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2015 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, GA, 19-24 November 2015

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ways in which constructive, effective progress is being made. Being new to the field of South Asian Studies, it was inspiring to witness how Nepal and Himalayan Studies is able to both provide a regionally-focused platform to share ideas and research yet also transcend disciplinary differences in order to engage in productive dialogue concerning scholarship in an array of areas. I look forward to next fall in Madison at the 45th Annual Conference on South Asia.

Michelle U. Grocke
University of Montana

2015 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion

Atlanta, GA

19-24 November 2015

The 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) was held in Atlanta on November 19-24. The largest conference on the academic study of religion, the conference was attended by over ten thousand members and exhibitors from sixty-nine different countries, with 1341 sessions held during the five-day meeting.¹ Though not specifically geared towards the religions and cultures of the Himalayan region, the conference began with the opening ceremonies for the construction of a sand mandala by a group of Tibetan Buddhist monks from Drepung Loseling Monastery in Atlanta. The construction of the mandala continued over the first several days of the conference.²

Several groups and sections focusing on Hinduism, Buddhism, and the religions of South Asia hosted panels that engaged the Himalayan region. For example, "Proclaiming Power: The Ritual Uses of Flags in South

Asia," co-sponsored by the Religion in South Asia section and Hinduism Group, examined the royal flag (*dhvaja*) as a manifestation of royal *dharma* and public religion in late-Vedic texts, art historical materials, and contemporary Jain performances in India and Nepal. Another panel, 'Weaving Traditions, Casting Spells: Tantra, Magic, and Folk Religion,' co-sponsored by the Tantric Studies Group, explored the use of magic – in both the literate, Sanskrit and vernacular folk traditions – as "an important aspect of living Tantric traditions, appearing in meditation, art, literature and ritual." The papers in this panel examined the many sides of Tantra: dangerous *ojha*, *bir*, *pishacha*, and snakes as well as the beneficial *siddhas*, *yantras*, and *mantras* that offer powerful protection.

The Tibetan and Himalayan Religions Group, a group that encourages scholarship on this geographical area through multidisciplinary, transregional, and cultural historical approaches, sponsored four dynamic panels. The first panel, 'Female Lives and Narratives in Tibet: New Materials and New Perspectives,' contained four papers that each offered new perspectives to the lives of women in Tibet through the presentation of new materials or fresh analyses. According to the panel organizers, the papers in this panel sought to "articulate diverse modes of female engagement, bring fresh insights into how we might recover female voices and perspectives across Himalayan Buddhist communities, and explore issues related to gender and genre in Tibetan literature." The historical range of this panel was rather wide: whereas two papers focused on Yeshe Tsogyel, the eighth century "matron saint" of Tibet, the other three papers dealt with individual texts, collections of sources, and individual

female religious figures through the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries.

The other three Tibetan and Himalayan Religions panels were co-sponsored by one or more additional group or section, thus contributing to the interdisciplinarity found in the mission of the group. 'Ritual (and) Practice in Hindu and Buddhist Tantrism,' co-sponsored by the Tantric Studies Group, explored three issues related to tantric performances in South Asian religion: "the place of imagination in Buddhist tantric ritual, the role ritual plays in managing death in Saiva traditions, and the place of the institution of celibacy and renunciation in tantric and non-tantric Hindu traditions."

Co-sponsored by the Buddhism Section, "Tibetan Teachers, Tibetan Performers: Can Performance Theories Help Us Understand Buddhist Pedagogical Practices?" asked a number of related questions regarding the performance-related language – such as "verbal acts" and "performative utterances" – that theorists might apply to Tantric verbal practices and the pedagogical ramifications of this approach.

The final panel, '(Re)presentations of Science and Yogic Religion in Pop Culture,' was co-sponsored by three other groups: Religion and Popular Culture, Religion and Science Fiction, and Yoga in Theory and Practice. This panel analyzed a number of case studies on *yogi* figures from Western popular culture, including the Batman and Spider-Man comic books, David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* series of the 1990s, and the Star Trek and Doctor Who science-fiction series. The five papers in this panel viewed these powerful *yogi* figures as "carriers of esoteric allusions and meanings as well as sites of slippage between fantasy and science fiction ... drawing on the Oriental mystique of India and Tibet."

The 2015 Annual Meeting of the AAR offered an interesting and insightful variety of panels and other events for the many students and scholars of Religious Studies in attendance. The conference's four specifically Himalayan panels – as well as its many other more generally South Asian panels situated on the periphery of this region – successfully drew attention to content that was multidisciplinary (textual, art historical, and media studies), transregional (Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions in India, royal rituals in Nepal, Western popular culture), and diverse in its cultural and historical approaches (female saints and teachers throughout multiple eras of Tibetan history). These well-attended panels speak to the importance of attending to the rich religious cultures of the Himalayan region.

1. <<https://www.aarweb.org/annual-meeting/2015-annual-meeting-survey-results>>

2. This quotation, and all other quotations, are taken directly from the panel or paper abstracts. All of these abstracts can be found on the conference app, which can be downloaded at AARSBLAM15.

Michael Baltutis
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Unfolding Central Himalaya: The Cradle of Culture

Dehra Dun, Uttarakhand, India

11-14 December 2015

The conference *Unfolding Central Himalaya: The Cradle of Culture* took place at the beautiful Songtsen Library near Dehra Dun, December 11-14, 2015. It was organized and hosted by the Doon Library

and Research Center (<www.doonlibrary.org>) in collaboration with Far Western University, Mahendranagar, Nepal. A second part to this conference was to be held in Mahendranagar, but was postponed due to the ongoing disputes along the Nepal-India border.

The conference was successful both in attracting a broad range of scholars from eight countries as well as in providing a venue for fruitful cross-disciplinary discussion. Over the four days of the conference, twenty papers were presented by scholars from India, Nepal, Germany, Israel, USA, UK, Poland, and Norway, with diverse academic backgrounds such as linguistics, sociology, ethno-history, archaeology, history, political science, and film studies. Contact information for presenters and full abstracts of their papers may be obtained from the Doon Library and Research Center <doonlib@yahoo.co.in>. The papers will also appear in published format later this year.

The conference began with B. K. Joshi (Hon. Director, Doon Library and Research Centre) extending a warm welcome to the participants and a special welcome to researchers from Nepal, who enthusiastically participated in the conference even amidst tensions between the two countries. He established the tone of the conference on the Central Himalayas by noting that December 11th was International Mountain Day and that the year 2015 marked the 200th anniversary of the Treaty of Sugauli, which laid the foundation for the modern state system in this part of the world. The conference represented a true unfolding both in terms of the material – namely, the intersections of language and culture across political/geographical boundaries – as well as in the cross-disciplinary exchanges among the

presenters. M. P. Joshi reinforced the importance of participation of researchers from Nepal in the hope that it would be the beginning of more fruitful cross-border research collaborations in the future.

This theme of cross-border collaboration was also foregrounded in the inaugural speeches delivered by Claus Peter Zoller (University of Oslo) and Chura Mani Bandhu (Tribhuvan University). Zoller drew attention to linguistics and observed that the region has been a true cradle of various crosscurrents in dialects, branches, and internal transformations parallel to the crosscurrents in cultural dynamics. Bandhu further noted that the conference was a significant step in cross-border research both in terms of geographical and disciplinary borders.

The presentations were organized into three broad themes: language, culture, and history. Studies based on linguistic analysis of languages in the Central Himalayan region formed a major part of the conference. While some scholars looked at the development of Indo-Aryan languages, others looked at the languages of the Raute and Rajis, two dwindling tribes in the Central Himalayas. Under the theme of culture, diverse topics such as religious cults of Kumaon, the intersections of religion and state power in the Shimla hills, environmental policies, legal order and customs in Uttarakhand, accommodation and resistance in Indo-Tibet borderlands, and mural art in Dehradun were covered. Different aspects of the history of the Gorkha empire and Gorkha martial identity were brought forward for discussion under the theme of history. Other areas of discussion in this theme included a critical reevaluation of the