

Mountains, Monasteries and Mosques. Recent Research on Ladakh and the Western Himalaya. Proceedings of the 13th Colloquium of the International Association of Ladakh Studies

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Reviewed by Patrick Kaplanian

First, we must congratulate the organisers for holding the 13th Ladakh conference in Italy, the homeland of two of the great 20th century Tibetologists, Giuseppe Tucci and Luciano Petech, as well as the 18th century Jesuit explorer Ippolito Desideri. Appropriately, this volume begins with an article on the latter in his capacity as precursor of modern Ladakh studies. Enzo Gualterio Bargiacchi presents Desideri's qualities, his acute sense of observation, and the intellectual honesty that led him to revise his initial impressions of Ladakh and of Tibetan Buddhism. Why did Desideri's *Relazione* lie unpublished until the late 19th century? The author believes that he was far in advance of his time.

In the past, the scope of International Association for Ladakh Studies (IALS) conferences has extended far beyond the boundaries of Leh district, for example towards the Skardu region in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. However, in this collection the contributors turn more towards Himachal Pradesh. Thus, Christian Jahoda presents a very clear history of Spiti and the numerous changes in its political relationship with Ladakh and Tibet. In practice, regardless of which kingdom to which it was necessary to pay homage at any particular time, this isolated valley was left more or less to itself as soon as it had paid appropriate tribute. Nonetheless, the author finds that certain Ladakhi customs influenced Spiti, for example the worship of the protective deity Dorje Chenmo, as well as aspects of local music and dance traditions. Also turning towards Himachal Pradesh, Kurt Tropper's paper provides us with a transcription and analysis of a donor's inscription at Nako in Kinnaur.

Georgios T. Halkias analyses the Tibetan text of the 1679 Tibet-

Bashahr Treaty, together with earlier English renderings, and proposes a new translation. At the outset of the Tibet-Ladakh war (1679-1683/84), Bashahr sided with Tibet, the ultimate victor, and as a result was able to regain control of Upper Kinnaur on the higher reaches of the Sutlej river. Bashahr centres on Rampur and Sarahan, lower down the Sutlej, and these developments therefore brought it closer to Tibet, geographically as well as politically. Halkias shows that the smooth functioning of the caravan route from Rampur via Kinnaur and across the Shipki-la to Tibet was one of the underlying strategic issues.

This episode in Bashahr had a completely differently outcome from a later episode in the history of Kangra (also now in Himachal Pradesh) in which—as Arik Moran describes—the tentative opening of a new trade route proved unsuccessful. The aim was to link Kangra with East Turkestan (present-day Sinkiang/Xinjiang) via Leh. In 1867, together with the tea planter Robert Shaw, the Jalandhar divisional commissioner Douglas Forsyth decided to open a trade fair at Palampur near Kangra. Despite its initial success, the fair did not develop in the way that its sponsors had hoped. Its avowed objective was to attract buyers of tea from East Turkestan. However, this did not happen and before long, Kangra's limited commercial relations with East Turkestan came to a definitive end following China's re-conquest of the region in 1877. Why this setback? For a number of reasons: because the Afghanistan route was more practical for traders than the road through Leh; because of the extension of St Petersburg's influence over the future Xinjiang following the Russian conquest of West Turkestan; and finally, because the princely state of Jammu & Kashmir, which controlled the route via Ladakh, had become too desirous of taxes. The issue of taxation was one of the factors that led the British to press the Maharajah of Jammu & Kashmir to accept the appointment of a British Joint Commissioner in Leh from 1871 onwards.

John Bray and Tsering D. Gonkatsang are similarly interested in the political and commercial significance of a caravan route. Under the terms of the 1684 Tibet-Ladakh treaty, the King of Ladakh, succeeded from the mid-19th century onwards by the Maharaja of Jammu & Kashmir, had to send a caravan known as the Lopchak (*lo phyag*) to Lhasa every three years. The authors have found three 19th century texts associated with the Lopchak. The first is a detailed receipt from the Lhasa government's

treasurer in 1872. It shows that the list of symbolic gifts carried by the Lopchak had hardly changed since the end of the 17th century. The other two documents are letters addressed by the Lhasa government to W.H. Johnson, the Maharajah's *wazir* (governor) in Leh from 1870 to 1883. Those who are not accustomed to reading this type of correspondence will be struck by its verbose and pompous style. An analysis of the texts in their wider political and social contexts shows that the Tibetans regarded themselves as superior to the Ladakhis, but that the continuation of the Lopchak mission provided benefits to both sides.

Now let us turn to the Muslim communities. The contributions by Abdul Ghani Sheikh and Shahzad Bashir complement each other. The former presents an overview of the Sufi penetration of Ladakh. He argues that pre-Islamic Hindu and Buddhist traditions in Kashmir provided a favourable terrain for the Sufis at the time of Islamisation. He then describes the arrival of the first Sufis in Ladakh, together with that of Shams al-Dīn rāqī (d. 1526) and the Nūrbakhshīs. We learn that there are some 5,000 Nūrbakhshīs in Ladakh.

Taking as an example three differing accounts of the Nūrbakhshīs in the wider region (Kashmir, Ladakh and Baltistan), Shahzad Bashir shows how difficult it is to interpret such historical sources unless one places them in their proper context. Depending on how one reads the texts, the founder Muhammad Nūrbakhsh (d. 1464) can be seen as a messianic figure, the reformer of a corrupted Islam, or a true Sufi whose message has been distorted. These contrasting representations depend on the origin of the text and the nature of the intended audience.

All these contributions are primarily concerned with history. Let us now turn to the papers dealing with ethnology and the other human sciences.

Pascale Dollfus focuses on the Kharnak community, one of the three nomadic pastoralist groups in the high plateau of the Ladakhi Changthang. She describes their history and way of life, showing its distinctiveness. One learns, for example, that the Kharnak population is divided into six clans (*phaspun*). The nature of the *phaspun* has been a source of controversy in a number of studies on Ladakh. In this case, it is interesting to note that the Kharnak-pa deny that the *phaspun* descend from a common set of ancestors, an apparent contrast with other regions of Ladakh. On the other hand, the Kharnakpa trace their origins to two households. Is this

a contradiction? Maybe so, but the study of mythology often mocks our desire for consistency.

Elena de Rossi Filibeck studies a series of 39 marriage songs. She gives the original texts together with English translations. This is a valuable contribution to the study of Ladakhi marriage customs which complements the publications of the Leh branch of the Jammu & Kashmir Cultural Academy in the 1980s.

Petra Maurer discusses a divination text: chapter 32 of the Vaidūya dKarmo by Sanggye Gyatso (Sang rgyas rgyamtsho, 1653-1705), the regent who governed Tibet after the death of the 5th Dalai Lama. This chapter deals with the art of geomancy (*sadpyad*, literally 'examination of the earth'), the prime purpose of which is to decide on the sites of new buildings. She compares the details of the text with the actual practice of two contemporary Ladakhi astrologers.

Erberto Lo Bue has chosen to focus on 'sky burial', the funerary practice, common in Tibet, which consists of cutting up the corpse and leaving it to the vultures. He seeks to find out whether sky burial has been practised in the Western Himalaya and does in fact find traces and personal testimonies to show that it existed in the past. According to him, this custom disappeared in Indian territory in the 1940s. It is still practised in Mustang and even gaining renewed popularity in Tibet.

Poul Pedersen discusses the relationship between two people of completely different backgrounds who might not have been expected to meet. Abdul Wahid Radhu is the heir to a family of traders from Leh, while Marco Pallis was from a family of Greek businessmen and later became a specialist in baroque music, particularly the viola. What brought them together was a certain spirituality and an interest in the work of the French Muslim scholar René Guénon, whose *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* (1921) had been translated by Pallis.

Before an important ceremony on 21 March 1996, the Dalai Lama solemnly declared that anyone who was a worshipper of the protective deity Dorje Shugden should leave. What is the source of this 'excommunication' of the devotees of this divinity? Martin Mills focuses on the way that the Dalai Lama's orders were executed in Ladakh. He shows the ambivalence of Ladakhis' eventual submission to the Dalai Lama's authority: were they responding to him in his capacity as a leader of the Gelugpa order, or as the political leader of the Tibetan government in exile?

Finally, Sonam Wangchok presents us with a tableau of sacred sites in the Nubra valley: mountains, lakes, caves, trees and footprints preserved in stone.

Taken together, the papers in this collection are very much in the spirit of the IALS, which has chosen not to limit itself to a narrowly defined view of Ladakh but rather to take into account neighbouring regions ranging from Baltistan to as far as the borders of Kumaon. Similarly, the Association is interested not just in Buddhists but also in Muslims and the followers of other religions, and it has adopted an interdisciplinary approach, linking ethnology with history and, more broadly, the human sciences to ecology. In short, this volume is a welcome and successful contribution to the field.