

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ABOUT LIFE IN THE LHOPO COMMUNITY

The doctoral dissertation of Kikee Doma Bhutia, "Mythic history, belief narratives and vernacular Buddhism among the Lhopos of Sikkim", broadly speaking, deals with the multiple interactions and entanglements between diverse dimensions: among these intertwined dimensions the author explores relations and dynamics between the Lhopo community and the non-human entities with whom they share the landscape they live in, but also, in a broader framework, the dynamics occurring between vernacular Buddhism and orthodox Buddhism. Moreover, her attention is also devoted to exploring the social and historical landscape in which people are embedded, i.e., the Lhopos as an indigenous community among other communities claiming indigeneity, and as a minority vis-a-vis the State and its apparatuses, at least since the inception of the kingdom of Sikkim (1642) and then after its incorporation into India (1975). Equally relevant, if not more, is the attention paid to the epistemological question of discussing belief and indigenous knowledge in a complex setting, where multiple perspectives, cosmologies and ideologies coexist side by side, even when apparently contradicting each other. At the same time, of the utmost importance is the gaze that the researcher turns towards herself, as a liminal figure, betwixt and between, at the same time insider and outsider, intimate participant and yet somehow critically detached.

The dissertation is elegantly written, well-structured and finely balanced in addressing all of the abovementioned topics, and it includes the following: a general introduction; an examination of the topic of the Beyul ("Hidden Land") according to academic, Buddhist and vernacular interpretations; a historical overview; an appreciation of the entanglement between mythic and contemporary narratives; an enquiry into Lhopo cosmology, with details on ritual specialists as mediators between human and non-human communities; a theoretical and methodological framework; a section on four academic articles engaging with some of the aforementioned topics; and final considerations followed by a useful glossary of recurring terms. The only possible remark about the dissertation structure is the question of why the author has positioned the chapter on theoretical and methodological framework so late (chapter 6) in her work as the theoretical and methodological framework is surely something that a reader would like to find earlier in an academic publication.

The author was able to bring in and collate inputs from a range of diverse subjects, all equally useful to put forward a detailed account of the context of reference, and a deep analysis of specific beliefs and related narratives. In doing this, the author mastered with competence the relevant scientific literature from the disciplines of folklore studies, Buddhist studies, ethnography, and cultural anthropology. I was nonetheless

surprised to see that the bibliography does not include sources in Tibetan (which could have been useful to substantiate Buddhist stories on cosmology, Padmasambhava and local deities, etc.), except for Rigdzin Gödem (1337–1408). The same applies to sources in Nepali or Hindi, which the author knows and to which she has access.

On the Taming/Incorporation of Local Deities

I find extremely pertinent the reference to the figure of Padmasambhava (Guru Rimpoche) as the historical-mythical figure enabling the dissemination of Buddhism in the Himalayan regions. The more so since the narratives about the taming of local (or should we say indigenous?) deities are the critical node of conjunction between Tibetan Buddhist arch-narratives and cosmology on the one hand, and its vernacular receptions and adaptations on the ground. Padmasambhava is more a tamer than an exorcist: local deities are not simply banished or annihilated, but, in most cases, incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon. Yet, this incorporation is arranged through a process we may define as domestication: local deities and spirits are given a position and a role in the pantheon modelled on the image of a mandala. On these dynamics of incorporation, I suggested that the author take into account David S. Ruegg's *The symbiosis of Buddhism with Brahmanism/Hinduism in South Asia and of Buddhism with “local cults” in Tibet and the Himalayan region* (2008). Incorporation entails hierarchisation: the distance from the centre of the mandala equates with a specific position in the general hierarchy of Buddhism, which the author summarises as *yeshey ki lha* and *jigten ghi lha* (p. 13). These two expressions situate entities onto an over-arching Buddhist pantheon, and yet some of the vernacular entities are not easily included: *Aju Zom Tsiring, pue sdé, bandar deuta*, and probably others escape strict classification and, as the author acknowledges, pass “through ethnic boundaries” (p. 15). It would be good if the author had elaborated on these deities/entities bypassing or crossing ethnic boundaries. In particular, at narrative level, there is an issue of the crossing of boundaries engendering specific dynamics of othering/demonisation (p. 54). The dissertation inspires the questions of whether external entities are more dangerous, more difficult to appease, and whether Lhopo deities attack intruders, foreigners, and other members of indigenous communities.

Visible and Invisible

On page 14 the author states: “I choose to write non-human entities as they are invisible, not human and have supernatural attributes”. This might contradict some of the materials she collected through interviews, since some informants relate about real

encounters with some of these entities. Moreover, since several local sacred mountains are deities themselves, it is difficult to define them as invisible. I would have liked the author to elaborate more on these visible and tangible expressions/manifestations of the so-called visible side of the supernatural, as sacred mountains, lakes, and rivers. In addition, in her dissertation, the author quotes Kinnard, who says, “There is nothing inherently sacred about any place or space” (Kinnard: 2014: 2), and yet she is well aware that the places usually associated with the supernatural, at least in the Himalayas, stand out in the landscape for some striking features: mighty mountains, ominous rocks and crags, eerie forested slopes, caverns and waterfalls. They might have nothing inherently sacred in them, but surely, they are regarded as potent places inherently different from surrounding ones (see Allerton 2013).

As to the above, we could argue that non-human entities are not exclusively invisible, and that the landscape could be potent without being supernatural. These issues have been dealt with by recent ethnographies, for example Allerton 2013, and especially De la Cadena’s *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds* (2015). These and other recent ethnographies take into account indigenous cosmologies, reframed as distinct ontologies (see Descola 2005), giving voice not only to humans but also to non-human collectivities. Bridging the gap between humans and non-humans opens up for us the topic of cosmopolitics, which the author explores in her second article. Elaborating more on the agency of Sikkimese vernacular non-human entities (deities, mountains, territorial gods, etc.) in cosmopolitics would add significant layers of analysis, enriching the understanding of dynamics unfolding in and around the notion of sacred landscape.

More on Cosmology

There are several hints towards a deep understanding of the interactions between pre-Buddhist and Buddhist cosmology. But can a discourse on current, contemporary times avoid discussing the emergence of a post-Buddhist worldview, i.e., a worldview combining belief, religion, science, secularism, and even scepticism? This is what is seemingly emerging from some of the interviews, and it could be a fruitful venue on which to tread further to explore individual ideas, perceptions, expressions, and feelings.

Shared Cosmos or Parallel and Conflicting Ones?

Cosmological narratives of diverse groups, moreover, provide elements for collective identities but also create alternative and sometimes conflicting worldviews. I especially like that the author avoids simplistic generalisation, by giving voice to informants who

express doubts about cosmological narratives, yet it emerges that sometimes doubt is used to deny the essentialist views embedded in mythic narratives. For example, on page 31, the author mentions the myth of creation of the Lepcha indigenous people, as opposing the ideas of the Beyul established by Guru Rimpoche. Such narratives propose mutually exclusive narratives. Are these narratives not only cosmopolitan, but also intrinsically political and communal? The author seems to elaborate on this idea in her final (re)consideration (p. 56). Does the author see these narratives as related to political assertiveness of the diverse communities inhabiting Sikkim? Is there a Sikkimese identity at all, or is there a fragmented one? In other words, is Sikkim a “world where many worlds fit” (p. 53), or is it an arena of competing interests? Such questions seem to be only hinted at in the final (re)considerations (p. 56), and yet it would be interesting to delve deeper into these aspects.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the author demonstrates her academic skills in developing a coherent, original, and well-structured discourse, going beyond the literature of reference and integrating it with novel perspectives, data, and analysis. She shows a remarkable level of engagement, investigation, and insight in relation to the object of her research, substantiated by the main body of her dissertation and completed by the four articles included. Her work is enriched beyond measure by the awareness and self-reflection on the scholar as a liminal figure in the field, even when her field is one with which the researcher has cultural intimacy and to which she has privileged access. Equally relevant and interesting is the idea of proposing a “partially native theory” to finally decolonise the objectifying gaze of the observer, acquired through distancing and learning to unlearn and relearn while based at the University of Tartu, as she herself states (p. 57). As a final remark, I would like to point to the concluding words of her dissertation: “My study at the University of Tartu as well as geographical distance provided me with a space to be true to the evidence, helping me develop the position of the partially native that I aspired to embody from the beginning” (p. 57). I would like to suggest a change, if I may: instead of “partially native”, I would say “a critical human being”. That is what academia needs the most.

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Kikee Doma Bhutia defending her doctoral dissertation at the University of Tartu on 7 March 2022. Photograph by Anastasiya Fiadotava.

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