



Toni Huber. *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet*. N. Y./Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, xxi + 297 pages, ISBN 0–19–512007–8, US \$65.00.

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T*he Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain* is an ethno-historical reconstruction of the pilgrimage to Dakpa Sheri (“Pure Crystal Mountain”), a 5,735 meter sacred peak in the Tsari district of Southeastern Tibet. Drawing on an extensive range of written and oral sources, this work is a landmark in the field, and more than achieves its stated aim of filling the need for “a very detailed and multi-faceted study of a major Tibetan pilgrimage tradition.”

While Mount Kailas (Tib: *Tise*) is popularly regarded as the premier Tibetan sacred mountain pilgrimage place, that site has been privileged in Western understanding because its sacred status for Hindus led to its attracting British imperial attention. However, there are now understood to be eight major Pan-Tibetan mountain pilgrimage sites, and in terms of the number of pilgrims that it attracted, Pure Crystal Mountain appears to have far outranked the others. In the most auspicious periods (which occurred at twelve-yearly intervals), it drew tens of thousands of pilgrims despite the fact that the route entailed traversing deep jungle-covered ravines populated by hostile tribes.

This work is ordered in four sections, focusing respectively on Tibetan pilgrimage and sacred mountains in the wider perspective; Tibetan representations of Dakpa Sheri; major Buddhist ritual institutions there; and finally, questions of local identity, cult maintenance and social organi-

zation. The author's use of oral sources provides a natural focus on the actual pilgrimages during the 1940s and 1950s, with the recently revived pilgrimage largely excluded from consideration on the reasonable grounds that the reconstruction raises issues sufficient to justify a book of its own. Huber explores the complex links between state, religion, and territory, and sets out to "document and analyze the set of representations, ritual practices and peoples" involved in the pilgrimage, in addition to investigating the relationship there between "high" and "popular" religion (that is, esoteric *Tantra/Vajrayāna* ritual vs. popular pilgrimage). Pilgrimage is examined both "as a specific form of ritual practice in Tibetan society" and in the wider context as a social and cultural phenomenon.

Fundamental to an understanding of Tibetan mountain cults is the distinction between two overlapping categories: *néri* (or *gnas ri*, "mountain abode") mountains, which are those sites where the primary figure in the complex hierarchy of resident deities is a Buddhist one and that historically have been part of the Buddhacization process; and the localized *yüllha* (or *yul lha*, "gods of the local mountains"). The former may be seen as concerned with the transcendent, drawing on textual tradition and worshipped by circumambulation, while the latter is a nonliterate tradition concerned with the immediate world and worshipped by various rituals, many of which appear to predate Buddhist influence. But these are not entirely fixed categories. Historically, the *néri* are mountains that were apparently formally *yüllha*, and there is often a complex overlay of practices and beliefs attached to the sites.

In correcting the tendency to explore Tibetan pilgrimage only through Buddhist models, rather than as part of a wider Tibetan worldview, Huber emphasizes the syncretic processes that characterize Tibetan religious life. The cultural commonalities between Bön, Buddhism and unsystematized Tibetan belief systems are drawn on according to context by practitioners who utilize a "universally accepted system of underlying ideas in Tibetan culture that both justify ritual and explain its effects." Thus, Bön and Buddhist rituals can be seen to conform to the same cultural patterns, and pilgrimages incorporate a wide range of syncretic traditions. We may note in the wider context that this finding is consistent with contemporary understandings of the continuity of ideas in South Asian culture; that is, ideas that may seem contradictory are accepted through a layered pattern of belief.

Yet Huber cautions against assuming a Pan-Indic/Asian character to Tibetan pilgrimage, and demonstrates the specifically Tibetan characteristics of this ritual expression. Though there is (at the time of publication) no evidence for pre-Buddhist pilgrimage in Tibet and merit accumulation on

the Indic model is a concern (or at least part of the rhetoric) of individual pilgrims, there are distinctly Tibetan concepts at work. Central to Tibetan pilgrimage is not only the act of circumambulation, but also the idea of *né*, meaning (in this context) the “abode” of the deity understood to be embodied in such features as the landscape, structures, remains—or even the bodies of Tantric *yogins*—at the sacred site. Pilgrims relate to these sites through various means, such as physical contact, mental identification, and so forth. Of equal importance is the understanding of the idea of *chinlab* (“empowerment”), which is a transformative force or sacred energy that is physically present at these *né* and that can, in physical forms such as water, rocks, plants, and so forth, be removed by the pilgrims or provided by religious functionaries in exchange for offerings.

Nonetheless, the distinctions between Tibetan and Indic ideas of embodied landscape are extremely subtle. The concepts are not categories fixed in time or even emphasis, and comparison is difficult in the absence of works on Indic pilgrimages that explore these understandings with the same sophistication as Huber applies in his analysis of the Tibetan situation. Clearly it is not the author’s concern here to discuss the distinctions, but to this reader, the similarities between such concepts as *né* and the Indic *dhâm* suggest very close links indeed between the two regional understandings.

The origins of Tsari as a sacred site are uncertain, but the *néri* cult was clearly generated by external agents. Crucial to its development were the Tantric ritualists, particularly those of the Kargyu sect whose presence there dates to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A.D. The Tantrists “opened” the pilgrimage sites and proved “ritually superior” to the forces they overcame, most notably through the use of *maṇḍalas* as a “spacial organizing principle” that was imposed on the landscape, and projected and embodied “within the specific category of cult mountains.” This “mandalization” process by which existing deities were assimilated (at least textually) was a competitive process drawing on Indian Tantric Buddhist narratives of the subjugation of Maheśvara (who was also known as Rudra-Bhairava-Śiva) by Vajrpāṇi/Heruka, and involving the transference of the Tantric *pitha* sites to Tibet.

The early Tantric visionary descriptions of the Tsari area as a *maṇḍala* palace date from the fourteenth century, and the Drigungpa ascetic community attracted state patronage from the Pagmo Drupa hegemony under Changchub Gyeltsen (1302–1369). While Pure Crystal Mountain continued to attract pilgrims from across the Tibetan religious spectrum (with the notable exception of the *Sakya-pas*), the *néri* sites were gradually brought under Gelugpa influence as a matter of state policy, and their cult was

promoted by central Tibetan state and elite interests. Thus Tsong Khapa was said to have visited Tsari in 1395, and the Lhasa elite actively sponsored his cult there, in addition to that of the primary Khorlo Dampa (Cakrasamvara)-based system of Great Seal Yoga. Tsari became closely associated with the fifth and particularly the sixth Dalai Lama, and in more recent times, with Tsarong Shapé, the outstanding secular figure of early-twentieth century Tibetan history. But the growing status of the *néri* mountains was a process. Thus while the presence of the Tantric practitioners at Tsari dates to the late twelfth century, popular lay pilgrimage developed from the sixteenth century, and the largest ritual circumambulation circuit was only initiated in the eighteenth century.

There were several pilgrimage routes around Pure Crystal Mountain, including the “peak” circuit, which is the preserve of Tantric *yogins*. The regular pilgrimage route was significantly gender-biased, for women were excluded from a twenty-five to thirty kilometer section of the middle circuit, which thus denied them access to the upper “peak” circuit. Though there was no apparent textual basis for this, there were plenty of popular legends to account for the restriction and the “clerical” explanation derived from the Buddhist understanding of women as impure and of inferior birth. But deeper indigenous understandings are also a factor; though the Tsari pilgrimage is apparently unique in *néri* pilgrimages in maintaining this ban, women are generally also excluded from major rituals and the higher reaches of mountains in local *yüllha* cult worship.

Women were, however, permitted to take part in the *Rongkor Chenmo*, the “great ravine circuit,” which took place every twelve years. Begun in the early eighteenth century—and due to its cross-border nature, unlikely ever to be revived—this outer circuit of the mountain involved a journey of at least ten to fifteen days, which involved intense physical hardship and danger. No food or shelter was available for much of the journey, which passed through areas populated by hostile tribes. Death by poison arrow or starvation was not uncommon, although many pilgrims were armed and the wealthier pilgrims had servants to carry food and tents.

In terms of logistics, the event resembled a military exercise. Around 20,000 pilgrims from all parts of the Tibetan cultural world took part in this circuit with direct support from the central Government, whose agents negotiated safe passage from the various tribal groups through whose territory the pilgrims passed. *Lodzong* (“barbarian tribute”) was paid out in a ceremony designed to inspire awe and fidelity, the tribal representatives receiving gifts of food and goods from agents of the Tibetan government in an elaborate ceremony in which power ultimately rested with the tribes, whose agreement had to be obtained in order to allow the pilgrimage to proceed.

When agreement was reached, the tribesmen were induced to swear an oath not to molest the pilgrims. Yaks provided by the Tibetan state were sacrificed, and the tribesmen passed through a ritual gate and were smeared with fresh blood to indicate that they had sworn the oath. The general reader will find the account of these negotiations and the great pilgrimage itself the most fascinating section of the book, with its reconstruction of a spectacular state ritual played out in a remote corner of the Himalayas.

Huber's careful recreation of the events suggests that a considerable tension was present during the ceremonials, with the constant threat of tribal violence against the Tibetans. Yet the account is balanced by an exploration of the tribal perspective on this exchange and relationships, and the implications of what was effectively a ritual involving blood sacrifice sponsored by the Tibetan Buddhist state are not ignored. In general, the ending of blood sacrifices was an important indicator of Buddhist dominance over local traditions, but Huber indicates that the prevalence of sacrifice among other ethnic Tibetan border communities suggests that in practice this was not necessarily a defining mark of Tibetan Buddhism, a factor to be considered in regard to center and periphery models of culture.

The actual organization of the *Rongkor Chenmo* pilgrimage followed a military pattern. Because the route was narrow and easily blocked, pilgrims set out at intervals in columns, each of which had a regional or sectarian identity and ranking. The columns were accompanied by soldiers, whose presence was necessary because—despite the oath-taking ceremonies—disputes between pilgrims and tribes were not uncommon. Huber records a major encounter in 1944 between Khampas and tribal warriors.

The pilgrims were also accompanied by two government officials who escorted a set of the Dalai Lama's robes. These were of more than symbolic significance, the concept of *chinlab* meaning they were considered as empowered by the Dalai Lama. Huber draws on this example of the importance of ritual and ceremony in pre-modern statecraft—referring to Catherine Bell's models of the functioning of power in ritual—in studying the premodern Tibetan polity as a “complex and changing formation in which ritual and ceremonial performance were [perhaps extremely] important.”

Though the scenario at Tsari might be seen as “Buddhist subjugation of barbarian borderland peoples, or even as a form of Buddhacization or Tibetanization,” Huber's local informants perceived the rituals as an explicit example of “the existence, display, and deployment of the powers and values of Buddhism as they are embodied in the Tibetan polity, and the material efficacy associated with that.” But while individual and state roles were seen in terms of “Buddhist practice and its goals,” the organization of the pilgrimage was firmly rooted in, and reinforced by, the existing social

hierarchy, and government and aristocratic sponsors of the pilgrimage drew “symbolic capital” in return for their sponsorship, an investment that provided a means for subsequent (upward) social mobility.

The social status of the participants in the pilgrimage was symbolically indicated through such means as the positioning of tents at “Maṇḍala Plain,” where the Tibetans gathered for the pilgrimage. Replicating the classical *maṇḍala* formation with the deity at the center and lesser deities radiating out to the margins, the tents of the government representatives and leading aristocrats were located in the center with a graduated decline in the social status of those whose tents were farthest from the center. Local and sectarian identities were similarly reinforced by such means as the ranking of the groups that set out on the circumambulation route. While the government party asserted its authority in being the first to set out, the order of departure for other groups was contested, with the Khampas of eastern Tibet (who were generally the best armed) claiming precedence in the twentieth-century pilgrimages for which Huber has oral sources.

The twentieth century inevitably affected the *Rongkor Chenmo* pilgrimage. While the Loyül region south of Tsari was a jungle-covered barrier between Tibet and India with no through-routes for traders, the security concerns of the British imperial government of India led to the area’s coming increasingly under Indian government control. The so-called “private” journeys into the region by British imperial officers such as F. M. Bailey are correctly identified by Huber as intelligence-gathering missions, paving the way for the demarcation of the McMahon Line at the Simla convention in 1914. (Bailey received a large sum from “Secret Service” funds after his journey.)

Such wider concerns were remote from the minds of the local people on the Tibetan side of the border. Unlike other *néri* sites such as Kailas/Tise and Amnye Machen, the Tsari ecosystem was able to support a permanent local community of 500 to 600 laypersons, the Tsariwa. While not a pilgrimage economy in the classical sense, “people lived there because of its sanctity, not in spite of it” and existed through “a complex system of institutionalized service and [economic] diversity.” Due to the sanctity of the place, hunting, land clearance, extensive cultivation, and the husbandry of “unclean” animals such as pigs and chickens was forbidden to the Tsariwas. But while subject to various duties in regard to the pilgrimage—like *corvée* labor and so forth—this “unique” ban on community agriculture was balanced by income derived from state subsidies such as grain supplies and the allocation of begging permits, and by income derived from pilgrimage duties. Thus sanctification enabled a reasonable level of economic existence for the Tsariwas, and linked them firmly into the Tibetan state

system. Huber's detailed study of the economic aspects of the pilgrimage region is welcome, particularly given the paucity of such work in regard to studies of Tibetan pilgrimage.

As in other studies of Asian pilgrimage, the author finds little support for Victor Turner's theories. In contrast to Turner's theory of anti-structure, the Tsari pilgrimage actually "worked to maintain the status quo of social order." Huber concludes that Tibetan pilgrimage "serves as a ritual context in which existing social distinctions and hierarchies based on birth, wealth, gender, and so on, become explicit, are reproduced, and are reinforced." Thus there is "graded access" to the center of the sacred despite shared cultural assumptions among the different grades of pilgrims. Yet the author does note a certain element of *communitas* in discussing shared bonds among those who have performed the pilgrimage.

The author is not drawn to speculate beyond the confines of his sources; he is notably cautious in regard to the wider historical and political implications of the map (provided on page five) that gives the location of the great *néri* mountains. Given that these may be located (roughly) at the periphery of the "ideal" central Tibetan state (and may indeed relate to the borders of the Yarlung and Zhang Zhung principalities in an earlier period), some comment might have been preferred. This reviewer would suggest that their location may indicate that the Buddhacization of border mountains—rather than those in the more accessible central regions—served a clear historical purpose with important implications for the definition of "Tibet."

This is a work that will repay repeated readings; there is a wealth of detail in the endnotes, and there are informative forays into a variety of issues related to the pilgrimage and the Tsari region: an account of the local slave economy, the sacred bamboo of the region, and a rare and fascinating glimpse of actual Tantric ritual practice, in this case an account of the practice of mystic heat yoga (*tümoéme*). In "a public advertisement of Tantric powers," *yogins* spent the midwinter night semi-naked in meditation in the snow at an altitude of nearly 4,000 meters. Though this type of activity has already been reported by observers such as Alexandra David-Neel, this account appears the most authentic that we possess. Those familiar with Himalayan ascetics will not be surprised to find that their performance in this rite was not without humor, egotism, and a degree of play-acting by the participants.

Huber's *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain* is a groundbreaking work of great significance to both Tibetan and Asian Studies that will also be of interest to scholars and students of Religious Studies and anthropology in general. It is a well-written, balanced, and insightful account of a complex

subject, one that we may hope will be the model for future case studies of Tibet's other *néri* mountains.