and Buddhism" (p. xiv). One finding that Allen emphasises in this chapter is "that whereas Thulungs emphasise the creative activity of females, Tibetans emphasise that of males" (p. 59), which he interprets though as a recent feature of Tibetan mythology. He suggests that the relation between the nature of ancient Tibetan goddesses and Miyapma needs further systematic research, also among the surrounding peoples such as the Naxi in South China.

*The Jaw-khliw Cycle* (Chapter 3) deals with variations of the myths of a group of culture heroes: the sisters Jaw and Khliw, their little brother Khakcilik, and his wife Wayelungma. The sisters kill their brother, who resurrects. The sisters, not knowing that he is again alive, go their ways, the younger gets killed by an uncle and revived by her older sister and they settle down and invent weaving. Meanwhile the little brother, who has survived by hunting and fishing, fishes a stone that turns into a beautiful woman who becomes his wife. She teaches him how to build a house, cultivate grain, and brew beer. The family is reunited in a large ceremony in which the sisters present gifts. Allen's main unsolved puzzle piece in this chapter is the final ceremony, which reads like a marriage feast. But who is marrying whom? Judging by the gifts that are exchanged, which are in effect equivalent to the Thulung bride price, he assumes an incestuous

relation between brother and sisters, a motive which turns out to be quite common in Rai mythology, as later research shows (e.g. Gaenszle 1991). Allen focuses his comparison of Tibetan and other Nepalese local groups on the motives of the captured wife, the sacrifice while building a house, and the shift in character in Kacilik's wife Wayelungma once he accepts her as a bride. Again, he finds that cultural invention in the written Tibetan myths is accredited to the male side, while in the oral tradition among the Thulung it is accredited to the female side. Roughly speaking, she [Wayelungma] is responsible for the Neolithic Revolution. Furthermore, she was clairvoyant and knew everything (p.99).

In *Migrations of the ancestors* (Chapter 4) Allen turns to myths that he considers "move closer to the realities of geography and history" (p.101). We read how the ancestors emerged from the primal lake through three hearth stones, and how they made a blood offering so as to be able to exit the door to the world. The brothers were the progenitors of different Rai groups of which Thulung was the youngest, but they split following a territorial dispute. Several accounts tell of a journey eastwards and an expansion to the north, more precisely Khumbu, until the main village of the Thulung, Mukli, was founded. Allen's main discussion here is concerned with the migration routes, and he identifies a mismatch between the journey in the narratives and in death rituals, which he assumes takes the reverse route of the migration. In this chapter a comparison with the wider Tibetan surroundings understandably makes no sense, because the myths Allen deals with are of an essentially local nature, but Allen emphasizes that in this 'later' phase of the mythological past, just as in the Tibetan case, women have completely disappeared from the picture and men have taken over.

The *Later Legends* (Chapter 5) are a group of myths that do not fit anywhere else but also do not form a corpus or cycle by themselves. Nonetheless Allen considers these myths or legends to be more consistent than might appear at first glance. A great number of them deal with difficult marriages with 'outsiders' and their consequences, others explain the dispersal of the different Rai groups, the foundation of villages, or the implementation of ritual places (*bhume* rites). Of major importance for the comparison with the Tibetan myths are the legends of the slug-eating wife among the Thulung, which are compared structurally to the myths of the frog-eaters in Tibetan versions, and to the Thulung creation myth.

### Academic reception of the original thesis

Among researchers working specifically on the Rai, Allen's thesis figured as a pioneering work long before its publication as *Miyapma*. It is referred to under its original title in most of the monographs on the Rai (Schlemmer 2004; Gaenszle 1991, 2002; Nicoletti 2006; Hardman 2000). Likewise in the ongoing research projects revolving round Kirat Studies at the University of Vienna undertaken by Martin Gaenszle, Alban von Stockhausen and myself,<sup>2</sup> Allen's material has proved invaluable for comparisons. Scholars of Kirat studies, along with many other Nepal scholars, have responded to Allen's hope that his study "will be sufficiently interesting to encourage others (...) to collect and record similar samples of the rich cultural heritage of the Himalayan peoples" (p.233). Similarly, linguists working on Kiranti languages have worked with the original Thulung text transcriptions, most intensely Ebert (2008: 131ff.), who has published a new annotated interlinear translation of the original texts, which is where the passages omitted in *Miyapma* may be found. However, Allen is better known at present in the academic community for his other works, namely his *Sketch of Thulung Grammar* (1975) – the first grammar of a Kiranti language – and some of his later articles on kinship terminologies.

Scholars who are long familiar with the thesis refer to the Thulung narratives themselves as examples to illustrate their own work, and sometimes Allen's interpretations of the local terms and concepts are also discussed. A few scholars working on other groups in Nepal have used the thesis as a reference resource for single myths, as for instance Michael Oppitz, who has himself worked comparatively on Himalayan mythology (for instance 1993, 2013). The most detailed discussion of Allen's interpretation of local concepts based on his narrative examples can be found in Gaenszle (1991: Chapter 3). While agreeing with many of Allen's ideas, Gaenszle does not agree that the myths can be regarded as half-forgotten simply because they were recorded in fragments (1991: 247), and thinks that Allen has underestimated the overall interconnectedness of the mythological episodes (1991: 249). He questions Allen's idea that the quadripartite structure of the myth of the four brothers (tiger, bear, monkey, man) relates to a societal quadripartite structure (kings, their

2 Research project "Ritual, Space, Mimesis: Performative Traditions and Ethnic Identity among the Rai of Eastern Nepal" at the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, Vienna University, funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF, 2011-2015).

ministers, priests, their assistants, p. 46, also reinforced by other of Allen's articles (1972, 1978) and suggests instead a dual model.

It is remarkable however that not many of the works that have used Allen's thesis as a resource explicitly refer to his proposal for a Trans-Himalayan-Tibetan comparative project as such. He emphasised this project again in an article published in 1980. But this article was noticed more for the specific myths it contained (e.g. in Huber 2010 and de Sales 1991), rather than for its call for a comparative approach. There are a few exceptions, however: Anne de Sales was one of the most explicit in acknowledging that Nicholas Allen had "prepared the ground for 'a comparative mythology of the Bodic speakers'" (1994:682). Likewise Stuart Blackburn specifically refers to Allen's comparative approach (for instance 2007: 421), while conceptually and geographically rooting his own approach elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> and we find marginal mentions of it in Bickel (2000: 694). One reason why Allen's comparative concept has not been pursued more widely might be due to the Tibetan examples he chose and the Dumézilian tradition that has interested him until today, even though it has long been out of fashion in studies of Himalayan comparative mythology and elsewhere. One of the problems with Allen's source area and examples for comparison is addressed by Gaenszle, who considers it much more convincing to draw comparisons with Northeast India rather than with the Tibetan plateau (1991: 281). And this is also what we find has recently been put into practice by scholars of comparative Himalayan mythology (as for instance Blackburn 2007, 2010, Huber 2010, Huber and Blackburn 2012).

### **A brief prospect**

Among Tibetologists it seems that Ramble in his foreword to "Miyapma" is one of the first to openly acknowledge, in published form, Allen's status as one of the pioneers of a comparative Himalayan mythology that includes the Tibetan plateau. However, even if not directly stated in publications, Allen's hope that "the study may [also] be helpful or suggestive to Tibetologists" (p.233), has found an open ear among many researchers working elsewhere in the Himalayas, beyond Kirat or Nepalese mythology. Comparing Himalayan traditions as a whole,

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3 That is on Northeast India and the 'Boasian heritage'.

scholars such as Toni Huber have taken inspiration from Allen, with major publications to follow in the near future. They have “embarked on the ship of comparative mythology where, besides Nick Allen, Rolf A. Stein was the great helmsman” – to use Michael Oppitz’ words (personal communication), with which I am sure Allen would agree.<sup>4</sup> In keeping with the greater vision of comparative mythology extending also beyond the mountains of the Himalayas, and stepping over linguistic borders just as the stories themselves do, it can be hoped that the publication of *Miyapma* will be an inspiration for the next generation of scholars to work comparatively on the Himalayas and Tibet.

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