

BOOK REVIEWS

Buddhist Himalaya: Studies in Religion, History and Culture. Proceedings of the Golden Jubilee Conference of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, 2008

edited by Alex McKay and Anna Balikci-Denjongpa.

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These two volumes are the proceedings of the conference *Buddhist Himalaya: Studies in Religion, History and Culture* that was held in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) in Gangtok in October 2008. More than seventy scholars from Asia and from the West participated in this international meeting, which was convened by Alex McKay and presided over by the late Gene Smith.

The programme of the NIT, which was initially conceived to unite research and the preservation of cultural heritage, has been significantly enhanced in the last ten years, as the focus on Buddhist and Tibetan Studies increasingly came to include regional research on Sikkim. The institution thus also reflects the state's historical position as an important cultural crossover within the Himalayan region. In this sense, one may see the conference's overall title, 'Buddhist Himalaya', as being somewhat restrictive, since it does not cover the factor of religious variety, which (together with ethnic and linguistic plurality) distinguishes Sikkim and the Himalaya in general. In fact, a number of contributions (not only in the 'Sikkim Papers' volume) deal with the realities of a non-Buddhist Himalaya.

It is a little confusing that the preface and acknowledgments of volume I mention three volumes whereas actually only two exist. Of the seventy conference papers originally presented, 46 were accepted as contributions for the present publication. The volumes include an introduction by the editors and a list of the authors, complete with biographical details, research focus and recent publications. Apart from a few typos, there are

some formal inconsistencies, such as the unusual, although acceptable, choice of leaving the rendering of Sanskrit and Tibetan words (either phonetically or transliterated) up to individual authors. However, it should have at least been ensured that the articles are internally consistent in this respect, which is not always the case, including in the introduction (e.g., Vol I, p. 6; pp. 151-155).

The first volume contains 23 articles dealing with aspects of Tibetan history and culture that relate to Himalayan border regions in varying degrees. In his introduction, Alex McKay offers a good overview of the individual papers, which are thematically, regionally and chronologically widely spread. These are, in order of appearance: David Germano with a discourse on issues concerning academic engagement with Tibet; Karma Phuntsho on the significance of the medium of the 'book' in the context of traditional Tibetan Buddhist identity construction. This is followed by five Bhutan-related contributions, which focus on linguistics, anthropology, art and material culture and contemporary political issues (authored respectively by Lungtaen Gyatso, Yongten Dargye, Ngawang Jamtsho, Akiko Ueda and Françoise Pommaret). Susanne von der Heide offers a report about her and the late Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche's investigations of the remarkable Buddhist cave temple sites of Mentsün Lhakhang and Dagrangjang in Upper Mustang; this is followed by Theresia Hofer's biographical account of a twentieth century female Tibetan medical doctor, a study connected with (the still little observed) topic of gender in the context of Tibetan medical traditions.

The ecology-related contribution of Rhyddhi Chakraborty and Chandra Chakraborty compares the philosophy of the Lotus Sutra with the Deep Ecology platform of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naes to propose an environmental approach to the fragile eco-system of the Himalaya, a conception that is linked to a philosophically postulated non-duality between humans and their environment. In our opinion, this study lacks a closer examination of the theoretical background and feasibility of such an approach, which could be improved by recourse to current anthropological debates on the links between culture and the environment. Ronald Davidson's contribution points to the influence of regional environments in the formation of Tantric Buddhism in the Himalayan regions, and the biogeographical model he introduces in this connection is helpful in explaining the diversity of Tantric traditions. Cakrasamvara and Syncretism in

the religious landscapes of the Western Himalayas is the subject of Andrea Loseries' contribution. Her claim that the NW Himalaya and West Tibet in general constitute 'a whirlpool of spiritual layers going back far into prehistoric times, where Shaivite traditions, Bon and Svastika Bon as well as Buddhist Tantra were and are practised in symbiosis' (p. 153) seems somewhat anachronistic. In the case of Svastika Bon, for example, it has been established that it is not an invention of prehistoric times; if Bon (in 'Bon and Svastika Bon') is intended here as the name of a religion that predates the appearance of Buddhism in Tibet, it would be an assumption that is rather questionable. Indeed, experts such as Henk Blazer see no real evidence for this; his paper in this volume (an analysis of the narratives round the shifting realm of Miyül Kyithing (*Miyi yul Skyi(d) mthing*)) is part of a series of systematic investigations of the narrative construction of the historical identity of Bon. He concludes that the formative phase of Bon religion in the 10-11th centuries saw the acquisition of narrative elements from the 'Tibetan heartland' (the 'heartland of Bon', as he calls it; i.e. *Miyi yul Skyi mthing*), the earliest textual evidence of which usually appears to be closely associated with the pre-Buddhist (esp. mortuary) 'rituals of *gshen* and *bon*'. Both the origin of the archetypical *miyül* (*myi yul*) and that of the Bon religion point to Central Tibet, and the traditional claim of Bon provenance in the West (Zhangzhung, or Tazig) thus represents a later projection. We are curious how these new (and in some respects controversial) insights on Bon (but also on questions such as what is Zhangzhung?) will continue to develop in the author's future works.

The volume continues with David Holmberg's insightful article on non-monastic Buddhism and identity in contemporary western Tamang areas. No one else has provided more systematic historical text-based studies on Tibetan clans in recent years than Roberto Vitali, whose paper on the ancestral lineage of Rigdzin Gödemcen represents yet another important contribution. Laxman Thakur offers significant supplementary data from folk songs in Kinnaur to the textually transmitted accounts of the biography of the Lochen Rinchensangpo. In a lengthy introduction, he expounds the value of oral traditions in the field of historical research, to which we only wish to add (and reassure) that no contemporary researcher of Tibetan history would object; there are enough good examples in recent studies that make its value obvious. It just depends on what one does with it, and how the data obtained from collective memory are contextualised

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against textual sources. The paper by Hildegard Diemberger – a presentation of central aspects of her long-standing research on the Samding Dorjephagmo tradition – is followed by two contributions that offer new data on the early and late (violent) phases of the Ganden Phodang state's expansion into the South-Eastern Highlands and the Eastern Himalaya: the contribution by Peter Schwieger (with the telling title 'The Long arm of the Fifth Dalai Lama') and Toni Huber's article, 'Pushing South', which analyses the economic and profit-oriented motives behind the incursions of the Tibetan state into the uncivilised regions between Tawang and Pemakö in the first half of the twentieth century. The last articles in this volume are studies by Patrick Booz on the political history of tea in Tibet in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Todd Lewis' discussion of a recent Newari version of the Buddha's life story, a biographical account of the remarkable Russian Roerich family by Malgorzata Gdok-Klafkowska, and Kumkum Roy's study of 20th century travel accounts by Indian visitors to the Kailas-Manasarovar region.

Anna Balikci-Denjongpa's introduction to volume II opens with an overview of the 'Sikkim Papers' and proceeds to inform us about the present state of Sikkim research and its relation to the NIT. The first two articles in the 'Sikkim Papers' would fit well with the first volume, as both address realities of Tibetan history: John Ardussi's work on Sikkim and Bhutan in the cross-currents of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Tibetan history, and Elliot Sperling's historical analysis of the Minyag origin of the Sikkim Chögyel dynasty. In connection with this, we wish to refer to John Ardussi and Per K. Sørensen's forthcoming annotated edition of Kazi Dawa Samdup's unpublished translation of the Royal Chronicle of Sikkim (*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*), where Sperling's valuable paper in the present volume will be further discussed.

Saul Mullard presents seventeenth-century events as per contemporary Tibetan sources, which were concealed or forgotten in the 'religiously inspired national narrative' of the nineteenth century in order to legitimate the existence of Sikkim as a nation, which was then threatened by British colonisation. Pema Wangchuk Dorje questions the uncritical reliance on colonial accounts in Sikkim, providing several precise examples of their incompleteness or inconsistency. Sonam B. Wangyal's parallel between the Bhutanese Zhabdrung Nawang Namgyal and Ögödei Khan enables him to explore the hypothesis of the Bhutanese troops'

withdrawal from Sikkim in 1706 resulting from the public announcement of the Zhabdrung's death. John Bray examines Captain Barré Latter's role in the establishment of diplomatic relations between the East India Company and Sikkim in the aftermath of the 1814-16 war with Nepal. Tirtha Prasad Mishra revisits the history of the Kotapa rebellion, but problematically avoids a more complex analysis of the relations between Bhutias and Lepchas in Sikkim, the two communities being interwoven at the level of the ruling elite and the Sikkimese kings' rule having been often destabilised by power struggles through history. Nawang Tsering Shaksपो describes relations and similarities between Sikkim and Ladakh, highlighting the importance of genealogies and historical lineages among the aristocracies of the Himalaya. Mark Turin presents significant results from the linguistic survey of Sikkim that he directed between 2005 and 2006; his analysis focuses on the role of heritage given to language in Sikkim. Piotr Klafkowski presents manuscripts written (except for one) by Athing Joseph Rongong (1900-1975), a Christian Lepcha writer of Kalimpong; these manuscripts focus on Lepcha lexicography, the Lepcha tale of Tashe Thing, the translation of the New Testament and the memoirs of Athing Joseph Rongong. Sonam Dhondup Tshering presents religious data per ethnic community from the 2005-06 Sikkim socio-economic census that was organised by the department where he is posted as Director General, and discusses the socio-economic and political factors of recent religious changes in the state. Charisma Lepcha and Jenny Bentley's articles on changes in the Lepcha community (in the Kalimpong area and in North Sikkim), reach similar conclusions, arguing that new elements introduced into Lepcha communities (Christianity, inter-ethnic marriages, formal education, etc.) have played a part in 'eroding' Lepcha culture on the one hand, and in giving Lepchas the means to protect their culture, primarily through cultural organisations, on the other. Isrun Engelhardt describes events that were witnessed and people that were encountered (mainly in Gangtok) by the members of the Ernst Schäfer expedition (1938-1939) in Sikkim. Bal Gopal Shrestha examines imaginative and innovative aspects of Newar religion and rituals in Sikkim in comparison with Nepal by discussing rituals performed at the temple of Svayambhū Bhimākālī in Gangtok. Majulika Ghosh draws parallels between Buddhist teachings and Sikkimese Buddhist monks' struggles for the protection of nature and Arne Naess' concept of Deep Ecology (see

the contribution by Chakrobarty above). Swati Akshay Sachdeva describes practices and rituals of Sikkimese Bhutia marriages. Brigitte Steinmann analyses Sikkimese and Nepalese Nyingmapa rituals of the crossed threads Dö (*mdos*) genre. Michael Oppitz provides an impressive insight into the geographical distribution of the various forms of Buddhist and Shamanic drums (*nga* and *dhyāngro*) in Nepal and Western Sikkim. Heleen Plaisier examines Lepcha practices and tales related to millet beer (*cí* in Lepcha). Usha Lachungpa proposes measures for the conservation of the ‘survival strategies’ of the Drokpas (North Sikkim nomads) and for that of their local environment. Reaching similar conclusions, Sophie Sabatier-Bourdet examines the socio-economic organisation of the Lachenpas (North Sikkim), and the changes that external pressures have triggered amongst them.

The great diversity of themes in the second volume reflects the nascent state of Sikkim studies, of which NIT is the main supporter. We can only hope that each of these themes will be developed in its own space in the future. In closing, apart from a few editorial imperfections and minor faults in some of the papers (none of which are substantial), these two volumes are testimony to what was evidently a very successful conference, with contributions providing a significant enhancement of our knowledge of the history and cultures of the Buddhist Himalaya and of Sikkim.