

A Rejoinder to Mills

"CULTURE CHANGE IN THE NAME OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION"

GEOFF CHILDS

Martin Mills raises some important issues in response to my exploratory essay "Culture Change in the Name of Cultural Preservation" (Childs 2004a). I will take this opportunity to respond and clarify my own stances on certain points.

My first hypothesis of the essay was, "The recent proliferation of exile monasteries, supported in part by foreign patrons, has increased the demand for monks. The rapid fertility decline among Tibetan exiles has stimulated the intensification of recruitment efforts in Nepal's Buddhist highlands, resulting in an unprecedented level of out-migration of young males." As pointed out by Wim van Spengen (2004) I stand guilty of epistemological laxity by virtue of the fact that this is more of an inductively derived supposition than a hypothesis formulated with the intent of being tested through the rigorous collection of data. Be that as it may, in the essay I argued that such recruitment efforts are resulting in the formation of new relationships between Tibetan monastic institutions and villages in the highlands of Nepal. In response Mills observes that "clerical infusions" are far from unprecedented in the Himalayan region. He argues, "What we are witnessing now is therefore less a radical break with a settled religious past than one more wave in the continuous ebb and flow of Tibetan monasticism's shifting power bases."

Although I agree with Mill's premise, I would argue that the current and unprecedented demographic context entails that today's "wave" has the potential to make previous ones appear like mere ripples. The above hypothesis derives from an understanding of the demographic transition that is now occurring in South Asia, in particular with respect to the populations of indigenous and exile Tibetans. A demographic transition represents a societal-level change from initial conditions of high fertility and mortality to completed conditions of low fertility and mortality. In pre-transitional societies the high levels of fertility and mortality more or less cancel each other so that population growth is minimal. In a transitional society mortality typically begins to decline more rapidly than fertility so that a widening gap develops between death rates and birth rates. This intermediate phase of demographic transition is therefore characterized by rapid population growth. Fertility eventually begins to decline more quickly thereby diminishing the gap between birth and death rates

and decreasing the rate of population growth. Once both rates stabilize at low levels the demographic transition is complete. Like pre-transitional societies, post-transitional ones are typified by little or no natural increase or in some cases population decline.

Nepal is currently in the middle phase of a demographic transition (Retherford and Thapa 1998). Since the 1970s Nepal has experienced rapid population growth, perhaps more rapid than at any time in history (we lack the empirical evidence to confirm or reject this assumption, but it is a logical conclusion based on our understanding of demographic transitions). Similar to demographic processes in other countries, Nepal's transition is not uniform but varies according to place of residence, educational levels, and a host of other variables. For example, by 2001 there were significant fertility differentials between urban and rural dwellers (2.1 versus 4.4 births per woman), between "Hill" and "Mountain" ecological zones (4.0 versus 4.8 births per woman), and between highly educated and uneducated women (2.1 versus 4.8 births per woman) (Ministry of Health et. al. 2002). In every demographic transition there are sub-populations who are forerunners with respect to fertility declines. History has shown us that these include urban dwellers, wealthier classes, and even certain ethnic groups. In the case of Nepal's demographic transition forerunners include the urban dwelling and relatively affluent Tibetan exiles, whereas those who lag behind include inhabitants of the ethnically Tibetan borderlands of Nepal. Why does the demographic transition make today's context of culture change more than just another instance of the "ebb and flow of Tibetan monasticism's shifting power bases"?

I speculate that the answer is rooted in a convergence of demographic and socio-economic factors. Rapid population growth engendered by the middle phase of a demographic transition enlarged the number of potential recruits from the highlands of Nepal at precisely the same time that increases in foreign patronage led to an expansion of monasticism in exile, and at precisely the same time that the urban dwelling Tibetans (the initial recruiting grounds) were having fewer children. As Mills points out, borderland peoples of previous eras have sent community members to large monastic institu-

tions in Tibet, so in this respect the out-migration of males to distant monastic centers is not a new phenomenon. However, these days the opportunities for young males to join monasteries are less constrained by residence and concomitant socio-economic mandates than they were in the past. Bear in mind that in pre-1950s Tibet many monks were obligatorily supplied by families who were subjects of monasteries. Although institutions in Tibet such as Dakar Taso (Bragdkar rta so) drew disciples from Nubri and other Himalayan communities, the number of recruits was few and the costs incurred by parents significant (Childs 2004b). Today, the fact that monks are subsidized by patrons in the West (as well as Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and elsewhere) makes it easier for them to join and the fact that Nepal's highland communities are in the middle phase of a demographic transition means that there are more of them who can enlist. Therefore, what is unique about contemporary times is the scale at which this process is occurring. The out-migration of Nubri's young males to religious institutions is significant both in terms of sheer numbers and in terms of percentages among the younger cohorts. Nearly one third of young males in some villages now reside in distant monasteries. Although other Himalayan communities have experienced a substantial out flux of males, for example Sherpa laborers to Darjeeling (Ortner 1989), the phenomenon is new to Nubri.

The fact that we are now in uncharted demographic waters does not address the core of Mills' critique. I argued that the large-scale removal of young males from rural villages and the infusion of a monastic orientation into places like Nubri will result in a transformation of religious practices and social structures. Mills responds by contending that members of the monastic sector are not necessarily at odds with the worship of local deities. Rather, they are more concerned with the "purification of the *morality* of local ritual practices" (emphasis in the original). I agree, and in fact made a similar point in an earlier paper (Childs 1997) by comparing three examples whereby lamas from Tibet initiated animal sacrifice prohibitions in various Himalayan communities. In each case the initiator was affiliated with a monastic institution in Tibet and had come to the hinterlands in part to escape political instability in their homeland. These examples of externally instigated culture change took place in the 1690s, the 1730s, and the 1960s, so we can be absolutely certain that the concern of today's monastic leaders for cleaning up practices such as blood sacrifice (*mar mchod*) is not a new phenomenon.

Furthermore, Mills is right on the mark when arguing that the baseline for an analysis of culture change in the Himalayan region needs to be expanded beyond the recent past, the time after which religious connections were severed between Tibet and the ethnically Tibetan communities of Nepal. By focusing exclusively on post-1960s Himalayan societies we risk making the untenable presumption that a place like Nubri during the 1990s (the time when I did my fieldwork there) can somehow be equated with "traditional culture". I have

emphasized elsewhere (Childs 2004b) that a locale as seemingly remote as Nubri has never existed in a political, economic, or cultural vacuum, but has always been influenced by regional events. Nubri communities do not, nor have they ever, existed as static cultural isolates. Nevertheless, there are some important points of continuity to consider, ones that may be transformed by the incursion of monasticism. Religious life in the Nyingmapa communities of Nubri has been dominated for centuries by householder lamas (*sngags pa*), but as mentioned in the essay a celibate monastery—one that was funded in part by Western donations—has recently been built in Nubri. Whether or not the recently constructed monastery in Nubri remains unique or is replicated remains uncertain. If the model proves successful, scores of monks from Nubri are currently studying in exile monasteries. They could be easily be sent back to staff any new institution in their homeland. Therefore, the demographic potential clearly exists for this particular wave in the ebb and flow of monasticism in the hinterlands to grow exponentially. The question remains, will such a process affect the long-standing relationships between *ngagpas* and surrounding communities?

In my opinion Mills is correct that conflicts between the monastic and local traditions are not inevitable: the waxing of the former does not inexorably result in the waning of the latter. Moreover, Mills points out that monks have limited authority when it comes to altering local religious practices, and that "the ritual relations that villagers have with local numina and ritual practitioners are more often adopted or rejected through a calculation of ritual power and obligation, rather than a voluntaristic view of what is or is not 'properly Buddhist.'" According to this point of view the insertion of monasticism in Nubri does not predestine the demise of certain rituals or the occupations of their practitioners. However, interactions between villagers and religious practitioners are bound to change due to shifting socio-economic relationships. I hereby speculate that the insertion of monastic centers into the social fabric of Nubri communities will erode the influence that *ngagpas* have held for centuries over the local laity. For one, it may reduce their economic clout: a monastery's gain in disciples can result in a *ngagpa's* loss of the *corvée* (*'u lag*) that he gains through the initiation of his own disciples. Furthermore, an in-situ monastery can diminish the ritual authority of *ngagpas* if there are overlaps in respective ritual functions (e.g., funeral rites). This may become especially evident when economic factors enter the mix. According to locals the recently constructed monastery in Nubri has already acquired considerable land holdings. The villagers who now work the monastery's fields are essentially share-croppers. In addition to providing *corvée* for the right to farm the land they split their yields with the institution and thereby are in some ways analogous to monastic "tax payers" (*khral pa*) of pre-1950s Tibet. The inauguration of monasticism in Nubri may therefore represent the reemergence of a template for a social hierarchy and institutional funding that no longer exists in Tibet. More to the point, the monastery's control over

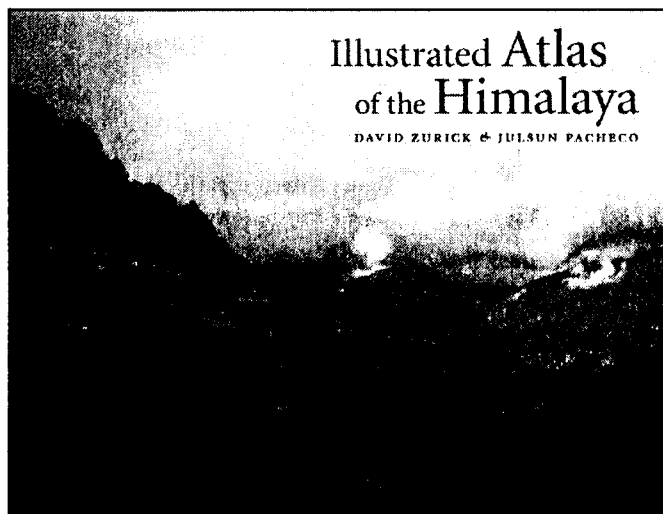
a farmer's productive assets undeniably gives that institution a degree of economic influence far greater than that garnered by a ngagpa through his right to a few days of corvée each year. Such control will no doubt enter into the "calculation of ritual power and obligation" that Mill's alludes to, and can tip a decision in favor of patronizing monastery's services over those of over other local practitioners.

The issues raised in my essay and in Mill's response can only be resolved over the course of time and with concerted research efforts. For that reason I wrote the essay in an exploratory frame of mind with the intent of stimulating debate. I would therefore like to thank Martin Mills for responding to my article with his thoughtful, well-reasoned comments. Hopefully this brief dialogue will stimulate further debates and encourage others to think more creatively about the impacts that transnational relationships and demographic processes have at the local level.

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