

Revisiting Rituals in a Changing Tibetan World

edited by Katia Buffetrille.

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Reviewed by Cathy Cantwell

This collection brings together a wide range of case studies from Tibet, Nepal and Mongolia, exploring the question of what happens to rituals during an era of modernisation, globalisation and socio-economic and political upheaval, and what kind of role they may play in these societies today. The contributions range in size from 13 pages upwards, but one chapter is so substantial that it could have been developed into a major publication in its own right. At just over 100 pages, Robert Barnett's study of ransom rituals in contemporary Tibet provides the historical background to ransom (*glud*) rituals in the Tibetan context, discussion of their different types, of the components of the symbolic structures offered as substitutes to the troublesome spirits, as well as the ideas associated with the ritual exchange. The essay examines the persistence of these ritual forms in today's Tibet under Chinese rule. Clearly, gathering ethnographic materials on such rituals in Tibet is not unproblematic, because besides the risk to informants involved in cooperating with unauthorised research by foreign scholars, in this case practitioners are involved in activity that is officially defined as superstitious, and is therefore liable to suppression or criminal prosecution. Nonetheless, ransom rituals have re-emerged, and the sight of effigies at busy city crossroads in Lhasa is not unusual, although they are generally destroyed quickly by passing cars. It seems that despite the length of the Cultural Revolution, the continuity of the associated Tibetan beliefs and their transmission across generations was not altogether interrupted. In Lhasa, Barnett focused on the disposal of ransom effigies in public space rather than the private practice itself. In contrast to Lhasa, where few monks and lamas would admit to involvement in these rites, Barnett witnessed an elaborate ransom ritual in Amdo (in Qinghai), where a lama had gained a reputation in the region for his divinations and ritual cures, his clients including Mongolians and Chinese. In conclusion, various possible social

and political meanings are explored, such as the implication that Tibetans' own cultural perceptions are co-habiting with global modernity, and the ritual struggle with demonic interference may not be wholly different from the experience of dealing with other types of temperamental and alien forces in modern life. The article is illustrated but, unfortunately, not all the photographic evidence is presented. A number of 'photosets' are described in an appendix, which is no substitute for the photographs themselves. If the publisher is unable to include the illustrative materials, it would at least have been helpful if the photographs could have been presented on a referenced website.

The editor's own contribution builds on her previous studies of the site of Halesi-Māratika, sacred to Hindus and Sherpa and Tibetan Buddhists. Here, she meticulously traces the history of the site from the eighteenth century, including a long-running dispute between two lineages of Hindu priests who had held the site, complicated further by a Sherpa lama trained by Tibetan masters who settled there in the late twentieth century, built a monastery, and has been succeeded by a son and an identified reincarnation. The socio-political changes of recent times have brought intervention by the Maoist authorities, and various uncertainties, but the development and internationalisation of the site continues. The article focuses mostly on the contextualisation of ritual practice today, rather than the practices themselves, but some attention is given to the development of large-scale Tibetan Buddhist rituals at the site, which attract Tibetan, Himalayan and international participants.

Alexander von Rospatt's article opens with a case study of rituals at Svayambhū, where despite a history of involvement of Tibetan Buddhists, Newar Buddhists persisted with their own rituals during periodic renovations of the chaitya. However, while rituals remain central to Newar social life, the recent past has seen very great religious change which has impacted on ritual performance. Initiation and ritual participation are less strictly restricted on the grounds of gender and caste affiliation, while a modern reformist influence has promoted standardisation, and brought greater attention to ensuring that rites are done 'properly' with attention to correct Sanskrit and understanding the meanings. Ritual practice has also been used to strengthen Newar Buddhist ethnic identity.

Marie-Dominique Even reviews the historical background for Mongolian Buddhism over the past century, from Soviet persecution to

becoming an integral part of Mongolian national identity. Mongolian Buddhist monastic reconstruction has prospered, at least in the capital, and monks and lamas provide ritual services for the laity—yet, despite the influence of some transnational currents, it seems that more individualistic and modernist tendencies have so far taken root only on the margins.

Hildegard Diemberger discusses the ‘personhood’ of holy books in Tibetan contexts, and the place of recovery and preservation of texts in Tibetan ethnic reconstruction in recent decades, considering also changes in their ritual treatment in the context of new forms of reproduction and transmission, especially the creation of electronic versions.

Nicola Schneider summarises continuing debates surrounding the proposal to reintroduce the full ordination of nuns into Tibetan tradition, showing that in such a case the inflexibility of ritual prescriptions has held back an innovation which many important lamas support.

Mireille Helffer’s contribution is more directly focused on ritual practice, presenting useful detail on the ritual calendar of Zhe chen Monastery in Bodhanath, Nepal. She highlights changes instituted in exile, but above all she makes clear the extraordinary achievement of re-creating an entire repertoire of elaborate rituals in the new setting. Moreover, today, ritual memory has been enhanced with digital texts, audio and video recordings, photography and so on. In the modern context, developments have included international ritual dance tours with a quite different ethos from traditional performances, but improving the technical expertise of the dancers and providing important financial support for the monastery.

Fernanda Pirie discusses the non-ritualistic legal dramas of dispute mediation amongst nomadic groups in Amdo, in contrast to the ‘rituals of state authority’ set up by local officials to mark the acceptance by all parties of agreements acceptable to the State. These ceremonial pacts may not resolve key issues from the nomads’ perspectives, and may ultimately fail to end hostilities.

The system of lots drawn from a golden urn, provided in the late eighteenth century by the Manchus to the Tibetan Government for use in the identification of the Panchen and Dalai Lamas’ reincarnations, is the subject of Fabienne Jagou’s essay, which explores the history of the practice, including Chinese sources. The current Chinese Government claims that its choice of the 11th Panchen Lama is valid because it used

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this system, while the identification made by the Dalai Lama and the official search team is invalid. It seems that the Chinese State insists on an absurd symbolic pretence to be the protector of Tibetan tradition.

Finally, Thierry Dodin briefly argues against a view that presents political acts of resistance by contemporary Tibetans as *transformed* rituals, when they may simply be the same religious rituals with new political connotations, or may not in fact be rituals at all.

Perhaps a little more could have been done to draw links between the papers, to consider recurring themes or reasons for contrasts, but despite this the book represents a significant contribution to the study of ritual in Tibetan and Himalayan contexts. Unfortunately, its price is set at a level only affordable for University libraries. While this may be inevitable in the case of highly specialised academic studies, in this case it is especially a pity because a book with such a broad theme deserves a wider readership.