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IN RESPONSE: GEOFF CHILDS

"CULTURE CHANGE IN THE NAME OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION" HIMALAYA 24, (1-2)

MARTIN A. MILLS

In HIMALAYA 24.1-2, Childs (2006) argues that general demographic shifts within the Nepal Himalaya, and the restrictive emphases of international sponsorship of 'Tibetan culture' are bringing about a marked cultural transformation in favor of monastic Buddhism, and in detriment to the general diversity of traditional village ritual and religious practice. While there is much to recommend this argument, it does however depend on an arbitrary construction of the 'traditional' that excludes much of the pre-1960 religious history of religious networks in ethnically Tibetan areas, and conflates monastic Buddhism's undoubted endeavors to purify specific local practices with an overall reform movement to rationalize religious life in Himalayan regions.

INTRODUCTION

Geoff Childs' exploratory essay on the question of culture change within ethnically Tibetan communities (Childs 2006) was both apt and timely. The growing impact of the burgeoning exile Tibetan monastic network on the religious life of Himalayan Buddhist communities is clear for all to see. What this means in concrete and cultural terms for outlying village communities, moreover, is a question that is both rarely raised and to which the answer is far from clear. In this regard, Childs asserts two important hypotheses: firstly, that "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 villages, resulting in an unprecedented level of out-migration of young males"; and secondly, that "the goal of preserving Tibetan culture is a rationale for Westerners to support Tibetan exile monasteries. An unintended consequence of foreign patronage for these monasteries is the loss of cultural diversity in the ethnically Tibetan, Buddhist highlands of Nepal" (Childs 2006: 32).

As someone used to working in the Indian Himalayan territory of Ladakh, I cannot speak with any real authority to the situation in Nepal, but it would seem to me that Childs' first hypothesis on demographic shifts is crucial, constituting a core cog in the general process of cohort-specific urbaniza-

tion that is happening across the entire Himalayan region; however, the argument that this is a significant historical precedent depends to a large extent on a baseline of historical comparison which implicitly excludes the pre-1950 state history of the region. Childs' second hypothesis – the assertion of a process of cultural rationalisation feeding back into outlying village areas through the founding of externally-funded rural monasteries – has both strengths and weaknesses, depending as it does on a number of assumptions regarding the structure of ritual and religious life in outlying ethnically Tibetan communities that require further examination.

Hypothesis One: Demographic Shifts

Few academics working in outlying Himalayan areas will have missed the key demographic shifts that have attended the last thirty years. Young men in particular have been drawn to burgeoning urban centers as part of the lucrative summer work in economic sectors such as the building and tourist trades. In Ladakh, young men from rural villages regularly travel to Leh to take work as porters and tour guides in the summer months, leaving agricultural village households at the precise moment of their greatest agricultural labour demand, a demand that can be answered by employing itinerant labor resources (largely from Nepal), paid for with the very cash resources accumulated through urban work. This also creates a drain on the predominantly young male cohorts that would have otherwise been sent to local Buddhist monasteries: not only because a village monastic career looks less economically appealing than it did previously, but also because many existing monks are drawn to urban centers to answer the financially rewarding religious needs of the flourishing urban middle classes there (and, for those with foreign language skills, to gain the sponsorship of visiting tourists). These financial resources are in turn often used to pay for monks' own sojourns (temporary or permanent) to the monastic and pilgrimage centers of Tibetan Buddhism to the South.

Clearly, the question of urbanization and the growing dominance of the cash economy present important questions for the viability of religiously-complex outlying communities. My own experience is that this affects both local and

'monastic' religious practices equally, something implied in the first part of Childs' own analysis. However, it is not clear to what extent this constitutes a definitive break with the traditional past. Outlying monasteries in both Nepal and the Indian Himalaya have a long history of sending their most talented young monks for elite monastic education at wealthy and in certain cases state-sponsored monastic centers, as a necessary bulwark to local monastic authority. In the pre-1950 context, the Buddhist religious centers in U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo acted as a necessary focus for pilgrimage and monastic training for many on the Himalayan periphery: the keener monks of Ladakh and Zangskar's many Gelugpa monasteries, for example, often made the long and arduous journey to Tashilhunpo and Drepung (see, for example, Tharchin & Namgial n.d.: 5). While it could certainly be argued that the proliferation of transport systems and the integration of outlying areas into the cash economy over the last thirty years facilitates such journeys in a way not possible before, the corvée transport obligations prevalent throughout the southern Tibetan areas in the pre-1950 context also supported such travel, as did the tax-based state support of many such central monastic institutions.

Moreover, the kind of expansion of foreign-sponsored monastic institutions into outlying rural areas (such as the new monastery at Nubri discussed by Childs) also replicates many similar movements throughout Himalayan history. Ladakh and Zangskar, for example, underwent precisely the same kind of 'clerical infusion' during the eighteenth century (Petech 1977: 112), as did the Sherpa regions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Ortner 1989). 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. Whilst the 1960s and 1970s did represent an important interruption of that flow – with the closing of borders and the wholesale eradication of monastic centers – this historically-specific localization of religious systems cannot automatically be equated with the 'traditional' in the Himalayan context, no matter how well it fits into anthropological visions of that category.

The issues of demographic shift and cultural diversity raised by Childs thus depend on which historical and cultural baseline one chooses to work from. While we can certainly speak of a comparative cohort-specific 'brain drain' from rural communities in the Himalayan Buddhist communities south of the TAR border since the 1960s, the comparison with the pre-1950 context throughout the Tibetan ethnographic area would seem far less clear.

Hypothesis Two: Cultural Rationalization

Whilst much more can (and should) be said regarding the issue of demographic shifts, Childs' second hypothesis – regarding the question of a cultural rationalization regarding religious diversity in Himalayan village communities – opens up some much more complex and subtle questions. Of

course, Childs' suggestion of a possible collapse of cultural diversity is an *exploratory hypothesis* rather than an empirical assertion (Childs 2006: 41), and should be read in that light. The evidence concerning this issue is however deeply ambiguous, requiring that the observer unpick (inasmuch as this is possible) the different impacts of the departure of young males for urban areas, from the impact of newly founded, exile-funded monasteries. More importantly, however, it means looking more closely at some of the assumptions underlying Childs' hypothesis. Some of these are fairly explicit (others less so):

- *Assumption One:* That international sponsorship campaigns regarding the preservation of 'Tibetan culture' are programmatically focused on 'Tibetan Buddhist monastic culture', as though the two were effectively the same thing (Childs 2006: 36).

- *Assumption Two:* That ethnically Tibetan monks from outlying villages are trained in exile monasteries in traditions that emphasize centralized textual Buddhist traditions, leading to them regarding village traditions as 'corrupt and degenerate' (Childs 2006: 39).

- *Assumption Three:* That many of these highly-trained monks, upon returning to rural communities as part of an externally-sponsored infusion of monastic institutions, tend to take positions of authority and influence, allowing them to instigate changes at the cultural level that will work to eradicate such degenerate practices (Childs 2006: 39).

Childs presents clear evidence in support of the first assumption: the vast transnational networks of economic sponsorship set up by exile organizations clearly equate the survival of 'traditional Tibetan culture' with a core set of generally monastic Buddhist traditions. By contrast, I've certainly yet to ever see a website asking for sponsorship to finance the rebuilding of a local area god shrine in some rural Himalayan village (although one does note the occasional emphasis on the protection of 'sacred groves' in Nepal as part of environmental diversity projects).

Similarly, the centralized training of monks in exilic monasteries does indeed often involve a certain valorization of central monastic traditions over local village customs. Most characteristically, this involves complex discourses on the moral significance of local area god worship, a staunch condemnation of blood sacrifice, and (in certain cases, particularly within the Gelugpa) a self-exclusion from village religious practices such as *tsechu* when beer-drinking as ritual libation is involved. As has been documented in several places, moreover, such views often translate into episodic ritual purifications of local village practice by high lamas, particularly if those customs include blood sacrifice to local, household or clan deities (see Mumford 1989: Chs. 2 & 3; Mills 2003: Chs. 10 & 12).

For Childs, this kind of purification of village practice, and the monastic attitudes that support it, exist as a kind of *overall reform movement* to rationalize 'Buddhism' in village areas, centered on an indigenous debate over what constitute

the legitimate contours of Buddhist institutional religiosity (Childs 2006: 41): that, in effect, the practices and specialists that characterize local village traditions should be replaced with clerical monasticism as a more appropriate Buddhist institutional framework.

This is certainly a tempting interpretation, following as it does the kind of Buddhist reform model reminiscent of urban Sinhalese movements during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see, for example, Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988), which certainly did witness a collapse in localized ritual diversity. This, however, was a wholly different kind of phenomenon from the transformations of Tibetan exilic monasticism that we are seeing at the moment. Firstly, the Sinhalese movement grew out of wholly different historical conditions, wherein the European colonial authorities had effectively captured the public organization of Buddhism; where the Sinhalese urban middle class were increasingly educated within a European (and specifically Protestant) educational context; and where the printed representation of Buddhism was increasingly dominated by European scholarship.¹ Secondly, because the reform movement that emerged out of these historical conditions (famously characterized by Gombrich & Obeyesekere as 'Protestant Buddhism') was wholly different in social character, emerging primarily amongst educated middle-class laity, and carrying within itself a strong anti-clerical and anti-ritual stance.

This kind of movement certainly does exist in the Himalayan context. In Ladakh, for example, reformist movements replicating many of the features of the Sinhalese reform movements increasingly emphasize the kind of meditation-focused, anti-clerical and anti-ritualist thrust of their genealogical forebears (e.g. Bertelsen 1995). Such movements will no doubt have their day; they are, however, very different from the kind of exilic monastic transformation that Childs focuses on; and find little ground for growth there.

By contrast, the tendencies towards local ritual change that emerge out of the monastic sector are characterized by a monastic concern with the purification of the morality of local ritual practices – with the eradication of blood sacrifice (*T. mar mchod*), limitations on sexual activity, beer-drinking and (more recently) smoking during religious festivals – rather than their institutional presence *per se*. Few monks that I have met would deny the existence of local deities, nor reject the necessity of providing offerings for them, but regularly criticize an excessive personal dependence on them, especially to the degree where it compromises a wider karmic morality (such as in the performance of animal sacrifice).

While these are clearly 'reform' movements in some sense, certain elements of them require clarification; I would argue that they should *not* seem to constitute a generalized assertion of the value of monasticism to the exclusion of other ritual traditions. Whilst many Western Buddhists may equate 'real' Buddhism with celibate monasticism, and while most Tibetan communities would agree on the value of founding and supporting monasteries within local areas, and while many monks do in-

deed have a low view of many village practices, this is *not* the same thing as the argument that the valorization of monasticism comes at the direct expense of the functional practice of village customs. The existence and availability of high status religious occupations does not belie the functional requirement for low status ones. Despite their undoubted endeavors to reform local practices, such events rarely seem to involve any direct endeavor to replace categories of local ritual specialist – whether local oracles, medicinal practitioners or astrologers – or that the introduction of monks trained in exile monasteries involves an *indirect* reduction or eradication of those groups. Indeed, in areas such as the Ladakh Valley, the 1970s to 1990s saw a burgeoning of oracular practitioners (*L. lhapa*, see Day 1989).

Secondly, 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'. While many senior monastics may, for example, regularly decry lay dependence on local deity worship, most laity regard their relations with such deities as ones upon which their health, wealth and welfare depend, and will only accede to changes that have been put into place by figures of real ritual power (*T. nus pa*). In this respect, while monastic assemblies are often charged with the performance of local rites, their authority to *instigate* or *reform* local practice is highly limited (Mills 2003). Such reform episodes depend more fully on the movement of high yogins and incarnates, whose ritual power was seen as far greater than that of ordinary monks. As I have argued in greater detail elsewhere, the Western view of clerical monasticism as the pinnacle of religious authority does not wholly equate with the actual ritual functioning of Tibetan monasticism (Mills 2003).

Finally, the founding of new rural monasteries that are *externally-funded* effectively allows such monastic communities to stand aloof of their local sponsors. Unlike many existing local monasteries – that depend upon income from performing rites within local villages to survive in the long term – this new brand of monastery replicate more clearly the government-funded monasteries of old Tibet, which rarely engaged in local 'pastoral care'. The demographic shift of young men from local monasteries to exile-funded ones may therefore lead to a collapse in the monastic performance of such rites. In the absence of these services, villagers might indeed need to look to local non-monastic specialists for their performance. In other words, the consequences of such a 'monastic infusion' with externally-funded institutions might equally lead to a *proliferation*, and not a reduction, of cultural diversity.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Childs is wholly correct to draw attention both to the demographic shifts brought about by the growth of the exilic monastic network, and its indirect impact on ethnically-Tibetan communities within the Himalayas. Certainly, the

departure of young males from rural village areas – whether to exile monasteries or as part of a general economic migration – will undoubtedly have dramatic consequences, especially as local monasteries empty. However, the precise consequences are far from clear, and bound to be highly localized. What Childs is suggesting is a cultural dynamic focused on both (i) a demographic shift and (ii) a general transformation in what is seen as ‘valuable tradition’. With reference to the monastic question, this latter emphasis on value is, in my view, misplaced: instead, I would argue that the principal issue is one of *localized ritual needs and services*.

Moreover, questions need to be asked about where as external observers we take our cultural and historical baseline for the concept of the ‘traditional’. Childs largely locates this in the *local village community as cultural isolate*: this, however emerged as a dominant sociological reality throughout the Himalayas during the 1960s, as a consequence of the closure of borders (in many respects the Rana state period also had this effect in a slightly different and more localized way - see Holmberg 1987). The ‘traditional’ thus becomes as much a product of external state and transnational flows as internal custom. Therefore, we might just as easily take our baseline for ‘traditional village Buddhism’ as being the height of state monasticism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, it would not be surprising if the various exile monastic authorities in South Asia do indeed look upon this as being the moment they wish to preserve.

ENDNOTES:

1. It is not Childs’ argument that the reform processes that he is suggesting arise primarily out of the ideological predations of Western reformists, although he does suggest that they may be *indirectly* influenced by external sponsors’ agendas over what is and is not ‘real Buddhism’ (Childs 2006: 40; see also Lopez 1998). Indeed, as Tsering Shakya has noted, the exile Tibetan religious establishment in South Asia has generally retained a staunch independence to anything other than the general *financial* constraints of Western and East Asian economic sponsorship (Shakya 2001).

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