

Compte-rendu

Toni Huber. 2020. *Source of Life: Revitalisation Rites and Bon Shamans in Bhutan and Eastern Himalayas*, Volume 1-2. Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, Denkschriften der philosophisch-historischen Klasse, Band 518 (Veröffentlichungen zur Sozialanthropologie, Band 24); ISBN: 978-3-7001-8269-6. Vol 1: pp. xiii–xv, 1-640; vol II: pp. 1-499; incl. 333 plates, 39 Figures (graphs, plans), and 18 maps.

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The object of this study, a social and cultural phenomenon I generically term the Srid-pa'i lha cult, is focused upon a tangible and perennial preoccupation of communities of Himalayan subsistence farmers: maintaining viability for themselves and their most important animals in the face of the fundamental precariousness of life.
(Huber, *op. cit.* Vol. I, p. 13)

With *Source of Life*, Toni Huber presents an impressive work. It covers the results of his longstanding anthropological and Tibetological studies on peasant communities in the eastern Himalayas, i.e. eastern Bhutan and the adjacent region of what is called the Mon-yul Corridor in western Arunachal Pradesh (India). The work, divided into two volumes with a total of over 1100 pages, is largely the result of fundamental research. Methodologically, this means the presentation of an immense richness of ethnographic data combined with text (including Old Tibetan documents) and an in-depth (and geographically broad) comparative analysis with the aim of identifying a scarcely known ritual tradition based in this area and its manifold historical, cultural and linguistic contexts.

Volume I comprises four out of the five major sections (Parts I-V) and forms the more descriptive part of the work. The focus is on the documentation of a series of calendric festivals as they are still practised in the eastern Himalayas and which the author summarises as “revitalisation festivals dedicated to the Srid pa'i lha deities”, the latter corresponding to the *lha* known in Old Tibetan contexts as *Phyva lha*, i.e. the leading meta-human beings, which are described in the present regional context as “ancestor-progenitor beings regarded as the source of life” (Vol. 1, p. 1).¹ In addition to the actual description of the festi-

¹ The author wishes to emphasise (Vol. I, p. 81) that the principal deities of the Srid pa'i lha cult are not to be confused with those classified as the *srid pa chags pa'i lha*

vals (in Part IV), there is a presentation and discussion of central elements of this Srid pa'i lha cult in the preceding parts (Parts I-III)—from cosmology, to the most important *lha* of the life-giving rituals to the ritual specialists, the “*bon shamans*”, their techniques and corresponding phenomena in the field of material culture.

Volume II contains the final section (Part V), divided into five chapters (chaps. 14-18), with the significant heading *Comparative Soundings in the Ancestral Past*, in which comparative material is presented and discussed in connection with various questions—with the intention to “explore possible ways in which the contemporary Srid pa'i lha cult came into existence” (Vol. I, p. 1). This also includes a new discussion on the ethnolinguistic identity and prehistory of the Tibeto-Burman speakers of the eastern Himalayas, whose ancestral heritage points to a close relationship with populations that are far away along the eastern margins of the Tibetan Plateau, namely the groups known as Qiang and Naxi. Indeed, while the first trace in the identification of Srid pa'i lha leads to Tibet (or southern Central Tibet, where the Tibetan kingship originated), there is a “non-Tibetan plateau content of the cult” (Vol. II, p. 146), which relates to similarities with the cultures of communities of the extended eastern Himalayas, whose identification only makes it possible to explain the whole of the Srid pa'i lha tradition.

Both volumes have an informative introduction, and the individual sections of the study are concluded by reflections in which interim results and certain conclusions are discussed. At the end of the volumes are the endnotes, in addition, Volume II has a larger appendix, which contains tables, photographic representation of manuscripts, and various illustrations (Appendix A-M), followed by a good index, which summarises personal names, place names and terms. Numerous photographs, graphs and maps are included in the main text and accurately illustrate the issues described.

I consider it as helpful and also methodologically reasonable to have the individual sections in Volume II preceded by (altogether four) separate chapters labelled “hypothesis”, at a place where the issues regarding the origins and the more exact historical genealogy of certain elements of the Srid pa'i lha tradition are presented. At the same time, these chapters address the study's central questions.

First, this concerns the assessment that the “*bon*” rites as an essential part of the Srid pa'i lha cult can be seen as a phenomenon largely separate from Bon (the G.yung drung Bon), at least it is none that repre-

dgu (“nine gods of the world that came into existence”) in Buddhist sources, although it seems to be clear that they share the same underlying cosmological history.

sents a mere side development of this 11th-century Tibetan religion. In principle, such assessments can also be found in the literature with regard to other peripheral “*bon* traditions” of the Himalayas, but in the given case the extensive material allows a more precise comparative examination of the provenance of the rites and their narratives. Here a quote at the beginning of the “hypothesis chapter” on *bon* / Bon:

The Srid-pa'i lha cult dedicated to mundane goals² and maintained by a range of local, autonomous *bon* shamans for the benefit of their own communities is neither a survival of any “ancient” and ostensibly “original” “Bon religion”, nor an epiphenomenon of the salvation religion calling itself g.Yung-drung Bon. Rather, the earlier agents who developed the cult were inheritors of non-Buddhist/non-Indic rites and narratives first evident in Old Tibetan and early Classical Tibetan manuscripts dating both prior to, and shortly after, an eleventh century watershed period. They combined this inheritance with other cultural materials and developed the cult along its own trajectories as they saw fit (Vol. II, p. 7).

A central part of the study is the correlating of the local traditions to a set of rituals, the written evidence of which is dated to the 11th century—namely manuscripts from the well-known “Dga' thang 'Bum pa Collection”, which was made available in 2007,³ and the illustrated manuscripts described as *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs*, whose specifics and partial parallels to even older text material have already been the subject of studies by John Bellezza.⁴ The peculiarity of the current work is that the meticulous comparisons enable it to free these old textual traditions much from their isolation and to concretise them, something that with restrictions also succeeds with respect to the Old Tibetan documents treated in this context (esp. PT 1060). The author's thesis that the (*bon*) rites of the Srid pa'i lha worship complex represent variants of ritual traditions that existed in southern Central Tibet 1000 years ago is convincingly underpinned by comparative analyses (chap. 16).

² For this phrase, see below.

³ Pa tshab Pa sangs Dbang 'dus and Glang ru Norbu Tshe ring (ed.). 2007. *Gtam shul dga' thang 'bum pa che nas gsar du rnyed pa'i bon gyi gna' dpe bdams bsgrigs*. Lhasa: Bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang.

⁴ Bellezza, John V. 2013. *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet: Archaic Concepts and Practices in a Thousand-Year-Old Illuminated Funerary Manuscript and Old Tibetan Funerary Documents of Gathang Bumpa and Dunhuang*. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. However, this work has not been further considered by the author, for reasons that he only briefly explains in a note; Vol. 1, p. 568, n. 86. For an early presentation of these manuscripts, see the exhibition catalogue: Klimburg-Salter, Deborah, Linda Lojda, and Charles Ramble (eds.). 2013. *Bon – Geister aus Butter: Kunst und Ritual des alten Tibet*. Vienna: Museum für Völkerkunde.

Regarding the *Ste'u* and *Sha lungs* manuscripts, the author also adds that “these old ritual manuscripts have exactly the form of small, hand-made booklets as used today by *bon* shamans practising in the cult, and their respective texts even share certain orthographic peculiarities in common” (Vol. I, p. 38; Vol. II, App. J, p. 302ff.).⁵

According to another central thesis, essential parts of the “*bon*-identified material” of the Srid pa'i lha cult came together with family (or “clan-”) migrations from southern Central Tibet to the valleys of north-east Bhutan, with population groups of the Shar Dung (well-known from the studies by the Bhutan historians M. Aris and J. Ardussi) as the main agents for these cultural transfers. This chapter (chap. 16 in Vol. II, p. 85ff.) also includes a new look at the historical composition of the communities of the Srid pa'i lha tradition, where information from ethnography and local documents (such as the highly informative (linguistically hybrid) lineage origin and migration text *Lha'i gsung rabs*) significantly supplement or expand the previous, purely text-based knowledge (especially that provided by the 17th century *Rgyal rigs*).⁶ Particularly fascinating in this migration history is the encounter with lineages, who are known as leading lines of the Tibetan royal dynasty; we find these not only among the migrated “clans” of the Srid pa'i lha communities (such as the Khu and Se), but also among groups that migrated in the other direction, from south to north, according to tradition, as early as the beginning of the Spu rgyal Dynasty.⁷

⁵ The author further explains that these texts (*Dga' thang 'Bum pa* and the *Ste'u* and *Sha lungs* manuscripts) “are the oldest known examples of such mundane rites discovered at any location directly upon the actual Tibetan Plateau” (Vol. I, p. 38); he does not include documents from Dunhuang in this calculation, because the oasis is situated outside the Tibetan Plateau system. Distinctions of this kind between the plateau land and Dunhuang in connection with age determination of texts or other qualifications can be found more than once in the book (e.g. Vol. I, p. 76), but are not always entirely comprehensible to me. It should be clear that the content of the documents kept in Dunhuang did not necessarily have anything to do with this oasis city and military outpost, but the collections naturally included texts or copies of texts also from completely different parts of the empire.

⁶ Aris, Michael. 1986. *Sources for the History of Bhutan*. Vienna (Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde, Heft 14). Ardussi, John. 2007. Notes on the *Rgyal Rigs* of Ngawang and the clan history of eastern Bhutan and Shar Mon, in: Prats, R. (ed.), *The Pandita & the Siddha*. Dharamsala: Amnye Machen Institute, 1-11; see Huber in Vol. II, p. 415 of the present publication for further references.

⁷ Huber here refers to the well-known story given in the *Can lnga* text *Yi ge lha gyes can* (in *Mkhas pa Lde'u chos 'byung*) of the three feather-covered Mon boys, which are said to have met the progenitor king Gnya' khri btsan po at a place in southern Tibet before they settled in different areas of Lhokha and became ancestors of famous “clans” (i.e. the Lho, Gnyags (= Rngegs), Myang; Vol. II, p. 112f., p. 146; Vol. I, p. 576). The author's identification of this Mon outfit as apparently belonging to the Srid pa'i lha culture is extremely exciting.

In addition to this southern Central Tibet component of the Srid pa'i lha history, the author differentiates a second, geographically broader cultural stratum, which in the research area is represented by the East Bodish-speaking Mon groups ("Mon clans"). These are the starting point for an exciting journey into the "trans-Himalayan ethnography", geographically into the "extended eastern Himalaya" and beyond, where linguistic and other similarities of cultural patterns and practices with Qiangic and Naic languages speaking populations (in western Sichuan and northwest Yunnan) can apparently only be explained by common ancestral roots – the basis for an attempt to determine the identity of these bearers of the Srid pa'i lha tradition more closely (Vol. II, chap. 16, 17; p. 85ff., 149ff.). The same chapters take up the old discussion (inspired by the classical Tibetan historiography itself) about the origin of the Tibetans, as it was first conducted among western scholars by R. Stein,⁸ a discussion in which the Qiang has been identified as one of the major proto-Tibetan population components (with the Tibeto-Burman Qiang arguably not necessarily related to the "Qu'iang" of the older Chinese historiography).⁹ The identification of the Tibetan Dmu / Rmu (the name of the heavenly bride-giver lineage and at the same time of the place from where the progenitor king travelled to Earth) as related to Qiang *mu*, which denotes the sky, represent one of the better known examples, and leads right into the heart of the Srid pa'i lha cult, whose rites are ultimately anchored in a geography of the sky.¹⁰ In these contexts we find the perhaps most exciting parts of the work: the description and comparative analysis of the manifold cultic representations of the cosmic space addressed in the rituals – from variants of the famous sky cord (*dmu thag*) to the figure of the clever messenger bat of the gods and the shamanic travels (each cartographically documentable) in the direction of the source of life, all of

⁸ Stein, Rolf. 1961. *Les tribus anciennes des marches Sino-tibétaines: légendes, classifications et histoire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France; for Huber's principal assessment of this work, which has been widely cited to this day, see Vol. 1, p. 7f.

⁹ See here the somewhat controversial discussion by Beckwith, in: Beckwith, Christopher. 2009. *Empires of the Silk Road*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 375-76; cf. also Huber's remarks in this connection, in Vol. I, p. 6f., p. 222.

¹⁰ As for *mu*, in addition one may refer here to the well-known Mu ra, which one finds as the name for the place of the Tibetan royal tombs in 'Phyong rgyas. Not only *mu* but also the name part *ra* is documented as a Tibetan-Burmese root, with the meaning of "to come", "to get to" (Joanna Bialek, personal communication 4.3.2019). Mu ra, which is usually read as the "enclosure (*ra ba*) of (D)mu", may thus originally have meant something like "arrival in heaven" – a suitable description of the place where in the course of the tumulus burial the kings and other members of the royal family went to heaven or were ritually taken to the heavenly paradise. Although not documented in Old Tibetan sources, this term, *mu ra*, could actually be of a quite old, possibly pre-imperial history, with the roots in southern Tibet, the region where also the Spu rgyal kingship originated.

which accompanied by endless references to corresponding elements from the field of material culture and the symbolic classifications of the natural environment.

The question of the Qiangic component in the early Tibetan history (or the history of southern Central Tibet) also includes a discussion about the famous colossal stone towers, which are known to be found in settlements of Qiangic languages speaking populations in the Qinghai-Sichuan border area, and which are seen in a narrower historical context with the externally similar structures in eastern Lhokha – in Nyang po (with the oldest structures, dated to the third century CE),¹¹ Kong po, and also in Lho brag (the pre-14th century home of the aforementioned Shar Dung)

The known sites and distribution zone of these multi-storied siege or defensive towers appear to mark the traces of one particular set of ancestral populations who spread out across, or who migrated over the south-eastern Tibetan Plateau lands in between the highland regions of western Sichuan and IHo-brag in southernmost Central Tibet (Vol. II, p. 223).

The author sees this dissemination in correspondence with the central position, which *mkhar* (stronghold) takes as a term in the rituals of the Srid pa'i lha worship, as if the rituals were addressing precisely this specific tradition of tower building (Vol. II, p. 132-33). Yet, given the (not least toponymically abundant) evidence of a much larger presence of *mkhar* in the entire central Tibetan region (in the ritual and architectural context), one may be sceptical about the causal restriction to this Qiangic ethno-cultural component, not least since the distribution area of these specific tower buildings, in my view, is not that clearly definable.¹²

¹¹ A publication of the radiometric measurement data mentioned in Darragon 2015 is missing, as also noted by Huber (Vol. II, p. 401). (Darragon, Frederique. 2015. On the ancient cross-shaped towers of Nyangpo and Kongpo in eastern Central Tibet, *Journal of Comparative Cultural Studies in Architecture* 8: 34-50).

¹² It should be noted that within the Lhokha area there are comparable towers in high density also in Gnyal (modern Lhun rtse County, east of Gtam shul / Lho brag), and also further west in the Khang dmar district, but I am not sure whether there is the same (ethno)historical background as the author assumes for the tower sites he mentions. (In Gnyal the towers are associated with the spread of the Chos rgyal Bya ba, one of the regional post-imperial descendants of the Yar lung dynasty. For the tower distribution in Gnyal, see the map "The ancient district of Gnyal", at www.oeaw.ac.at/tibetantumulus-tradition/maps/gyo-ru-left-horn/). And even with the *so kha* towers from Upper Yar lung and many similar *mkhar* structures in Central Tibet locally known as Bya khyung 'bab sa it often seems difficult to distinguish their outer form from the Nyang po or Lho brag towers. Moreover, it seems that

One specific characteristic of the Srid pa'i lha culture, which I find particularly worth mentioning, is the absence of a "mountain cult"; this relates not only to the ethnographic reality of the research areas, but also to the larger space that the Dga' thang 'Bum pa manuscripts and the *ste'u* and *sha slungs* rites refer to:

[mountains are] completely absent from the central ritual concerns expressed in any manuscript from dGa'-thang and the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript as well (Vol. II, p. 82).

The mountains (especially the summit zones) are apparently not a place of "source of life", at least not an explicit addressee in the rituals and virtual shamanistic journeys, where other parts of the landscape (river course) come to the fore, and above everything is the sky (or its uppermost, usually 13th, level) where the actual ancestral origin is located (Vol. II, p. 81-82).

Huber combines these observations with a more general scepticism about earlier (pre-Buddhist) forms of mountain worship in Tibet, as has been common opinion in the western literature since Samten Karmay's studies at the latest,¹³ that scholar who made the "strongest appeal so far for a widespread and ancient "notion of the ancestral mountain" as being something quintessentially "Tibetan"" (Vol. II, p. 82). In concrete terms, for the Srid pa'i lha areas, this means that the *lha* at the centre of the revitalisation rituals—above all 'O de Gung rgyal ("the most prominent and universal deity identity occurring in the cult of Srid-pa'i lha"), his "son", the *lha'i bu* Gu se Lang ling (Gur zhe),¹⁴ and the deity *lha* Tshangs pa¹⁵—are not associated with any

the usual attribution of the function of the stone buildings as "defence tower" is not always true, at least not for the Nyang po towers, according to the local information available to me (cf. Hazod, G. 2006. The land of Shing-khri btsan-po: a survey of ancient Nyang-po in eastern Central Tibet, unpubl. paper, i.e. written version of the paper held by the author at the IATS conference, Bonn 2006).

¹³ Karmay, Samten. 1996. The Tibetan cult of mountain deities and its political significance, in: Blondeau, Anne-Marie and Ernst Steinkellner (eds.), *Reflections on the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 59-75.

¹⁴ This *lha* deity known from the *Rgyal rigs* chronicle (and Aris' studies related to it; above fn. 6) is plausibly associated by the author with the Dakpa- and Dzala-speaking Mon groups of the research area, with further distant relationship to Qiangic and Naic languages speaking groups (Vol. II, p. 146f.).

¹⁵ The author refers here to the *lha* Tshangs pa of the origin account of the Rlangs Lha gzig family (in the *Rlangs kyi po ti bse ru rgyas pa*, Lhasa 1986) as the possible template of this Srid pa'i lha deity, and emphasises that in this account as in the Srid pa'i lha tradition there is no allusion to the Buddhist identification of Tshangs pa

mountain in the vicinity of the research areas. Huber calls them placeless deities. This observation appears to be rather unusual compared to the situation in Central Tibet and adjacent “Tibetan” regions,¹⁶ but on the other hand it is not entirely unknown for peripheral areas.¹⁷ With ‘O de Gung rgyal, it is the well-known case that this famous Phyva god (known as the “father” of all the *lha* or territorial gods of Central Tibet; below fn. 21) is at the same time associated with a mountain, i.e. the ‘O lde Gung rgyal mountain range in the ‘Ol kha district on the border with Dvags po, an identity that Huber questions. The mountain association of a deity named ‘O lde Gung rgyal is a later Buddhist story (13th / 14th cent.), he says, and this mountain deity cannot be derived from the ‘O de Gung rgyal of the Old Tibetan texts and has nothing to do with the eponymous deity of the Srid pa’i lha tradition either (Vol. I, p. 87; and esp. fn. 48-49 for details concerning this issue).

It may be true that we still know too little about what exactly defined the “mountain cult” in pre-Buddhist Tibet and a critical look can certainly help to find a more precise determination in this respect; yet in all I see no reason to question the very early ritual significance of the mountains in Tibet (or more precisely Central Tibet—the old Bod), at least not in the form in which we find this questioning expressed in

(= Brahṃā), but rather the old Tibetan ancestral context of this Phyva god Tshangs pa is addressed (Vol. I, p. 93). The non-Buddhist function of this deity is indeed clearly illustrated in the presented rituals; on the other hand, the identity of Tshangs pa as Brahṃā in the Rlangs origin account is indirectly mentioned, in the form of the “turquoise-winged white goose” (*ngang dkar g.yu gshog*), the mount of the Brahṃā, with whom the ancestral figure Mang ldom Stag btsan was travelling (*Rlangs, op. cit.*, p. 12.19). And also the form Tshangs pa Gdong bzhi as the *lha* Tshangs pa is often called in the Srid pa’i lha accounts (Vol. 1, p. 54, 93, 261) seems to refer to the Brahṃā (i.e. the “four-faced Tshangs pa”), or the alternative form (Tshangs pa) ‘Dungje’ (Vol. I, p. 540: fn. 78) is a corrupt rendering of Tshangs pa Dung thod can, the conch-decorated form of Brahṃā in the tradition of Lower Yar lung, the area where the whole Rlangs story was fabricated. Cf. Hazod, G. Forthcoming. The ‘stranger-king’ and the temple – the Tibetan ruler image retained in post-imperial Buddhist environments: the example of the *lha* of Khra ‘brug (Yar lung, Central Tibet).

¹⁶ Huber himself quotes examples from the Himalayan region of the often-observed situation that together with the migration of people usually also the representative deities (*pho lha*) used to “migrate” and to settle down in the new home (Vol. I, p. 101), and thus having become “place gods”.

¹⁷ With certain restrictions, one can refer here to the situation in Ladakh, cf. Dollfus, Pascale. 1996. No sacred mountains in Ladakh? In: Blondeau, Anne-Marie and Ernst Steinkellner (eds.), *Reflections on the Mountain. Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 3-23.

one of the recent discussions.¹⁸ Noteworthy are new data from the field of archaeological (and archaeo-astronomical) surveys in Central Tibet, in connection with the alignment of burial mounds in Mu ra (above fn. 10), which indicate that ancient *lha* mountains in the districts of Central Tibet and also mountain sanctuaries, which are primarily known from the Buddhist tradition, apparently served as reference points in geomantic practices as early as the 7th century CE.¹⁹ In my opinion, the imperial deities involved in divination, the “source of prognosis” as Dotson has described them, should be seen in a similar context.²⁰ In these documents, which Huber also quotes, ‘O de Gung rgyal appears in tandem with famous (imperial) mountain / territorial deities such as Thang la Ya bzbur and Yar lha Sham po as well as a dozen of other place deities classified as *yul lha* or *lam lha* (IOL Tib J 740, ll.1-171), and there is actually no reason not to see the ‘O de Gung rgyal of these lists similarly as a place god, i.e. to identify him with the mountain in Ol kha (cf. also Dotson, *op. cit.*, p. 24-25).²¹ In my opinion, it is no contra-

¹⁸ Cf. here M. Walter’s critical “mountain cult” reflections in which he, for example, doubts that the *lha dgu* and *sku lha* of the late 8th century-Khri Srong lde btsan edict had anything to do with mountains. Walter, Michael. 2009. *Buddhism and Empire: The Political and Religious Culture of Early Tibet*. Leiden: Brill, 230ff. The problem has been recently addressed by the author of this review: Hazod, G. 2019. ‘There is scarcely a peak in Tibet which would not be regarded as the abode of a mountain-god or goddess’ – Some notes on Nebesky-Wojtkowitz’ classification of Tibetan mountain deities based on recent historical-ethnographic research in Central Tibet; paper held at the Symposium in memoriam of René Nebesky-Wojtkowitz “Exploring Himalayan Cultural Heritage”, Weltmuseum Vienna, Nov. 2019. It has been demonstrated that the representative *lha* of the ancient Central Tibetan chiefdoms, as far as identifiable, all refer to mountains, and there is no reason not to regard this association as old, if not dating from the time of the founding of this regional rules (in later history addressed as *rgyal phran* or minor principalities). They are no doubt part of the *bod yul gyi sku lha dang lha dgu* evoked as witnesses for the oath ceremony in the context of the Khri Srong lde btsan edict (*Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston*, Beijing ed. 1986, p. 371.22-23). For the *sku lha* (= *sku bla*), see most recently Dotson, Brandon. 2019. Gods and souls in Tibet: The etymologies of *sku bla* (paper held at the IATS Paris 2019); cf. also Bialek, Joanna. 2018. *Compounds and Compounding in Old Tibetan*. Marburg: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, p. 233, *et passim*.

¹⁹ Cf. Romain, William F. 2019. Tombs of the Tibetan kings: geomantic entanglements with sacred mountains (online publication ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1177-248X>).

²⁰ Dotson, Brandon. 2007. Divination and law in the Tibetan Empire: the role of dice in the legislation of loans, interest, marital law and troop conscription, in: Kapstein, Matthew and B. Dotson (eds.), *Contributions to the Cultural History of Early Tibet*. Leiden: Brill, 3-77.

²¹ The mountain with the striking pyramidal snowy peak is located at the intersection between the northern and southern parts of Central Tibet, on both sides clearly visible from quite far away – perhaps the actual origin for the deity’s attribution as “father” – father of the district *lha-s*, a genealogical classification widespread at least since the 11th century. In ‘Ol kha, the ritual landscape with its (partly ruined)

diction if the same deity appears as “placeless” deity elsewhere, which, as demonstrated by Huber, has no abode other than the sky (Vol. I, p. 82), from where it used to ritually descend to Earth without staying here permanently.

These two issues, which I have briefly picked out, the *mkhar* and the mountain cult issue, only form two side aspects in this so extensive study, and they represent two of the many examples where the ethnography of this previously little-known Himalayan tradition repeatedly leads us to core areas of the early Tibetan culture, often with suggestions from the author to reconsider traditional positions in the light of new evidence.

In the final “Reflection” chapter, at the end of the second volume, the author has summed up this situation very well:

There is no doubt the Srid-pa'i lha cult is somewhat unique compared with other cultural phenomena within its wider surroundings. So much of its content can be shown to preserve components and traces of ancient rites, narratives, cosmology and models, albeit sometimes transformed and reused. Some of this material we can securely document as far back as the eleventh century era in the same geographical region, while other aspects are attested in earlier pre-eleventh century Old Tibetan documents. Certain specialised ritual uses of the sacred plant Ephedra²² offer an excellent example of very ancient cultural patterns being continued within the Srid-pa'i lha cult and its precursor ritual culture known from nearby gTam-shul, but for which we currently have no other ethnographic and historical evidence from elsewhere across the historical Tibetosphere (Vol. II, p. 241).

Finally, the work provides a theoretical contribution. Huber sees the concept of “mundane rites” (short for “rites for mundane goals”), which characterises the cult of Srid pa'i lha, as an alternative to “folk religion”, “nameless religion”, “pagan rituals” and other common expressions in the literature that refer to the close interweaving of ritual and community outside the world dominated by salvation religion. Inspired by Maurice Bloch's notion of the ‘transcendental social’,²³ the author understands “mundane rites” as an alternative approach to “religion”, which similar to “tradition” etc. “fails to do justice to the cult's

'O lde Gung rgyal-oriented *yul lha* sites also speaks in favour of an old tradition of the deity's association with this mountain, although it is true that the various *rgyal phran* catalogues only list the *srin* of 'O yul (= 'Ol kha) and not the *lha*.

²² For ephedra (*mtshe*), one of the core components of the early Tibetan rituals, see the highly informative presentation and discussion in Vol. I, p. 137f., Vol. II, 35f.

²³ Bloch, Maurice. 2013. Why religion is nothing special but is central; book chapter in: Bloch, M., *In and Out of Each Other's Body: Theory of Mind, Evolution, Truth, and the Nature of the Social*. London: Paradigm Publishers, 23-40.

characteristics" (Vol. I, p. 15):

Ultimately, none of these expressions are entirely adequate to describe rites encompassed by the cult, nor those practices recorded in the much older ritual texts from which the cult's content is derived. I thus introduce the new expression 'rites for mundane goals' or shorter 'mundane rites' to describe the cult and cognate phenomena. [...] All such 'mundane rites', past and present, lack any reference to or association with soteriological claims or 'ultimate' horizons for human existence. Particularly in this latter sense, rites for mundane goals must be considered as non-religious in the contexts I am investigating (Vol. I, p. 14).

Similar considerations can be found in current discussions about religion in early Tibetan societies,²⁴ and in fact it seems that "religion" is not an appropriate concept for describing phenomena like the Srid pa'i lha cult, simply because in this context the religious cannot be defined as a category separate from everyday social life. With regard to traditional Tibet, however, one also observes certain limits in the usability of such methodological division between organised religion (book religion) and the popular-religious traditions (in whatever form the latter are specifically described), since, and this is not new, the older world of the everyday (mundane) rituals has been largely incorporated in the programmes of the great religions—a topic which needs not to be further pursued here.²⁵

To conclude, there are hardly any comparable publications from the recent past in the field of Tibetan and Himalayan studies; in fact, it seems it has rather gone out of fashion to produce such extensive, fundamental research-oriented work in this research field.²⁶ The basis for this has been laid by the more than 30 field research visits (between 2002 and 2014; Vol. I, p. 7), the realisation of which (with the coping of the enormous logistical and bureaucratic expenses etc.), have to be regarded as an exceptional achievement.

Noteworthy are also the form and outward appearances of the book: it is stylistically brilliant (as is known from previous publications

²⁴ I refer here to the conference recently held in Vienna (Nov. 2018) entitled "The Social and the Religious in the Making of Tibetan Societies. New Perspectives on Imperial Tibet". The publication of the conference proceedings (ed. G. Hazod, C. Jahoda and M. Fermer) is planned for 2020, or early 2021.

²⁵ Some new reflections in this respect are to be found in the introduction to the aforementioned conference proceedings (fn. 24).

²⁶ An exception from the closer research environment is M. Oppitz's extensive shaman drum study—often cited in the present work in connection with the numerous overlaps in the field of the eastern Himalayan ethnography. Oppitz, Michael. 2013. *Morphologie der Schamanentrommel*, 2 vols. Zürich: Edition Voldemeer Zürich.

by the author) and as far as I can tell the text has hardly any typos or other formal errors. And not least the book was made as a high-quality production, made in offset print on best paper, bound in hardback, it gives one a pleasure to leaf through it. These external qualities are only appropriate for a work that will undoubtedly endure as standard in the field of Tibetan studies and Himalayan ethnography.

