

Cameron Bailey and Aleksandra Wenta (eds.), *Tibetan Magic: Past and Present*, London (Bloomsbury Academic), 2024. vi + 254 pp. ISBN: 978-1-3503-5494-4.

Reviewed by Per Kværne
(University of Oslo)

In a certain sense, reviewing this book could be regarded as superfluous, as the excellent Afterword (pp. 221-243) by Nicolas Sihlé provides an insightful and critical overview of its nine chapters and discusses their theoretical foundations and methodological implications. However, given the importance and broad range of topics in this volume, a short presentation of its contents will be attempted in the hope of encouraging scholars – and other interested readers – to delve into it.

In his Introduction (pp. 1-11), Cameron M. Bailey outlines the use of the term ‘magic’ in anthropological literature, where it generally has had a negative connotation. Bailey, however, argues for a shift in this regard, drawing on older Western, including Muslim, understandings of magic: “Occult philosophers and practitioners in the west did not view magic as bad science and primitive religion in Frazerian terms, or pit religion and magic against each other in hostile, mutually exclusive Durkheimian terms. Quite to the contrary, they often viewed magic as the pinnacle of religion and natural philosophy (i.e. science)” (pp. 3-4).

A recent major contribution to the study of magic in Buddhism, including Tibetan Buddhism, is Sam van Schaik’s monograph *Buddhist Magic: Divination, Healing, and Enchantment through the Ages* (2020). While fully acknowledging the importance of van Schaik’s work, Bailey argues that facing the difficulty of defining magic, van Schaik “proposed using a Wittgensteinian “family resemblances” approach to the definition of magic, pointing out certain elemental features of magic that tend to recur in similar practices historically across the planet” (pp.1-2). Bailey does not adopt this position; on the contrary, he sees an advantage, in the Tibetan context, in referring to an “esotericist” or “occultist” framework, exemplified in Buddhism by the emic category of Tantra, and adopts the following position: “An esotericist model of magic which is much more in line with the actual emic viewpoints of the writers and practitioners of the texts and methods we are studying, recognizes magic not as opposed to religion but as a specialized form of it” (pp. 4-5).

Thus, Bailey's approach has the advantage not only of doing away with unhelpful prejudices, but also of conforming to the emic Tibetan understanding of those rituals and beliefs that are the concern of this book. His approach is shared to various degrees and in different ways by most of the authors of the chapters constituting *Tibetan Magic* and should be kept in mind when reading their contributions. The chapters may, *grosso modo*, be said to be either based on textual material or on fieldwork (or in several cases a combination of both) but have in common a focused structure and the merit of presenting new material and insights.

Amanda N. Brown's contribution, "The *Zla gsang be'u bum*: A Compendium of Ritual Magic and Sorcery" (pp. 13-34), is a study of a collection of short texts invoking the Buddhist wrathful deity Yamāntaka. While the author characterises the rituals as "aggressive magic or "sorcery"" (p. 16) – their object being to cause harm, to the extent of killing an enemy – she points out that the rituals "are only to be performed by high-level Buddhist practitioners, defined as such through the religious system as a whole" (p. 15). This supports Bailey's approach, indicated above, of seeing magic "not as opposed to religion but as a specialized form of it".

Susan Landesman likewise bases her chapter on a textual source: "Magical Results of the Rituals in the *Tārā-mūla-kalpa*'s Continuation Tantra" (pp. 35-60), a Sanskrit text brought to Tibet in the 11th century and translated into Tibetan two hundred years later. The rituals outlined in the text aim at the attainment of a range of worldly goals, such as obtaining a lifespan lasting thousands of years, gold or silver coins, acquiring a village or an entire kingdom, subjugating a king, a minister, or a prostitute; or becoming invisible, travelling through the sky, and so on. Paradoxically – or so it would seem – these attainments are not only dependent on the relevant rituals being performed with the utmost scrupulosity, but it is just as essential that "religious commitments are maintained, and respect for teachers, teachings, and tradition is upheld" (p. 35). Once again, magic and religion are seen to be inextricably intertwined.

Textual studies are continued in "The *Vajrabhairavatantra*: *Materia Magica* and Circulation of Tantric Magical Recipes" by Aleksandra Wenta (pp. 61-84). The author characterizes the *Vajrabhairavatantra*, composed in India in the 8th century CE, as "a seminal Buddhist *yogatantra*", consisting of "ritual procedures... that deal primarily with magical technology" (p. 61). Wenta raises the issue of whether it is possible, or helpful, to distinguish "between religion – seen as "high", soteriologically oriented – and magic – viewed as "low", popular, and used for pragmatic purposes – often made in anthropology", and arrives at the same conclusion as the authors already discussed,

namely that the distinction makes little sense, as “The execution of tantric magical recipes belongs to the repertoire of the advanced practitioner” (p. 62). The author emphasizes parallels between Shaiva and Buddhist tantric texts and points out their common origin, as far as magical practices go, in the *Atharvaveda* (p. 63). The chapter also discusses various foul-smelling and impure substances and recipes used in Buddhist tantric rituals, including those described in the *Vajrabhairavatantra*, as well as their opposites, such as milk, ghee, and honey; the manipulation of dolls to attract, subjugate or destroy another person; and finally, the driving away a person by means of visualisation. Wenta concludes that “the magical recipes of tantric milieu were embedded in the culture of circulation that crossed sectarian boundaries” (p. 78), namely the (often fluid) boundaries between Hindu and Buddhist tantric practices – a phenomenon which she regards as “a virtually unexplored aspect of tantric tradition” (p. 79).

A widespread phenomenon in Tibetan Buddhism is *smon lam*. In his chapter, “The Magic That Lies within Prayer: On Patterns of Magicity and Resolute Aspirations (*smon lam*)” (pp. 85-102), Rolf Scheuermann aptly translates it as “resolute aspirations”, while listing other translations, such as “wishing prayers”, “paths of aspirations”, and “earnest wish”. In any case, the concept plays an important part in standard Mahāyāna soteriology, and on the level of practice, “resolute aspiration prayers are an integral part of the daily liturgies of monasteries and individual practitioners” (p. 91). How, then, does this relate to magic? Scheuermann argues that “the analytical category of magic is quite problematic... as it excludes certain practices, particularly those labelled as religion” (p. 85). Nevertheless, “The practice of resolute aspirations appears as an apotropaic practice in divination texts” (p. 91), used, for example, “to remedy acute health issues” in which context the recitation of specific *sūtras* is recommended. While such practices are not, Scheuermann argues, magic, they do at least involve “the efficacy of words in the sense of a pattern of magicity” (p. 92). This argument is further refined in Scheuermann’s chapter, contributing to a nuanced discussion of the concept of magic.

The following chapter, Cameron M. Bailey, “The *Yogin’s* Familiars: Protector Deities as Magical Guides” (pp. 103-123), likewise involves the study of textual sources but focuses on certain folk beliefs found therein. In view of his approach to magic outlined in the Introduction, it is not surprising that he chooses to discuss a form of magic found explicitly in western esotericism and (implicitly) in Buddhist magic, namely “so-called “demonic” magic in which nonhuman, potentially if not overtly malevolent beings are commanded to carry out a

particular magical action" (p. 103). Bailey explains that a more apt term could be the Greek word *daemon*, referring to "active beings...divine, lesser than the 'great' gods" (p. 105), and hence "worldly" as opposed to transcendent buddhas and bodhisattvas. In Tibetan hagiographic literature such beings are not necessarily depicted as servants, but rather "as spiritual guides, friends and even lovers to the *yogins* and *yoginis* who encountered them in... vital, lived interactions" (p. 107). He examines this phenomenon in the context of an 18th century Tibetan Buddhist master, Sle-lung bZhad-pa'i rDo-rje, whose *daemon* (in the above sense) was his personal protector goddess, Lha-gcig Nyi-ma gZhon-nu. This master had apparently spontaneous visions of the goddess, who he believed regularly possessed his wife. Bailey describes three magic practices purportedly taught by Sle-lung bZhad-pa'i rDo-rje, among them "the blessing and empowerment of hot springs water to endow it with healing properties" (p. 115), during which the goddess is visualised as a beautiful *klu mo* (an aquatic divine being), "flirtatious and extremely desirous".

With Valentina Punzi's chapter there is a shift to fieldwork-based anthropology as well as a clearly formulated emphasis on emic perspectives, as indicated in the title: "Emic Perspectives on the Transubstantiation of Words in Tibetan-Script Textual Amulets" (pp. 125-148). The chapter deals with the widespread use of magic amulets in Tibetan religion, illustrated by two carefully observed examples of the production and empowerment of amulets by ritual specialists, one being an elderly monk in southeast Qinghai Province, the other a young lay member of the Baima ethnic group in northwest Sichuan Province (the Baima are officially classified as belonging to the Tibetan nationality, but nevertheless consider themselves to be different from Tibetans).

A striking characteristic of both case studies is the pragmatic approach of the ritualist; for example, while in one case various *substances* (such as human flesh) are, according to the ritual text, required to ensure the effectiveness of the magic, in the actual observed performance of the ritual by the monk they were substituted by the *names* of the substances, written on pieces of paper. Moreover, for the protection of livestock, "once one amulet is put around the neck of a single animal in the herd, it will be effective for the protection of all" (p. 132). In the second case study, the ritual specialist was a young layman specializing on rituals for healing the sick. During the ritual he omitted to use the drum and ritual manual that he had in fact brought with him, explaining that it was sufficient to recite "auspicious words" in the Baima language, and that setting up the poles from which the drum needed to be suspended would take too much time.

Punzi makes the point that these pragmatic procedures are not

random simplifications, but presuppose a “semiotic domain”, i.e. a “set of practices that recruits one or more modalities... to communicate distinctive types of meaning” (p. 141). These meanings must be mastered by the ritual specialist, and must be intelligible, though not necessarily directly accessible, to the community of the ritualist. The ritualist can manipulate and alter the actual ritual according to “what is materially and culturally available”, but only within “the shared sense of acceptability and familiarity” (ibid.). This approach makes it possible to make sense of the many individual choices made by the ritual expert. She concludes – and this is, in the present reviewer’s view, an important point – that the task of the scholar is not necessarily to adopt an emic perspective, ‘giving a voice’ to her or his interlocutors (who have, as often as not, never expressed an interest in being ‘given a voice’), for “such a deep-rootedness would undermine the possibility to elaborate etic theorizing and further prevent the identification of patterns that are necessary to generate a cross-cultural definition of magic” (p. 146).

Eric D. Mortensen takes ethnological observation further, in a truly participant mode, as he himself, on leaving a combined interview and dinner during his fieldwork in Gyalthang in northern Yunnan on the south-eastern rim of the Tibetan Plateau, found himself “nearly doubled over with stomach pain”. His chapter, “The Magical Causality of Poison Casting and Cancer among Tibetan Communities of Gyalthang” (pp.149-167), explores a complex system of belief revolving around the local nexus of ideas of poison, the act of magical poisoning, and rumour. In Gyalthang, certain people are accused of “having poison”, without necessarily being able to control it, but nevertheless suffering from social ramifications, not least because it is believed that once a person has poison, she or he is likely to pass it on, even to his or her own children. Poison is dangerous, as even the breath of persons affected by it is dangerous, and one “needs to be lucky to survive a visit and a meal inside a house that has *dug* [poison]” (p. 153). Poison is often invisible but can also assume the shape of creatures such as snakes, frogs, or scorpions. Black flags are still sometimes flown to warn would-be guests not to eat food within such houses, as poison can be transmitted through food, but also by a simple gaze, especially from affected women, “in which case there is no cure” (p. 154).

From this it will be understood that in Gyalthang magical poisoning does not necessarily depend on defined ritual procedures or, at least apparently, on specific intent to harm. In fact, some scholars (notably Giovanni Da Col, discussing similar beliefs in Kongpo) do not regard ‘poison (*dug*)’ as nefarious or as ‘black magic’ at all. Mortensen provides a most useful overview of related beliefs and practices in a

wide area including Kongpo and Sikkim. Be that as it may, in Gyalthang poison is more like a contagious disease, "an affliction, a scourge, an anxiety" (p. 160), and Mortensen argues that it fulfils all criteria of the concept of magic. Fortunately, after "a several hours of acute pain and a few days of stomach discomfort" (p. 164), he recovered from his fieldwork interview visit and did not develop cancer, as some, conforming to local beliefs, had feared.

From one of the eastern regions of the Tibetan cultural area, the reader is led to a western region, namely Ladakh, located in India: "Is There Magic in *Gcod*? An Expedition into (Some of) the Complexities of *Sādhanā*-Text Enactments" (pp.169-191). Nike-Ann Schröder has spent many years in India, principally in Ladakh, and Nepal studying and practicing *chö* (*gcod*), literally 'cutting', a complex Tibetan Buddhist tantric practice. To put it in the simplest possible terms, in *chö* the practitioner, through a carefully choreographed ritual, identifies with a female deity and offers her dissected body to all beings, particularly fierce animals and supernatural beings, as an offering to alleviate their suffering, and – ultimately – obtain enlightenment herself. The ritual can also be enacted collectively, often by monks or nuns in a monastery, in which case it may be internalized, based on fundamental Buddhist philosophical concepts of non-duality.

Schröder bases her chapter on a ritual handbook, short passages of which are translated, and her own experience and observation of Tibetan practitioners in the field. Her description and analysis of *chö* are acute and revolve around the concept of 'a field of magic' which she states that she prefers rather than a single, more precise definition of magic (p. 170). 'Field of magic' is perhaps quite close to 'magicity' as used by Scheuermann's chapter discussed above. Schröder does, however, uphold a distinction, at least provisional one, between religion and magic, although as two ends of a spectrum spanning "a religio-philosophical end" which "provides and array of meanings, elaborate techniques of transformation, and a means of embodying all this within a fine-grained Tibetan Buddhist cosmology", and a "'magic" end with its physicality, materiality, performance and tangibility" (p. 186). This spectrum, more in tune, Schröder suggests, with an emic Tibetan understanding of *chö*, hinges on the concept 'transformation', a ritual and spiritual process through which magic is turned into religion. Schröder would therefore seem to implicitly question Bailey's position, as set out in the Introduction, which "recognizes magic not as opposed to religion but as a specialized form of it" (p. 5).

Schröder points to the importance of the French traveller and author Alexandra David-Neel (1868-1969) in forming the popular

western image of *chö* (pp. 170, 181). In the final chapter of the volume, Samuel Thévoz discusses this enigmatic but influential personage: “‘Training for Sorcery, Magic, Mystic, Philosophy – for That Which Is Called ‘the Great Accomplishment’’: Alexandra David-Neel’s Written and Unwritten Tibetan Grimoires” (pp. 193-219). Her role in firmly anchoring the association of ‘magic’ and ‘mystery’ in Tibetan religion among a large segment of the western public can hardly be overrated, and Thévoz is an expert on her life and literary output. Her importance in this regard is perhaps surprising as her early travel narratives from Tibet and the Himalayas “hardly touched upon the topic of magic” (p. 193). This changed with her second book, *Mystiques et Magiciens du Tibet* (1929), where the concept of magic was introduced and linked to a range of supernatural phenomena allegedly witnessed by David-Neel herself. As Thévoz demonstrates, however, David-Neel essentially relies on her own “invention of Tibetan magic... as a cultural translation” (ibid.).

Thévoz points out that David-Neel originally intended the title of her book to be *Le Thibet mystique*, but in the editorial process it was changed to *Mystiques et Magiciens du Tibet*, thus linking (or possibly contrasting) the two concepts. The American edition (1932) simplified the title to *Magic and mystery in Tibet*, “giving a significant prominence to magic as an umbrella category rather than to human actors” (p. 195). Consequently “magic became the defining feature of David-Neel’s presentation of Tibet in her second book” (ibid.). Thévoz then discusses what David-Neel understood by ‘magic’ in the Tibetan context. She distinguished two categories of Tibetan magic: the first represented by “sorcerers, soothsayers, necromancers, occultists who seek the power of coercing certain gods and demons to secure their help” (of whose real existence they are in no doubt), and the second, “a small number of adepts who employ the very same means as their less enlightened colleagues, but hold the view that the various phenomena are produced by an energy arising in the magician himself” (p. 197, quoting David-Neel). This dichotomy is not entirely unlike that referred to by Schröder in the chapter discussed above (although Schröder has a far more refined and helpful methodology than David-Neel, whose narrative tends to be random and episodic). Be that as it may, her subsequent books tended to define her later writings and aroused considerable interest among contemporary western scholars and scientists, especially in France. Making use, not least, of archival material, Thévoz shows, however, that while “David-Neel has been instrumental in making Tibetan magic a worthy topic in its own right in the scope of the psychic sciences of her time” (p. 211), she was a committed Buddhist, deeply influenced by the Tibetan spiritual practice known as “the Great Perfection” (*rdzogs chen*), into

which she had been initiated during her sojourns in Sikkim (p. 200). Her presentation of magic in Tibet was based on "her own understanding of "true" Buddhism as a "mental training"" (ibid.), and in connection with magic "she... never used the term "supernatural", replacing it with the term 'supernormal' (p. 208). Thévoz' chapter is a fundamental contribution to clarifying the complex contribution of David-Neel to the concept of 'Tibetan magic'.

As mentioned at the outset of this review, the volume concludes with an Afterword by Nicolas Sihlé which richly rewards the reader not only by summing up the preceding chapters, but by discussing each of them critically. Here it will only be pointed out that while concluding that "whereas the category of "magic" enables one to outline broad comparative contrasts and arguments at the macro level, ... it remains... a rather blunt analytical tool" (p. 239), Sihlé nevertheless emphasizes that in Tibetan studies, "*the strong presence of "magical" elements [is] at the very heart of a "religious" tradition like tantric Buddhism [Sihlé's italics]*" (p. 240), thus conforming, broadly speaking, to the main argument of this work, so rich in inspiring research and new insights.

