

Bards and Mediums: History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms

edited by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine

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Reviewed by Arik Moran

This richly documented and extensively researched volume, the product of a three year-research project (2000-2003) funded by the French National Agency for Research (ANR), is a timely addition to the growing body of scholarship on the Himalayas. Ostensibly limited to an investigation of 'oracular religion and bardic tradition' in the 'Khas cultural area' (p. 12)—the region between West Nepal and Kashmir where the indigenous population of Khas (alternately, Kanet) is dominant—the articles and supplementary audio, video and photographic data featured in the interactive DVD that accompanies the publication are, in fact, the most complete and updated source of information on this long neglected part of the Himalayas available today. Moreover, in bringing together a host of international specialists from different backgrounds, *Bards & Mediums* offers an interdisciplinary investigation into theoretical issues related to possession and oral traditions that extend beyond the confines of Himalayan societies. Finally, many of the materials presented in the volume are new or otherwise translated from sources in local languages that are not readily accessible to external readers, rendering it particularly valuable as a centralized source of information on this otherwise sparsely documented region. As it is impossible to do justice to the complex analyses and breadth of subjects covered in *Bards & Mediums* in the space of a review article, in what follows I shall limit myself to outlining the work's content and central aims, and complement these with examples from those articles most pertinent to the publication's overall goal: the exploration of Khas history and culture in light of mediumship and bardic traditions.¹

The volume's twelve chapters are divided into two parts, 'Religion' and 'History', which broadly (although not exclusively) relate to

1 For a full list of the chapters and their authors see: <http://bit.ly/bardsmediums>

anthropological and historical topics regarding mediumship and bardic traditions, respectively. Each part is preceded by an editorial essay that sets out the theoretical framework for the articles that follow by highlighting the key issues under consideration and their relation to the contributors' works. The emphasis in the introductory essay to the first half of the book ('Religion') is placed on the social dimension of Khas mediumship, which the editor perceives as the distinct quality that sets the area apart from other Himalayan regions where oracular practices prevail.² Taking due note of the political, social and ritual implications of the institution, the fundamental significance of Khas mediumship is summarily explained in its affording 'a potential for reaction or innovation' to the social order while simultaneously reinforcing the power structures and norms that sustain it (p. 54). The tensions between the communal aspect of mediumship and accepted social practice underlie the different case studies that follow. For example, Satya Shrestha-Schipper's detailed exposition of socio-religious structures in Jumla (Nepal) shows how *dhāmī* oracles can improve the social standing of their home communities by serving as the mouthpiece of powerful regional deities. This allows for social mobility among later settlers in the region, such as the Indo-Nepali Matwali Kshatris, who can overcome their apparent disadvantage (expressed in the relative position of their lineage deities) by having a member of their community chosen as the oracle of a distinguished regional deity (pp. 74-75).

The centrality of mediumship to political life is further elaborated in Daniela Berti's article on conflicts between deities and their followers during the 2001 Kullu Dasara, which is accompanied by a useful audio-video commentary on the DVD. Tracing the convoluted relations of politicians, mediums and the former raja of Kullu (a politician in his own right), Berti points to the continued influence of oracular religion on political life. Thus, while the raja's centrality to the ritual celebrations helps sustain his popularity, it also renders him open to criticism on the part of participating deities (through their respective mediums), leading to the establishment of new institutions to regulate relations between the various gods so that he may preserve his political clout without sacrificing ritual privileges.

2 The shamanism of East and Central Nepal is a case in point. There relations with the divine are the unique prerogative of shamans to the exclusion of their clients in the community (pp. 30-35).

The case for Khas mediumship as a form of resistance that simultaneously affirms and legitimates the social order is forcefully made in Marie Lecomte-Tilouine's account of a communal ritual in the former kingdom of Askot in eastern Kumaon. Unlike the overtly political, week-long, annual Dasara of Kullu, the 'Dhuni Jagar' at Askot is held every two or three years for a single night, during which the 'gods of the forest' manifest, enact scenes from their local mythology and offer members of the community an opportunity to seek their help in confronting various wrongs and grievances (p. 85). As illustrated in her paper and patently visible in the corresponding sections of the DVD, possession in this restricted setting is an open-ended affair. Thus locals other than the deities' designated mediums may come under the influence of divine forces (not without being contested) and thereby bring communal disputes into the public space in order for them to be resolved through the gods' arbitration. These mundane conflicts are played out with varying degrees of violence on the backdrop of sequences from the local gods' mythological tales, which are enacted by different members of the community in affirmation of their hierarchical positions in society. The last two chapters in this section offer a comparative examination of mediumship by expanding the analysis to sub-regions in the Tibetan cultural zone (Spiti and Zaskar) that borders Khas territory.

The second part of the book, 'History', uses oral traditions and epigraphic evidence to trace the evolution of the Khas Malla Empire (12-14th centuries) and the polities that followed its dissolution in Uttarkhand (Kumaon, Garhwal) and West Nepal (Dullu, Daleikh, etc.). In her introductory essay and two further chapters (7 and 9), Marie Lecomte-Tilouine dispels the prevailing perception of the Khas Empire as centred at Jumla and proposes shifting the site to Dullu instead. The latter's political significance is shown to be intertwined with its position as the ritual centre of a vast tantric empire, where Death (*yama*) itself used to preside over the 'territory of the flames', locally known as the *pañcakośī*. Marked by a series of sites where gaseous flames emit from the mountains and under which a huge subterranean snake is believed to have circled, and to whom sacrifices were habitually offered, the spatial and ritual arrangement of the *pañcakośī* and its related myths are outlined in a unique chapter (9) that can be fruitfully explored in a detailed interactive section of the DVD.³ In another chapter

3 It is worth noting that the editor also benefited from access to (written and photographic)

(7), Lecomte-Tilouine reconstructs the genealogical roll of the Raskoti dynasty of Dullu from several written and oral sources. Resuming an anthropological perspective, she points to the significance of the social context in which the latter are recited by specialist *huḍke* bards in face of Kshatriya (either ‘real’ or ‘aspiring’) patrons. The roles, mechanisms and devices employed by *huḍke* bards are further elaborated in Rémi Bordes’s investigation of heroic poems (*bhārat*) from Doti in West Nepal.

The remaining three chapters, written by accomplished scholars from the Himalayan region, abandon oral sources altogether to concentrate on written and epigraphic evidence, providing complementary, and at times contradictory, accounts of the region’s history. Tek Bahadur Shrestha reconstructs the history of the neighbouring principalities of Dullu and Daleikh from the decline of the Malla Empire to the rise of the Gorkhas, highlighting their distinct trajectories as evidence of their constituting two distinctly independent polities. Mahes Raj Pant presents a selection of epigraphic material from his ongoing work on Khas inscriptions (numbering nearly 150 at the time of publication), which are fully transliterated and translated. He raises questions concerning their provenance, addresses earlier evaluations by other scholars and advances new interpretations. Discarding the Malla-centric point of view in favour of a regional one, Maheshwar Prasad Joshi argues for the formation of independent polities in Garhwal and Kumaon parallel to the rise (and fall) of the Khas Empire. He supports these claims with a selection of 50 transliterated and translated inscriptions from Uttarkhand dating to the 12-15th centuries that are accompanied by an extensive glossary of contemporary terms. The juxtaposition of these informative articles and their divergent interpretations point to the considerable advances made in the study of Khas history and the need for further work, discussion and elaboration of the topic that will hopefully follow. This is equally true for the rest of the volume: as the first attempt at a comprehensive introduction to Khas society and history, *Bards & Mediums* will be of immense value to both the general and specialist reader, as well as those seeking to deepen their understanding of mediumship, possession and bardic traditions through their particular regional manifestations.

data collected by Marc Gaborieau in the late 1960s, which further enriches this section.