History through rituals. Explorations in Indo-Tibetan religious cultures, University of Haifa, Israel, 1-2 July 2019

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A workshop on ‘History through Rituals’ was held at the University of Haifa in Israel on 1-2 July 2019. The goal of the workshop was to explore connections within and between the Indo-Tibetan cultural spheres through an intensive engagement of anthropologists, historians, and philologists whose work addresses rituals in either one or both regions. The extensive time allotted for presenters (approximately one hour) helped further the investigations, which primarily focused on historicization, regional variance, and the transmutations of ritual practises over time. The discussions were enhanced by the presence of invited commentators from diverse backgrounds, notably Himalayan anthropologist Ehud Halperin (Tel Aviv University), Theatre Studies specialist Ruthie Abeliovich (University of Haifa) and Classics scholar Moshe Bildstein (University of Haifa).

Broadly divided between Tibetan, South Asian, and pan-Himalayan foci, the workshop began with a substantial examination of the textual evidence regarding the use of rituals among mediaeval Indian tantric Buddhists by Péter-Dániel Szántó (University of Leiden). A delineation of the forms, functions, and purposes of tantric rituals revealed the multifocal aims of Buddhist tantri[as in relation to state structures. The actual number of such politically relevant ‘spiritual masters’ in local courts was found to be exceedingly lower (barely two dozen individuals) than the prodigious literary output that their religious schools would suggest. Persisting with the philological exploration of Buddhism, Gergely Hidas (The British Museum) presented the fruits of a five year-research project on Buddhist incantations (dhāraṇīs) that were used to secure agricultural yields in the mediaeval Kathmandu Valley. The findings suggesting that such aspects of Buddhist tradition had found followers in Nepal from the mid-first millennium onwards (see https://www.degruyter.com/viewbooktoc/product/509288).
The Buddhist-philological overture of the first day was followed by lectures relating to the Tibetan cultural sphere at large. In a sobering examination of the tensions between the ‘secular’ (civic) and ‘religious’ (monastic) aspects of oath-taking, Berthe Jansen (Leipzig University) illustrated the resonance of this fundamental ritual act in contemporary refugee communities and among high ranking lamas, who avoid taking oaths for fear of inadvertent perjury. The regional variants of popular cults in and around the plateau were addressed in two succeeding presentations. In a detailed investigation of the ‘sil’ tradition of Amdo, Daniel Berounský (Charles University, Prague) produced tangible evidence of sorcery at the pale of monastic Tibet that was insightfully linked to a broader, northeast Himalayan arch of ritual subcultures. Extending the view farther east, Marc Des Jardins (Concordia University, Montreal) demonstrated the multifarious ‘domestications’ of indigenous deities along the Sino-Tibetan frontier and their entanglement in the Tibetan-Buddhist pantheon. The day concluded with an evocative examination of ‘folk’ methods for the subjugation of vampires by Charles Ramble (École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris). Drawing on Georg van Driem’s ‘fallen leaves’ model as an alternative to the traditional tree shaped-graphs for explaining relations between language families, the cross-cultural ‘borrowings’ in ritual revealed surprising links between vampire subjugation rites with respondents pointing to additional underexplored ties between the ‘demons’ of the roof of the world and Central Asian divinities depicted in wall paintings dating to the first millennium CE.

Shifting to the Indian and Nepal Himalaya, the second day began with an innovative analysis of ‘eye opening’ rituals among the Newars of Kathmandu and their distant Kham Magar compatriots in West Nepal by Anne de Sales (Paris Nanterre University). Underlining the commensurateness of these ostensibly disconnected installation ceremonies’ (pratistha) culminative acts—the animation of painted deities by the urban artists’ drawing of eyes in the capital on the one hand and the initiation of shamans through a piercing of blindfolds in the rugged western hills on the other hand—prompted a rethinking of Tantric ritual cultures more broadly and of the importance of individualization as a prerequisite for successful rites of initiation in particular. Also in West Nepal, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (Laboratoire
d'anthropologie sociale, Collège de France) exposed the associative chain of ideas linking the image of the ‘joker’ in masked dances among neighbouring ‘tribal’ communities. Extending the string of ideas westwards into the Indian Himalaya, a similarly motivated reincarnation of masked dances in oral epic performances suggested incestuous relations within ruling families there are animated to produce a similar affect. Still in the Indian Himalayan, Arik Moran (University of Haifa) questioned the development of ritual cultures in the Kullu Valley. Focusing on the ritual components of the recent surge in festivals celebrating ‘human sacrifices’ revealed that these were, in fact, transmutations of earlier rites of ‘divine marriages’, whose recasting can be traced to specific historical junctures. In a departure from the strictly ethnographic data presented during the day, Alban von Stockhausen (Bernisches Historisches Museum, Switzerland) proposed new ways for thinking about rituals that draw on classical programming themes from Computer Science. Taking the life rituals of the Rai of Eastern Nepal as data, von Stockhausen illustrated how these could be fruitfully grouped into classes by noting modular attributes and transposable functions according to changing sets of rules to be defined by the researcher (or ‘programmer’), the principles thus outlined being applicable to ritual cultures writ large.

As an initial attempt at establishing dialogues between regional specialists from different disciplines, the meetings in Haifa proved successful in laying the groundwork for future collaborations that are currently underway. Interested contributors are encouraged to contact the workshop organizer for additional information on follow up events.