

# **The Navel of the Demoness: Tibetan Buddhism and Civil Religion in Highland Nepal**

by Charles Ramble

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Reviewed by Mark Turin

While Himalayan studies aspires to be interdisciplinary and transregional, much of our scholarship is still rendered through our discrete analytical frames just as our sites of field research so often remain constrained by political borders. Conventional intellectual output is largely comprised of volumes on the anthropology of Nepal, the religions of Tibet, the histories of the Indian northeast and the ecological transformations of Uttarakhand. As a scholarly community, most of us still study disciplines rather than problems, and genuine interdisciplinarity is hard to achieve.

All of this serves to explain why *The Navel of the Demoness* makes such an important contribution to our understanding of the region. Much anticipated and beautifully crafted, Charles Ramble's distinctive narrative enriches our appreciation of the cultural strategies of Himalayan communities while at once showcasing the sophistication of the civil institutions that shape (but do not entirely govern) people's lives.

In an understated yet ultimately persuasive way, this monograph is also deeply humanist. The people of Te are neither shackled by their Buddhist faith (and the word 'faith' itself is so loaded and problematic) nor do they publicly subvert it. Their civil religion is dynamic, adaptive and modern. As Ramble writes, early on:

Neither Buddhism nor paganism could serve as the vantage point for an understanding of religion in Te. Both were relatively peripheral when seen from the perspective of this mysterious entity known as "the community" (p. 11)

After an introduction that blends the pithy with the personal, the first chapter introduces the people of Mustang and their history. Drawing on local sources, Western writings and oral history, Ramble explodes common

misconceptions (and misnomers) without appearing to scold. Rather, he is effective in instructing the reader through anecdotes, allusions and the recollection of historical events.

The second chapter on the five Seke-speaking communities of Baragaon, 'Inside the Shöyul', generously demonstrates Ramble's interdisciplinary edge. Drawing on sources as diverse as architecture and archaeology, irrigation and Tibetan texts, the author unpicks the complexities of village decision-making and strategies of cooperation to show how solidarity and secrecy are integral to the formation of local political relationships. Over time, confederations of autonomous principalities that existed in 17th century Shöyul lead to consolidation in the 19th (p. 63), and the author teases out the manner by which these five villages collaborated to secure a revision of the tax law that impinged on them so severely.

Ramble avoids the standard traps of historicisation, and is at pains to point out that lasting political alliances between settlements were designed to be pragmatic—at times even opportunistic—agreements in the common interest based on 'shared obligations to the regional administration' and their 'ethnic distinctiveness' (p. 71), and were not nostalgic expressions of symbolic harmony. His narrative, then, lays the foundation for a meticulous appreciation of the socio-political tensions in the village of Te, the focus of his narrative.

The scene now set, in Chapter Three the curtain is pulled back on the implications of these allegiances of expedience, through a crash course on political decision-making and structural anthropology:

The rhetoric of solidarity that pervades the documents concerning the alliance creates a misleading impression of spontaneous amity among the five. The alliance was, rather, an evil necessity in which the five [villages] were obliged to participate in order to protect themselves from a more general menace (p. 72)

Ramble argues that the insular 'tightness' of Te, an intimacy so difficult for outsiders (let alone anthropologists) to penetrate, manifests itself not only in a unique internal administrative and civic system, but more impressively, in the 'near-elimination from the community of what conventionally passes for religion' (p. 72). This extraordinary

development, both its very occurrence and the implications that follow from it, serves as an intellectual backdrop to much of the book. During the fourth chapter, the reader is rewarded with an explanation of how the ideal of community in Te was neither predetermined nor accidental, but consciously crafted and developed at the expense of other forms of social organisation, principally patricians.

But Te is no secular backwater, as is apparent from the fact that the village is home to Molha Chutsen Nyenpo, a fallen star who landed by the river bank and is now revered as the mother-goddess of the entire settlement. What could be the role of a mother goddess in a village free of organised, traditional religion, and how do conventional beliefs penetrate it? As Ramble makes clear throughout the text, but in a particularly powerful section in Chapter Five:

Buddhism does not enter a community as an abstract ideology that is intellectually appraised, weighed, and accepted or rejected. It is mediated by institutions.... (p. 149)

Whether civil or religious, social life in Te is as much about alliance as it is about belief. An example would be local marriage practices, long the object of study across the Himalayan range on account of their regional specificity and social intricacy, to which Te is no exception. Whether as a teaching resource or as a trove of comparative detail, Ramble's three pages on marriage in Te are elegantly written and insightful (pages 113-115), exploding the idea that weddings are transactions between clans or other corporate groups. In Te, we learn, a marriage is simply a 'private affair between two households'.

On a related note, in a charmingly entitled section on the 'Acquisition of Priestcraft', it becomes clear that training is far more important than descent for the Te priesthood. Both the priests and their patrons are shown to be practically oriented, focusing less on the 'abstract preoccupations that are generally associated with Buddhist endeavour' and far more interested in matters that have a 'palpable bearing on their immediate environment' (p. 174). Ramble paints a convincing picture of business-like lamas and commonsensical clients who function in a socio-religious climate in which concession and compromise are valued. In Te, men of the cloth were free to 'devote their energies to the prosperity of

the household, either working on the land or trading' (p. 184). This humanising narrative, which situates the collection of activities conventionally referred to as religion firmly within the boundaries of everyday life rather than outside of it, is one of the outstanding achievements of Ramble's text.

While the pacification of a pagan landscape by encroaching Buddhist forces has been an enduring theme in scholarly literature on Tibet, the degree to which this Buddhicisation / Buddhification was 'piecemeal and haphazard' (p. 188) in Te remains truly surprising. Certainly, there has been replacement of local practices as a consequence of the advance of the dharma, but this process of displacement is neither complete, permanent nor is it uncontested. All of which may explain why villagers in Te continue to look to their deities and religious leaders less for blessings and benefaction, and rather more for 'straightforward civility' (p. 194) and real-world guidance.

In Te, as in other locations across Mustang and the alpine stretches of borderland Nepal, the landscape is studded with territorial gods. These place-bound and highly specific deities have 'position but no substance' (p. 202). They are from Te, of Te and in some ways, they are Te, and the villagers remain adept at reconfiguring space in order to bring the divine closer to hand. Buddhism and paganism (although we must be wary of -ism-ising local practices) do not exist in complementary distribution, but neither have they morphed into a new hybrid in this Mustang village.

Ramble is damning about the use of the 'lazy sobriquet of syncretism', an easy phrase that leaves 'unexplored the principles underlying the selection of elements from Buddhism and their integration—or confrontation—with pagan interests' (p. 215). The documents that Ramble unearths and explores in Chapter Seven intrigue the reader precisely because of their ambiguity, offering occasional insights into the complex world of civil and religious action. And if a clash exists at the conceptual level between Te's local territorial cult and the 'soteriological creed' that is Buddhism, this is not manifested in the minds of the villagers. The ends-justify-the-means approach to the buffet of religious, moral and customary life choices in Te displays no signs of confusion or competition for its industrious inhabitants (cf. p. 232).

Not only is Buddhism 'kept at arm's length' by the inhabitants of Te, but—more dramatically still—'tenets that are seen as inimical to village tradition are rejected' (p. 233). As a working hypothesis, Ramble proposes

that as priestly and monastic institutions receded, the performances of the laity grew ‘into the resulting gaps’ and developed ‘a form independent of its original ritual structure’ (p. 249). The image of a civil, pagan ‘ivy’ growing out of the cracked brickwork of Buddhist infrastructure is searing. One can only imagine the profound challenge that this would have posed to any itinerant proselytising lama hoping to convert this village of functionalists. As Chapter Eight comes to a close, Ramble documents the complex, historical processes by which a ‘doctrinal framework has been replaced by an exhibition of the structure of the community itself’ (p. 258). Even in Mustang, it seems that Durkheim is never far away.

Yet Te’s richly woven civil fabric is of course made up of independent people with specific needs, and the author now turns his attention to individual estates as the focus of ‘affective and economic interest’ (p. 267). While certain public events encourage villagers to think about ‘how the community might best be sustained and protected’, these are blessedly infrequent and short, after which they can ‘stop worrying about the village as a whole and bring their attention back to the problems of their own estates’ (p. 304). What is good for individuals, then, is good for society, and the constitution of the village remains a far more important and effective ‘nomic edifice’ than either Buddhism or the local territorial cults of the area.

General readers should not be put off by the apparently esoteric nature of this important work. In Chapter Ten, the last substantive section of the book, Ramble focuses on the ceremony by which headmen are appointed. Given the prolonged nature of Nepal’s post-conflict political transition, Kathmandu might take note of Te’s civil society, which, based on the idea of monarchy, is a ‘true democracy that legitimises itself in the idiom of make-believe kingship’ (p. 264). With a powerful and well-wrought conclusion that brings this book to a close, this excellent monograph can be read in its entirety or as a series of discrete lectures on the civil, religious and psychological frames that shape Tibetan culture.

Replete with valuable insights and charming asides—the reason that all farmers should fear excess alcohol consumption is because ‘careless talk costs pastures’ (p. 89), or ‘most history is ... the history of war, and peace goes largely unrecorded’ (p. 149)—the *Navel of the Demoness* is also a testament to the importance of building advanced linguistic aptitude in a number of regional languages in order to engage in deep analysis. In this

case, the author is well versed in Nepali, standard written Tibetan and the local spoken variety of Tibetan used along Nepal's northern frontier. On the topic of language, echoing his earlier work, Ramble reminds us that when speaking collectively of the 'people of the north Nepal borderland ... we are obliged to use language as a metonym for ethnicity' (p. 29).

It is the singular achievement of this skilled ethnographer to extrapolate from a village of forty-eight houses in Mustang a narrative that speaks to wider, theoretical issues (much as he had done for the even smaller village of Lubra during his formative doctoral research years before). The prism that Ramble uses is the complex articulation between individuals and their social order, with each shaping the other in its likeness. This is a masterful book, and one that is beautifully written; engaging in its detail and sweeping in its implications. And for those readers eager to learn precisely what and where the Navel of the Demoness is, they will be rewarded for their patience on page 190.