

BOOK REVIEWS

Pilgrimage in Tibet edited by Alex McKay. London: Curzon Press, 1998. 228 pp.

Reviewed by Maria Phylactou

Readers of this journal will be familiar with recent writing on Tibet and the Himalayan region concerning the subjects of space, place, and landscape. One strand of this writing relates to specifically western images of Tibet as a sacred space. The popular and enduring image of Tibet as Shangri-la, a distorting representation in which Tibet is apparently detached from its geographical and historical referents and transformed by the Western imagination into a placeless utopia is one that many writers have now meticulously documented, analysed, and tried, more or less successfully, to deconstruct. Peter Bishop's (1989) study of Western travel writing is especially well known; others have focused on representations of Tibet in history, accounts of Buddhism, and in Western popular culture.

Another strand of writing examines Tibetan ideas about space and ideas that Tibetans hold about particular places, and types of places, at particular times, drawing also on textual sources. Individual studies provide insights into highly situated understandings of place, which also function as a much needed critique of the distorting representations alluded to above. With this substantial body of firmly grounded ethnography and textual source material, generalization and theorization about Tibetan notions of space may proceed rather more cautiously.

The main focus of this literature is on sites of religious importance: 'sacred landscapes'. There is still relatively little documentation of how Tibetan communities live in, and interact with, their immediate environments. The middle ground between 'households' and 'sacred mountains' remains to be covered, while religion does not figure in recent discussions of development. Beyond Tibetan studies, the literature on Buddhist ideas of nature and the environment has also grown. Drawn from textual sources and oriented towards philosophical themes, it seems even further removed from lived experience.

Pilgrimage in Tibet is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on place. It adds to our knowledge about particular places and pilgrimage sites in Tibet, and our understanding of the pilgrimage process among Tibetan people. The ten papers of this collection were presented at a conference on pilgrimage held in Leiden in 1996, and organized by Alex McKay. Alexander Macdonald has contributed a foreword. Individual papers highlight different aspects. Pilgrimage events may cut across all manner of geographical, cultural, religious, and political boundaries: we encounter Indian and Western pilgrims in Tibet, and Tibetan pilgrims in

India. There are professional pilgrims, pilgrim-traders, and tourist pilgrims; tourism may overlap or indeed compete with pilgrimage. Pilgrimage, as much recent anthropological writing has shown, is simply not a homogeneous category, nor is it uniformly experienced or described. The focus has moved away from the ritual process.

In this collection a historical approach is at least partially privileged, foregrounding some of the changes that have occurred over time at particular sites, and to particular pilgrimage events. It sheds light on processes connected with the establishment, systematization, growth and, occasionally, decline, of particular sites; their possible development into arenas of contestation; the possible cessation and subsequent revival of pilgrimage events—changes that relate as much to an economic and political canvas, the worldly setting of which pilgrimage is a part, as to religious phenomena alone.

Drawing on a wide range of textual and ethnographic material relating to well-known pilgrimage sites in Nepal and Tibet, Katia Buffetrille discusses the process whereby a cult linked to a territorial god or local deity (*yul lha*) is incorporated over time into a more encompassing Buddhist ritual matrix. The landscape is perceptually reconfigured according to more universal Buddhist (mandalic) models, and may become the focus of large-scale pilgrimage (*gnas skor*). Parallels are drawn with the process of Sanskritization. Buffetrille notes that cults associated with sacred mountains (*gnas ri*) are often composite in character: neither wholly Buddhist, nor non-Buddhist. Brigitte Steinmann's paper illustrates an analogous process of 'Buddhicization' as it occurred in Sikkim. She draws on a history written by the Maharaja of Sikkim in the early 20th century, and focuses on the creation of sacred sites by a religious elite and the submission of local powers.

McKay's introduction and the paper by van Spengen, a geographer, provide useful insights into some of the distinctive aspects of Tibetan pilgrimage sites. Van Spengen highlights the 'geographicity' of the Tibetan pilgrim world, its 'written-in-the-earth quality', noting that sacredness derives from landscape and monuments alike, each often imaged in terms of the other. He discusses the economic aspects and contexts of pilgrimage, urban pilgrimage centres, and the trade that occurred there. Trade forms the subject of John Clarke's paper on the Hindu Gosains who, during the 18th and 19th centuries, made annual visits to Tibetan pilgrimage sites, bringing precious stones and returning with musk, yaktails, and gold.

Tibetan pilgrimage accounts provide an important narrative frame concerning people as well as places: pilgrimages often feature in individual biographies. Per Kvaerne and Hanna Havnevik both write about individuals for whom pilgrimage

became a way of life during certain periods. Hanna Havnevik draws on the biography of Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche, a female religious practitioner with links to the Rime movement, who travelled widely in the Himalayan region and Tibet between the 1860s and early 1900s, and became highly respected. Havnevik suggests that the pilgrimage process itself contributed to an accumulation of sanctity within her, though her biography also testifies to the hardship and prejudice she sometimes faced, as did so many female practitioners. The (1957) biography of Khyung-sprul 'Jigs-med nam-mkha'i rdo-rje, discussed by Per Kvaerne, relates how this Tibetan Bonpo pilgrim travelled around India and the Himalayan region on several occasions between the 1920s and 1940s, visiting Bon and Buddhist sites alike. He produced several publications, founded a monastery in western Tibet, and suppressed local practices of animal sacrifice in the worship of mountain gods.

The collection contains three different views of Mount Kailash in western Tibet. Andrea Loseries-Leick examines references to Kailash/Meru in various early sources and reviews its significance in the Hindu, Jain, Bon and Buddhist traditions, showing how its sacredness is portrayed in each. Alex McKay examines the development of Kailash as a site of Hindu pilgrimage. Drawing on Indian classical sources, he argues that, while renunciates may have frequented the area from early times, there is little evidence of ordinary Hindu pilgrims until much later. Modern British sources indicate a significant increase in the number of Indian pilgrims to Kailash in the early 20th century. Winand Callewaert's personal narrative of his 1996 pilgrimage to Kailash oscillates between the highs and lows of an exacting journey, the physical hardships and moments of spiritual insight.

The final article is an engaging account by Peng Wenbin of the revival of a Bonpo pilgrimage to the sacred mountain of rDza-dkar in Sichuan during the 1980s among a local Tibetan community. For several years the pilgrimage flourished, only to decline with the increase of tourism to the area, which a guide book describes as 'a holy land of Nature to which thousands upon thousands of tourists pay homage'.

The juxtaposition of pilgrimage and tourism returns us, by another route, to some of the different conceptualizations of sacred place mentioned at the outset. It reminds us that sacredness can be constituted in a multiplicity of ways which may at times converge, whilst the contemporary idiom of pilgrimage brings into relation quite different constructions of place in a changing ecology of the sacred. Future studies may begin to shed more light on these different aspects, on whether and how they interact and influence each other, and on the shifting and multiple significance of pilgrimage as it is understood and practised in the present. While *Pilgrimage in Tibet* focuses mainly on the historical dimension of this diversity, it is essential

reading for anyone interested in understanding the phenomenon as it is developing now.

Ladakh: Culture, history, and development between Himalaya and Karakoram edited by Martijn van Beek, Kristoffer Brix Bertelsen and Poul Pedersen. (Recent Research on Ladakh 8). Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1999. 414pp. ill.

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The first colloquium for Ladakh studies was held in Konstanz in 1981 and its proceedings were published as *Recent Research on Ladakh*. The International Association for Ladakh Studies was set up at the third conference in Herrnhut in 1987, largely at the initiative of Henry Osmaston who has guided the Association through its first ten years and to whom this volume is dedicated. The volume includes an account of his remarkable career as forester, farmer, geography lecturer and mountaineer. In 1993 and 1999 IALS meetings were held in Ladakh. Ten of the contributors to this volume are from the region and attended the colloquium in Moesgard in 1997.

The editors remark that the collection “reflects both the depth and breadth of recent research on Ladakh”. One is certainly struck by the sheer number of papers (27 in all) and the variety of topics. The collection does not include editors Martijn van Beek and Kristoffer Brix Bertelsen’s own work on practices of representation in Ladakh, an important recent contribution to Ladakh studies. A brief introduction might have helped guide the non-specialist through the recent history of the field, identifying particular interests, trends, and broader regional and theoretical contexts.

The regional scope of Ladakh studies has been significantly broadened with the addition of studies of some of the nomadic communities of Changthang, and of the region’s Muslim communities, especially in the district of Kargil in the west. One of the papers relates to the Northern Areas of Pakistan.

Monisha Ahmad describes the annual salt trek to Tso Kar lake in Rupshu, east Ladakh. Salt extraction began here after the cessation of the traditional salt trade with west Tibet in the 1960s, and continues today despite the availability of subsidized sea salt. In the 1970s and 1980s the rights of the Rupshu nomads to salt extraction and grazing at the lake were contested by nomads from Kharnak. The