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*Review of Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and
the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geography* by
Alex McKay

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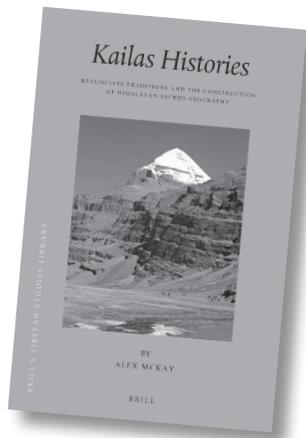
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Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geography.

Alex McKay. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015. 530 pages. ISBN 9789004304581.

Reviewed by Himani Upadhyaya

Kailas Histories is a very timely and well-researched book on an 'age-old' Himalayan sacred site which has gained immense popularity in recent times: Mount Kailas (6,660 m) and the lakes of Mansarovar and Rakas Tal in the south-western corner of the Tibetan plateau. The book is of particular appeal for researchers working on the western Himalayas and Tibet. It is a result of nearly three decades of critical engagement by the author with an impressive range of textual and non-textual sources as well as anthropological field research. As the subtitle suggests, McKay identifies Shaivite and Tibetan renunciates who ventured beyond the "known and tamed world" (p. 448) as key historical actors in the construction of Kailas-Mansarovar as a sacred

region. The broader context of McKay's nuanced and critical reading of various oral and textual narratives around Kailas is state power and contestation.

There are four sections in the book, which are laid out in line with the defining principles that Kailas-Mansarovar is not "a place of timeless sanctity" (p. 452) and that "there is no one Kailas history to be discovered" (p. 10). In the first section, titled "Indic Histories," the author examines how Kailas and Mansarovar figure in Sanskrit and Pali Indic texts. He situates Kailas in a wider early pan-Asian context of sacred mountains and renunciate traditions and moves on to analyse references in Sanskrit texts to ritual specialists who enabled territorial expansion into the Himalayas. He points out that while there are no specific references to Kailas in the Vedas, in the epics and Puranas Kailas often gets invoked only as a toponym in a metaphorical or mythical sense without earthly connotations. Moving to the medieval period, he discusses how various Tantric renunciates in their search for alchemical agents were drawn to this region as a part of a larger circuit spanning through the western Himalayas and Tibet. It is only from the eighteenth century CE onwards that clear and conclusive historical references of renunciates (particularly of the Giri order) reaching the Kailas region emerge. The modern understanding of Kailas-Mansarovar as the abode of Shiva, accessible to ordinary Hindu pilgrims, emerges in a peculiar context between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century CE. Similar to

questions posed by the Sanskrit texts, Pali references to 'Kelasa' in early Indic Buddhist texts do not support the modern Buddhist understanding that Kailas is the home of the Tantric deity Demchok/Chakrasamvara. The geographical locations of the modern day Kailas and the Kelasa of Pali texts also seem dissimilar.

In the second section, "Kailas Mountains of India," our attention is extended to the western Himalayas, southwest of Mount Kailas where at least five different mountains or smaller ranges are currently identified by the toponym Kailas. We are given a glimpse into their local and regional histories. These mountains are united in the author's conceptualization of a western Himalayan Cultural Complex defined by the resilience of the indigenous territorial deity system in dynamic interaction with the Sanskrit and Tibetan politico-cultural centres. Similar to the case of Kailas-Mansarovar, he observes that at most of these sacred sites, it is actually a Naga lake that predates the veneration of the mountain. Additionally, providing patronage to Shaivite renunciates who venerated a local mountain as the abode of Shiva was in some cases a strategy to legitimize regional political authority on the Sanskrit pan-Indian model. A closer look at the regional histories of these Kailas mountains also reveals that renunciates remained relevant even during the period of modern scientific geography as they re-imagined, re-invented and re-created earlier bodies of knowledge in line with newer contexts (p. 225). Swami

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Tapovan and Swami Pranavananda were two such modern English-educated renunciates who contributed significantly to the elevation of the status of Sri Kailas in Gangotri and Mount Kailas, respectively.

Narratives that gained prominence in the modern period, however, silenced non-Indic understandings of Tise, the toponym Tibetans use to identify the mountain now widely known as Kailas. The third section of the book is about “Tibetan Histories.” McKay points out that like the Indic sources, it is only in the 2nd millennium CE that Tibetan sources give us evidence for Tise being a great sacred site. The earliest references to the sacredness of the region are in fact related with the Mapham (Mansarovar) lake rather than Tise and suggest an association with the Naga lakes of the western Himalayan Cultural Complex. He maintains that the absence of historical records for western Tibet prior to the 7th century C.E. is noteworthy and thus situates later Bon and Buddhist narratives of Tise in the context of the politics of state and identity formation in western Tibet. While doing so, he avoids approaching his subject through an easy antagonistic binary between an indigenous Bon and dominant Buddhism. He identifies renunciates as important agents here too – as revealed by the story of how Tise was Buddhacized as a result of the victory of the Buddhist renunciate Milarepa over the Bon renunciate Naro Bonchung in a contest of magical powers. Further, the renunciate of the Drukpa sect, Gotsangpa, is credited with having

inscribed the *mandala* of his tutelary deity Demchok onto the landscape and for having ‘opened’ the site to the householder-pilgrim, extending access to beyond just the Tantric renunciate.

McKay’s study further argues convincingly that the status of Kailas-Mansarovar gets significantly elevated to a wider audience under the specificities of the colonial context in the early twentieth century CE. The last section of the book, “Modern Histories,” situates key persons and their writings (including English translations) concerning the Kailas-Mansarovar region. He delineates how the often-cited travel account *Western Tibet and the British Borderland* (1906) by the British official C.A. Sherring was actually strategically intended to stimulate pilgrimage to Kailas-Mansarovar as a possible source of increased revenue from a predominantly mountainous British territory. Colonial interests in the expansion of the empire drew upon wider contemporary discourses of timelessness imposed on Tibet which also shaped the accounts of the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin’s ventures in western Tibet. With the spread of the Theosophist movement and the publication of Bhagwan Shri Hamsa’s *The Holy Mountain* in 1934, Kailas was subsumed within universal esoteric associations. The subsequent travel account of a German Buddhist, Lama Anagorika Govinda, gave full fruition to Kailas-Mansarovar as a New Age universal spiritual center no longer restricted to Asian religions.

Kailas Histories is encyclopedic in its scope. It takes the reader on a long

and exciting Himalayan journey that traverses many texts and persons, both mythical and historical, in different time periods. During all of it, the author remains firmly anchored in critical historical analysis, which is the strength of this work. This is well-exhibited in the painstaking attention to detail given in the footnotes of the book (see, for example, n.13, p. 276). This work benefits greatly from the author’s prior expertise and knowledge on Anglo-Tibet relations and extends it further by drawing into its fold his own field visits and interviews with key persons. Though it is well-illustrated with a set of nine maps, the focus of each map is within the western Himalayas and Tibet, thereby assuming the reader’s familiarity with the subject of study. The book is a commendable contribution to the history of the Himalayas and Tibet. Its translation into other languages would greatly benefit the scholarship emerging from the regions that are a subject of McKay’s study.

Himani Upadhyaya holds an M.Phil. in modern Indian History from Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. Her research revolved around aspects of colonial power and knowledge in the Himalayan borderland of British Kumaon-Tibet in the nineteenth century CE. She is currently working at the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Nepal and has previously been a part of the Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative at ICIMOD and the Sacred Himalaya Initiative of the India China Institute, The New School University, USA.