

## BOOK REVIEW

*András Höfer: Tamang Ritual Texts I, Preliminary Studies in the Folk-Religion of an Ethnic Minority in Nepal, Wiesbaden 1981, Franz Steiner Verlag, Beiträge zur Südasiens-Forschung, Südasiens Institut Universität Heidelberg vol. 65.*

This is András Höfer's second book. While the first one, wide in scope, glanced at all Nepalese castes and ethnic groups in regard to their respective hierarchical positions within the State, as mirrored in the first Legal Code, the Muluki Ain of 1854,<sup>1</sup> this second book, narrowly focused, deals with just one of the ethnic minorities, the Tamang, the largest hill tribe in Nepal. The book opens up new territory, and the means by which this is accomplished, are novel too. The new territory explored in Höfer's study are the ritual recitals, predominantly non-Buddhist and non-Hindu in nature, of the various Tamang religious officiants. The new approach by which the author acquaints the reader with this hitherto untouched territory, may be coined as *philological ethnography*. To employ the philologist's magnifying glass (as traditionally handled by the Sanskritist, Tibetologist, Sinologist) and to use it in an anthropological perspective, is of course not altogether new. To drop just a few names as a reminder of precursors: Berthold Laufer and Marcel Granet, whose vast knowledge in things and words Chinese combined well with a qualified sociological intuition; Joseph Rock, who knew the Na Khi people probably as well as the Na Khi ritual texts he studied and which he collected

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1 The Caste Hierarchy and the State of Nepal: A Study of the Muluki Ain of 1854. *Khumbu Himal*, Universitätsverlag Wagner, Innsbruck 1979, reviewed in the previous no of *Kailash* by P.R. Sharma.

in the thousands, (I assume Rock's works inspired Höfer's own textual arrangements); and R.J. Held, who undertook a kind of fieldwork in a text, the Mahābhārata, previously reserved to exegetists or amateurs; or Rolf A. Stein, who washed the grains of the Tibetan word in etymological waters until they turned into golden nuggets of cultural significance; or, in the intermediary generation, A.W. Macdonald, to whom Höfer's book is jointly dedicated, together with Ser Bahadur Mamba Tamang, the author's main informant. What is new in Höfer's fusion of anthropology and philological approach, is the stress on ethnography. Whereas most of the scholars named above entered the realm of anthropology through a textual analysis of the word, Höfer reverses the route: he comes to the text via ethnography.

This is so in a purely temporal sense, a diachronical necessity. For when the author set out to study the Western Tamang in three villages between the Trisuli and the Anku Khola rivers along the old track from Kathmandu to Gorkha - in 1969, 71-72 and 74, - the texts he dug up for his book, did not exist as (written) texts. He had to establish them first from his own tapes. For all the "texts" he deals with belong to the oral tradition. And there was not much chance of being philological about them, until he had learnt the Tamang language - not yet taught in Wisconsin - on location. In short, he had to *be* with the Tamang (that is what the highly strategic term *fieldwork* really means: to be with the people one studies), before he could unravel them through their unrecorded oral literature.

What then are these Tamang ritual texts about and on what ground can their presentation be termed philological ethnography? The present volume I, implying that there will be a volume II, which will concentrate, I guess, on shamanistic ritual matter, contains five texts: a) a text on an

exorcistic ritual called the *nàkhle mán* and performed by a Tamang ritual specialist, the *lambu*. As the name implies, (*nàkhle*, derived from Nepali *nānglo* = round bamboo tray) this ritual is performed on such a bamboo tray inside the client's house, in honour of a class of supernatural beings, the *mán*. Höfer claims that this class of spirits has no equivalent in the Tibetan language (what about the *mangma*, a class of witches?), but can instead be associated with the Limbu *man* ('divine spirits'), the Lepcha *mun* ('devils') and the Gurung *mōh* ('spirits, ghosts'). It may be added that the exorcistic healers of the Lohrung Rai who, like the *lambu* and the *bombo* of the Tamang, go on ritual journeys during their séances, are called *mangpa*, i.e. 'the ones that deal with the mang'. And the class of ghosts in Western Nepal, (for instance among the Magar), called *mān*, who can poison food and crops with the evil eye, may perhaps belong to the same group of supernaturals that haunt the Himalayan peoples beyond the ethnic borders.

Höfer informs us about all the occasions on which the *nàkhle mán* ceremony is performed, for instance when the crops are damaged, when people or cattle of a household are ill, or at certain fixed dates related to the agricultural cycle. And he gives us an introductory picture of the ceremony's structure, inherent in the ritual text. The text is the longest of the five (270 lines) and so is, accordingly, its commentary.

b) The second text, established from a staged performance for the ethnographer - only the first and the last are taken from life - the *piksu mán*, is addressed to a union of two supernaturals, a ghost of a powerful ritual specialist killed by a leopard during a hunt, and a *cen*-demon. It is about 50 lines long. As in the other texts, the ritual arrangement is depicted by the author in schematic drawings. And the tools and materials used in the rite, such as leafplates, wooden forks for raw eggs, white and black *torma* figures, incense-

stones, etc. are described and their symbolical signification is elucidated.

c) The third text and its ritual - the *cen bra* - deals with another union of supernatural trouble-makers, which, this time, affect the cattle only and can be appeased prophylactically on the fixed dates of Kartik or Mangsir fullmoon nights. It is the shortest, only 19 lines long.

d) The fourth text is addressed to a trinity of hunting spirits (*kirba ḍakpo sòm*); to four mythical orphans; to various Nepalese divinities, which, therefore, are spoken to in Nepali; and to the gods of the soil, the *syibda nēda*, or *sime-bhume* in Nepali parlance. The ceremony, for which the text is meant, precedes a hunt. Hunting amongst the Tamang has gradually declined over the last centuries and the text is a reminder of days past, when the ancestors went, accompanied by dogs and equipped with bows and arrows, on long hunting expeditions, especially those ancestors of the Waiba clan, who still today maintain a special association to hunting, as can be deduced from an annual mock-hunt performed by the members of this particular clan. The text for the hunting ceremony as presented by the author, is 110 lines long, although it has been pointed out that in reality the text is longer. How much has been omitted in the presentation, is not told.

e) The fifth and last of the texts is addressed to a clan-god, that of the Mamba-clan. It is one hundred lines long. The clan-god, appearing under two names, Jyañjyen Marbo Raḅujyet and Jyañjyen Marbo Ḍabla Ma: bon, is associated with the ideal North; and the performer of the ritual faces, during his recital, towards this ideal North, whereas his back is directed to the 'lower' south. This may be a hint to the northern (e.g. Tibetan) origin of the Tamang as an ethnic group, a fact, which in Höfer's book gains new, unquestionable evidence. It

may also be related to the notion, shared for instance by the Northern Magar, that North and South are dichotomies to express a series of antithetic qualities: up/down - good/bad - healthy/unhealthy - familiar/foreign.

With the exception of the fifth text all the other ritual recitals presented by Höfer share one common feature of considerable interest, and it is worthwhile to comment on it in passing. All these texts contain at one point or other an enumeration of place-names, which are both mythological and geographical. This enumeration of place-names, *rirap* in Tamang, has been equated with the famous "ritual journeys" of the ecstatic medico-religious practitioners. And indeed, in some of them it is these officiants who do the trip in their minds. Thus, in Höfer's first text a *lambu* - religious officiant goes on a long ritual journey, starting from the village of his recital, Cautārā, northward to Ganesh Himāl, proceeding through the Ankhu-, Marsyāñdi-, Kāli Gaṇḍaki- and Seti Gaṇḍaki-rivers south to Pālpā/Tānsen, touching some localities in India, then turning north again, passing through the Trisuli- and Bhoṭe Kosi-valleys via Rasua to Kyirong into West Central Tibet, and finally going east through Tsang and Ü, ending, as in most large scale ceremonies, in Samye (T Uiseme), the founding place of Tibetan monastic Buddhism, a place closely related to Padmasambhava, who is claimed as a patron of the Tamang, and a place to which the genesis of Tamang ethnic history is associated. This ritual journey of the *lambu* officiant lists about 280 different place names, and it is regrettable that Höfer did not show enough obtrusiveness to reproduce them all, even though it may never be possible to verify just half of them. Nor does he attempt to show us this important mythical trip on a map, which he does - beneficially - with the *rirap* journeys of the other texts.

In one of the *rirap* (of text 4) it becomes evident that these

ritual journeys are de facto not reserved to the shaman or ritual specialist - some are also undertaken by supernatural beings, spirits or divinities, those that are presently invoked. Here, in the text of the hunting ritual, it is the god of the soil that starts the journey and after reaching his alleged birthplace hands his traveller's walking stick over to a warrior god of the mountains, *dabla*. For the interest of the comparatist it may be noted in parenthesis that the same is the case with the ritual journeys in the epic chants of the Kham speaking Magar shamans; here these journeys are called *ri sadumne* = 'enumerating the rivers'. Some of them are undertaken by the magical healer himself, some by a helping spirit, the Wild Boar, others again by the mythical First Witches, the Nine Sisters. In all these cases, however, the actual geographical environment is exploited for transcendental purposes: the Uerbau is modelled after the Basis, - Marx would have been delighted.

The five ritual texts assembled in Hofer's book all follow the same pattern of presentation. First, a short introduction is given, dealing with the circumstances of their performance and the ceremonial activities surrounding them; then follows the text, cut up into small portions. Each portion consists of three sectors: transliteration into Latin script with readable diacritics of the oral portions of the recital; translation of the given portion into English; etymological commentary on the vocabulary used in the text. It is this etymological commentary, - mainly derivations from the Tibetan - that makes Hofer's book a trailblazing piece of philological ethnography. Although those commentaries, fragmentary as they may be, look more like sections of an experimental dictionary or glossary, they help to establish the diachronical perspective of the tradition followed in the texts.

The texts are preceded by a 40-page introduction into Tamang religious culture, starting as it were with a glimpse at the history of this ethnic group. A section on the classification of supernatural beings is followed by a classification of the main religious officiants, such as the *lama* (the Nyingmapa Lamaist priest); the *bombo* (the shaman); the *lambu* (the non-extatic exorcist); the *yulgi pombo* or *mukhiya* ("leader of the region", responsible for the gods of the soil); and the Hindu-type *pujari*. The introduction ends with some remarks on the texts, their individualistic performance and their standard form.

The bibliography at the end of the book is more or less up-to-date, except for recent publications on the Tamang. Thus, three Ph-D. theses are missing, those of D.H. Holmberg: *Lama, Shaman and Lambu in Tamang Religious Practice*, Cornell 1980; of L. Peters: *Shamanism among the Tamang of Nepal: Folkcuring and Psychotherapy*, UCLA, 1978; and of P. Weisbecker: *Le Bonpo Tamang, une forme de chamanisme himalayen*, Nancy 1978, plus an additional article by L. Peters: *Shamanism and Medicine in Developing Nepal*, in: *Contr. to Nep. Studies*, VI, 2, 27-44. Moreover, in one instance an article by P. Kvaerne is quoted, but one searches in vain for it in the bibliography. Besides such shortcomings, which one may put aside as Freudian slips, *Tamang Ritual Texts I* is an important piece of work. It makes the reader curious for the second volume and, if planned, for a conclusive study, a more total vision of Tamang religious identity, where philology is no more queen, but a mere miner for the possible wealth of anthropological description.

In addition to the mentioned hand-drawings, which are of ethnographic rather than of aesthetic value, the book is illustrated with 14 half page bw photographs. Two of them are good pictures (4 and 8). One of them (9) shows the *lambu* performing the ritual of text no 1, the *nākhli mān* ceremony.

The careful observer will recognize, behind the officiant, the shining silver of a Zarges aluminium box, the silent witness for more than two decades of ethnography in the Nepal Himalayas.

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