

1999

Book review of 'The Bon Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition' by Per Kværne

Donatella Rossi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Rossi, Donatella. 1999. Book review of 'The Bon Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition' by Per Kværne. *HIMALAYA* 19(1).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol19/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

WATCH FOR THE RETURN OF *Recent Publications*, our list of books and journal articles in Himalayan Studies, to resume in the following issue of Himalayan Research Bulletin.

HRB is pleased to welcome long-time NSA member Gregory Maskarinec as Contributing Editor. He will be compiling an annual list of recent publications treating the Himalayan region. Readers are invited to submit bibliographic entries, and those whose expertise and familiarity extend to published work in natural science and development are particularly implored to contribute citations.

Please provide the Recent Publications Editor with submissions at either of these addresses:

Gregory Maskarinec
2412 Ohau Ave.
Honolulu, HI 96822 - 1967

gregorym@hawaii.edu

BOOK REVIEWS

The Bon Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition.

Per Kværne. London: Serindia Publications, 1995. 156 pp. 74 color plates.

The Bon religion has been the object of Western scholarly studies for about one century now. However, this scholarly research started to become more promising only a few years ago when textual material on the Bon religion finally became available in the West through the reprint of the Bonpo Canon and its ancillary texts, with the most recent reprint amounting to more than 500 volumes. Per Kværne's *The Bon Religion of Tibet* marks a welcome addition to this body of research.

At the beginning much bias surrounded the religious phenomenon of Bon. Part of this bias was determined by the interest of scholars in 'mainstream' Tibetan Buddhism and consequently by the acceptance of the doctrinal polemical stands of Tibetan religious orthodoxy. It was not until the late 1960's that a more coherent picture of what Bon was really about started to appear. This was thanks to the efforts of Prof. David L. Snellgrove, who worked in close contact with one of the most knowledgeable representatives of the Bon religion, Lopon Tenzin Namdak, and published *The Nine Ways of Bon*. Excerpts from the gZi brjid edited and translated (London Oriental Series, Vol. 18, London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

The Bonpos, followers of the Bon religion, maintain that their religion has universal traits and define it as the Eternal or Everlasting Bon (g.yung drung bon). The founder of this Everlasting Bon is the Teacher gShen-rab Mi-bo-che, who appeared before the historical Buddha, lived and spread his teachings from a land to the West of Tibet called sTag gzig. What we can observe of the Bon religion today is a tradition that came to be organized as of the 10th or 11th century following the demise of the Tibetan empire. This religious tradition does not acknowledge an Indian origin of its doctrines and practices. It is still followed today in Tibet and in Tibetan inhabited areas of India and Nepal. Although Bon may appear quite similar to Buddhism in some respects, there are in fact definite differences, particularly in terms of "religious authority, legitimation and history" as Per Kværne clearly shows in his delightful work.

The iconography of the Bon religion has hitherto been a virtually unexplored subject. Professor Per Kværne of the University of Oslo is a specialist of the Bon religion. This recent work of his is the first attempt to describe Bonpo iconography in a systematic way. He presents a selection of paintings and statues, mostly from Tibet, of major deities and spiritual figures. He not only describes them in terms of form and content but also through translated excerpts, including mythological ones, which provide the reader with vivid descriptions and representations. The Introduction is a state-of-the-art discussion of all the major issues related to the Bon religion. The subsequent chapters deal with Peaceful Deities, Tutelary Deities, Protectors and Local Deities, Siddhas, Lamas and Dakinis and Narrative Thangkas (chapters One

through Five). The final chapter discusses the Bonpo version of the 'Wheel of Existence' - the circle of transmigration of sentient beings - which shows, as Per Kværne rightly observes, how Bon "assimilates elements which are present in Tibetan culture as a whole, while retaining a considerable degree of freedom in utilising these elements according to its own religious concepts" (p. 143).

Per Kværne's work is an elegant, scholarly study of the Bon religion from an iconographic perspective. It is extremely accessible to non-specialized readers, and for this reason alone, it represents a very important contribution to our understanding of the Bon religion, an undeniable and profound component of the Tibetan cultural heritage.

Donatella Rossi

Natural Premises: Ecology and Peasant Life in the Western Himalaya, 1800-1950

Chetan Singh. Delhi: University of Oxford Press, 1998.

Natural Premises is a careful historical analysis of the interaction between environment and society in the western Himalaya now encompassed by the state of Himachal Pradesh, from roughly 1800 to the time of India's independence. This first environmental history of the region is based on the assumption that natural premises, i.e. the opportunities and constraints imposed by environmental parameters such as topography, climate, and natural resource endowments, significantly influence patterns of resource use and social, economic, and political organization. Through close attention to subregional differences in environmental management and natural resource use, trade, and social and political relations, Singh dispels the myth of a timeless homogenous mountain region and replaces it with the notion of distinct but interacting and changing subregions which together constitute the social, economic, and political region of the western Himalaya. Singh substantiates his theory of regionality based on subregional differences through meticulous examination of the internal dynamics of production systems within subregions and the varieties of trade and other exchange relations they engendered between subregions, southward to the plains of North India, and northward to Central Asia.

The book begins with an introductory chapter which lays out the broad aims and approaches of the study and includes a methodological note on the use of colonial documents, primarily settlement and administrative reports, and gazetteers, which constitute the bulk of Singh's sources. The next chapter addresses the emergence of regional polities. Singh traces the emergence of the relatively small hill states of this region to the ability to control territory and establish mechanisms of revenue collection, and to a lesser extent, trade relations with neighboring hill states. The remaining six chapters each focus on a different aspect of the natural environment and associated land use practices. These include settlement and agriculture, wastelands, pastoralism, forests and forest use, the growth of the market economy, and the last chapter entitled, "the social response." In each chapter Singh is careful to draw out the differences between subregions and to identify the varieties of relations and interrelations which bind them together. So, for example, in his chapter on agriculture he relates the relative importance of agriculture and pastoralism to elevation, such that agriculture is the dominant production system in the lower hills, a mixture of agriculture and pastoralism is common in the mid-hills, and pastoralism is dominant in the higher elevation trans-Himalaya regions. The regional differentiation of production strategies provides the basis for intra- (e.g. grain and meat) and inter- (e.g. wool and wool products, salt) regional trade networks which reduce total reliance on local resource endowments and enabled the development of regional towns as seats of political authority. Singh persuasively argues that the varieties of exchange relations between transhumant pastoralists and sedentary agriculturalists were also a form of non-monetized trade which linked together different subregions.

Throughout the book Singh pays close attention to the distribution of rights in property—to cultivated land, forests, grazing pastures, or "wastelands"—between villages and government, and to so e extent, between subgroups of villagers. Thus he examines and explains differences in property regimes between regions, e.g. why local forest rights differ in Kullu and Kangra, and changing property regimes over time, e.g. changes in pre-colonial and colonial taxation policies towards transhumant Gaddi shepherds. The focus on property rights allows Singh, whose discipline is history, to critically analyze British interpretations of pre-colonial notions of property in cultivated land as an attempt to bolster British property and revenue assessing claims. He also carefully distinguishes between *de jure* concepts of property and *de facto* control of resources and resource products. Furthermore, within the context of rights to wastelands and forests, he shows how the British used the concept of the village community to create a social group (landholders) in