

BOOK REVIEW

Martin Brauen: *Feste in Ladakh*, Anademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt Graz 1980, 105 photographs, 12 line drawings, 186 pp.

Eva Dargay/Ulrich Gruber: *Ladakh - Innenansicht eines Landes*, Diederichs Verlag, Dusseldorf 1980, 41 photographs, 300 pp.

The tourist boom on Ladakh and Zangskar in the second half of the seventies has transformed this area, once the unveiled dreamland for scholars, adventurers and Tibet-freaks, into one big bazaar. The Golden Hordes, steaming in from all countries, led by the French and the Germans, were to become the proper rivals of the Indian Army in trampling down the unique culture and landscape of Little Tibet. The tourist hordes were followed by the authors of books. These, however, came hardly as the chroniclers of this international form of neo-imperialistic destruction. They came as the discoverers of yet another Lost Kingdom of the Himalayas : The Peissels had and took their chance. Or they came as slide-romanticists, filling coffee-table book after coffee-table book with radiant moonscapes, wild rock architecture or smiling children with turquoise ear-rings. (Some books of this kind are: K. Storm/S. Wahid: *Between Earth and Sky*; H.P.S. Ahluwalia: *Hermit Kingdom Ladakh*; R. Bedi/R. Bedi: *Ladakh: The Transhimalayan Kingdom*; or H. Harrer: *Ladakh*.)

Some, like Eva Dargay and Ulrich Gruber came as modest travellers, who were taken by the poetic environment of the place and carried off. Their travelogue became hymnical. Of those, finally, who came as researchers, only three have so far shown their results in books to a wider public. T. Skorupski and D. Snellgrove published two volumes of varying technical quality under the demanding title: *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*.

And Martin Brauen came up with his *Feste in Ladakh*, so far the best, though scanty, anthropological account on the region.

The content of the book is expressly limited on the lay festivals of Upper Ladakh. This limitation is an advantage, for it saves the author from touching complicated Buddhist ecclesiastical matter. The book is a descriptive ethnography of folklore and popular beliefs and practices as reflected in the festive events of the life cycle and those of the annual cycle.

These descriptions are preceded by a chapter on social stratification in the population of Ladakh and on such socio-ceremonial bodies as the *pha spun* and the *bcu tshogs* (see below). The sociological description of the classes is meagre and a bit unsatisfactory, because no inside look is taken into either of them. In Ladakh, society is stratified into the following classes: the royal families, *rgyal rigs*, the nobility, *rigs ldan*, the commoners, *mi dmangs*, and the "miserables", *rigs ngan*. The last mentioned category, according to Brauen, is subdivided into two artisanal classes, the blacksmiths and the 'carpenters', *mgar ba* and *mon*, and a class without landed property, the *be da*, all three ranked on the social ladder in this sequence. The two artisanal classes, the blacksmiths and the carpenters, do not only work in a *jajmān*-fashion for their higher ranked clients, they also participate in the passage rites of the latter with fixed roles: the blacksmiths by handing over selfmade tools of iron, the *mon* by making music, very much in the way as the *damai* or tailors do in the Nepal Himalayas.

More detailed than the treatment of the socially ranked classes is that of the corporated socio-ceremonial bodies. Brauen offers us a new view on the *pha spun*, which consist, according to Jäschke's lexical definition of 1881 of "several neighbours or inhabitants of a village that have a common *lha* and thus have become *rus-pa-çig-çig*, members of the same family

this tie entails on them the duty, whenever a death takes place, of caring for the cremation of the dead body. "Brauen, who does not quote Jäschke, reviews the statements of other scholars on this highly significant functional unit of Ladakhi society and concludes that it should be discussed from a point of view of residence rather than of descent. And with this perspective he discards formerly made claims that the *pha spun* is a consanguineal group of relatives in the paternal line, very much like the Tibetan *rus* or 'bone' = clan and stresses the fact of *pha spun* being neighbours, connected either by consanguinity or by alliance. I doubt whether his position is the last word on *pha spun*. The other corporated socio-ceremonial body described in Brauen's book is the *bcu tshogs*, the 'assembly of ten'. It has a variety of political and calendrical functions.

The following three chapters are the core of the book. The first of them deals with passage rites, those of birth, marriage and death. With a language as arid as a technical manual the author guides his readers through the first year of a newborn Ladakhi. One interesting cultural item that figures in the birth ceremonial is the *mda' dar*, a bamboo arrow of three knots and an iron point at one end. This arrow is stuck into a bowl of grain and visitors come to attach auspicious, multi-coloured strips of cloth into it. This ritual arrow carries cosmological connotations. The Ladakhi say it reaches through the sky, the air and the soil, the three spheres. As a symbolic mediator it is associated with the world-tree. Amongst the Sherpa of Eastern Nepal, it may be noted in parenthesis, the *mda' dar* arrow symbolizes power and longevity. There, as in Ladakh, it is used predominantly during another passage rite: the bringing home of the bride. During this sumptuous event the ritual arrow is carried by the main functionary of a ritual group called *nyo pa*, men who accompany the bridegroom to buy and guide home the bride to her new, virilocal residence. The marriage ceremonies of the Ladakhi which, as elsewhere in the

Tibetan cultural sphere, are broken up into a series of subsequent phases, marked by special beer-offering events, are described meticulously in Brauen's book. Here, as in other sections, the author enlivens his descriptions with ample quotations from the oral body of folksongs.

In his dealings with the last group of passage rites, those of death, the author concentrates on the sociological, rather than the transcendental side of the phenomenon. Special attention is paid to the responsibilities of the *pha spun*-relatives who, after a death has occurred, have to inform an astrologer to come to the house of the dead. It is their duty to prepare the dead for his final resting place, by bending the corpse into a squatting position, covering his eyes with his hands and closing the nostrils with the small fingers. Then they have to cook and serve the funerary guests; and it is their job to carry the dead on a bier to the cremation place, a cylindrical oven outside the village, *spur khang*. There they have to burn him and throw his ashes into a river. Several days later they repair the oven and serve the mourners a final meal. Later, when the dead has turned ancestor, it is again the *pha spun* who carry out the ancestral rites.

Among the festivals of Ladakh connected with the annual cycle, those related to New Year, are the most elaborate. And as the Ladakhi recognize two calendars, - the proper Tibetan one and one of their own - they also celebrate two New Years, each of them with distinct features. In simplifying the facts, those features can be classified as such: The Tibetan New Year displays predominantly Lamaistic elements, the indigenous Ladakhi New Year predominantly pre-Buddhist ones. From this distinction Brauen concludes that the Ladakhi calendar must be the older one, thereby contradicting a popular legend, according to which the local calendar was introduced about four hundred years ago by a Ladakhi king who advanced the New Year by two months,

for he and his men had to go to war and it was not sure whether they would return before the Tibetan New Year. As to the antiquity of the Ladakhi calendar, Brauen's arguments seems sound, whereas the local legend, historically false, points to another truth: New Year is so important that even an army going to war should not miss it at home. Moreover, the Ladakhi New Year customs display a number of similarities with those of the ethnic groups of the Hindukush, such as the Kalash. Thus, Brauen compares his descriptions with those made previously by Jettmar in *Die Religionen des Hindukush*, Stuttgart 1975, a standard opus, (which will soon be published in English). Some of the similarities he mentions are: making a special bonfire to expel an enemy king; commemorating the souls of the dead and the ancestors with offerings, *shi nu*; fabricating dough figures, in the shape of the ibex, *skyin*, their display inside the houses and their final ritual killing; honouring the deities of the hearth, *thab lha rgyal mo*; performing the pantomimic dance of an old couple, *api meme*, to expel the evils of the old year; and expressing a greater sexual freedom in words and actions, thus relating the New Year to the wish of fertility.

As agriculture plays an important role in the economy of Ladakh, a number of ceremonies and rites related to its phases accompany the agricultural cycle of the year. One of them is the first ritual ploughing in reverence to the god of the soil, *sa bdag*. It is fixed by an astrologer. Formerly, this inaugural ploughing used to be performed by the local kings. Another is the festival of the First Ears of Grain, *shrub lha*, which are cut by members of each family and hung onto the central pillar of the kitchen in honour of the gods of the hearth, the soil and the region. In former times folksongs used to be recited in the course of the *shrub lha* festival, dealing with the creation of the world and the origin of grain and beer. In the absence of a recent recording Brauen quotes a very interesting song on this subject, first published in 1923

by Francke, the great precursor of Ladakh's ethnography. As a whole, the descriptions of Brauen concerning the agricultural festivals are relatively poor and I am not in the position to decide whether this goes on the author's account or whether it reflects a general decline of agrarian rituals in Little Tibet.

Feste in Ladakh is concluded by a chapter on the oracles. As the activities of the oracles are not fixed to the dates of festivals, they are not immediately related to the subject of the book. Only the temple oracles act on set calendrical dates, some of which are festive days. The house oracle, *khyim lha*, on the other hand, can be called in by anyone at any time. The house oracle also acts as possessional magical healer. The author tells us some case histories of the Ladakh oracles: real people tell their vocational biographies. It is these presentations that are the liveliest part of the book.

It remains to be mentioned that each subject of the book is followed by a series of black and white or colour photographs which illustrate well what has been previously said in the descriptive, though artless language of Ladakh's first contemporary ethnographer of their festivals.

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