New Directions in Himalayan Studies. A joint Berkeley-CNRS Workshop, co-convened by Alexander von Rospatt and Stéphane Gros, 1-3 March 2019, University of California, Berkeley

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Hosted under the umbrella of the Himalayan Studies program at the University of California Berkeley and in partnership with the Centre d’études himalayennes (CEH) of the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) in France, this three-day workshop (for details see https://southasia.berkeley.edu/himalayan-studies-workshop) brought together an equal number of faculty and graduate students from both institutions working on the Himalayan region in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The workshop was made possible thanks to a grant from the France-Berkeley Fund and to financial support from the Institute for South Asia Studies (ISAS), the Berreman-Yamanaka Fund at UC Berkeley, and the Centre d’études himalayennes.

A welcoming address by ISAS director Munis Faruqi and a brief introduction to the Berreman-Yamanaka Fund by Keiko Yamanaka were followed by introductory remarks by the co-conveners. This broadly configured workshop allowed for a total of twenty presentations grouped around common research interests, organised in thematic panels.

The first panel on ‘Religious Practices Across Tibet’ allowed for cross-fertilisation between philology, history, and anthropology, involving speakers with complementary expertise in Tibetan religious traditions across the Tibetosphere. It addressed a range of topics that were discussed by respondents David Gray (Santa Clara University) and David Germano (University of Virginia).

In his talk, Fernand Meyer (CEH) showed that Tibetan techniques known as bcud-len, linked to ancient Indian procedures aimed at rejuvenation and even immortality, constitute a reinterpretation of these earlier practices and developed into a large variety of techniques at the confluence of medicine, alchemy, asceticism,
ritual and yogic psychophysiology. Offering a historical-critical reading of commentaries of the Guhyagarbha Tantra to shed light on early tantric doctrinal developments in Tibet, PhD student Zack Beer (UCB) presented a tentative chronology for the emergence of procedures deemed by the later tradition to entail the ‘completion stage’ (rdzogs rim), highlighting the transition from a sexual rite to the body’s complex internal technologies. Focusing on the Foundational Practices (Skt. ādikarma, Tib. las dang po pa) and the gurumaṇḍala rite, a method for worshipping one’s guru, PhD student John ‘Zim’ Pickens (UCB) examined relevant ritual manuals. He suggested that the rise of gurumaṇḍala practices contributed to the development of a broader set of ritualised meditations in Tibet with a focus on the figure of the lama. While analysing a short passage taken from the Tattvasamgraha-sādhanopāyikā (De nyid ‘dus pa’ bsgrub pa’i thabs), a tantric ritual manual preserved in several copies, from Dunhuang, Jacob Dalton (UCB) discussed the ritual technique of visualising and imagining a divine form and demonstrated how the practitioner’s merging with the deity (‘wisdom being’, ājñānasattva) and the installation of samaya in the practitioner’s heart represent the key moment in this early Yoga tantra system.

These philological considerations then gave way to anthropologically oriented presentations. Nicolas Sihlé (CEH) combined second-hand sources and first-hand ethnographic data (from Mustang and Amdo) to discuss the place of commensality in the ritual practice of the gaṇacakra (Skt.) or tsok (Tib. tshogs), pointing out that in the cases compared a given shared ritual form can be articulated with a diversity of underlying logics. Finally, PhD student Donagh Coleman (UCB) presented his documentary work in progress about the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of tukdam (thugs dam), a term referring to the tradition of dying in meditative equipoise, with the practitioners’ bodies showing no signs of physical decay for days or even weeks after their clinical deaths. He discussed how tantric understandings of tukdam contrast with biomedical understandings and throw into disarray Western categories of life and death, mind and body.

The second panel focused on ‘Water Management and Use’ and was an opportunity to showcase complementary strands of research conducted in Nepal by faculty and graduate students. PhD student
Yoshika Crider (UCB) presented the results of an ongoing project that addresses the issue of safe drinking water and the advantages of system-level treatment technologies by chlorination over household-level safe water products. PhD student Romain Valadaud (CEH) presented his work on the role of Water Users Associations in the eastern Tarai, their link to patronage networks and how, beyond irrigation management, they transform into local political institutions contributing to changing or reproducing social structures. PhD student Caroline Sarrazin (CEH) addressed the question of water access in relation to the use and management of pokhāri (ponds and tanks), also in the Tarai. Based on an extensive study of 230 pokhāri she discussed representations and practices of various actors to uncover socio-spatial injustices and issues related to property rights, and the influence of local management authorities. Based on long-term research in Nepal, Olivia Aubriot (CEH) reflected more broadly on ‘how to “read” an irrigation system’ and the methodological and theoretical implications of considering water management as a trace of the history of social relations: a social construct that evolves with the society that produces it. Isha Ray (UCB), co-director of the Berkeley Water Center, provided a well-rounded discussion of all the papers in this panel.

These data-rich presentations on natural resource management issues were complemented by the third panel on aspects related to landscape diversity and the impact of environmental protection policies on local communities. Under the title ‘Changing Natures’, the panel included cases from Nepal, India and China. PhD student Tracy Burnett (UCB) presented her methodological musings about the limitations of conventional rangeland management approaches in the context of Tibetan pastoralism. She addressed how, for Tibetan nomads, yaks mediate a range of relations with the environment, the grassland and its deities, well beyond considerations of subsistence production, market commodity, etc. Stéphane Gros (CEH) discussed the impact of environmental policies and poverty alleviation programmes on the Drung people of Yunnan (China). He focused on how the prohibition of shifting cultivation leads to increased dependence on government subsidies, to a reduction in traditional knowledge transmission, and to a significant increase in labour migration and female marriage migration. More concretely, he argued that the ‘livelihood conversions’
experienced by the Drung people can be correlated with the progression of ‘religious conversions’ to Christianity, and to the pervasive neglect of traditional ritual practices. The impetus to protect ‘nature’ has been behind the creation of dozens of national parks in the Himalayan range, as discussed by Joëlle Smadja (CEH). Through several case studies in Nepal and India, she showed how the control these parks exert over resource management and governance is often instrumentalised by actors who are beholden to a political or religious agenda. This is turning parks into territories where conflicts over legitimacy unfold, pitching the rights of wild animals against the interests of farmers and herders, as well as tourists, foresters, etc. Elizabeth Allison (California Institute of Integral Studies) served as respondent and discussed these three talks.

Leading on from this, Daniela Berti (CEH) addressed the attribution of legal status to ‘nature’, including granting the status of ‘legal person’ to natural resources. Based on court cases filed at the High Court of Uttarakhand (Indian Himalayas), she showed how legal and religious arguments may sometimes be combined. PhD student Fabien Provost (CEH) gave a presentation based on research conducted in mortuaries in Himachal Pradesh and in the process shed light on the various types of knowledge implicated in the formulation of medico-legal opinion. He demonstrated that forensic experts’ conclusions and actions are not founded on a biological theory of the body but on a biosocial theory of humans in their sociocultural environment. Lawrence Cohen (UCB) served as discussant for these last two papers of the panel.

Finally, the fourth and last panel to take place during this workshop brought together scholars working on ‘Newar Society, Religion and Art’. The first three papers were discussed by Nicolas Sihlé (CEH). PhD student Kris Anderson (UCB) examined the Sarva
durgatipariśodhana (Elimination of All Negative Rebirths), a Buddhist tantra that has been a source for Buddhist funerary rites in Newar and Tibetan Buddhism, in light of a circa nineteenth-century Sanskrit-Newari bilingual manual containing Sarvadurgati rites for the approach of death and the seven ritually critical days after it. She discussed the adaptation of materials from the tantra for ritual purposes, demonstrating how it is combined with transfer-of-consciousness (utkṛānti) rites from other tantric systems. PhD student Ryan Damron (UCB) presented his research on
the late Buddhist monk Vanaratna (1384–1468). Drawing on Tibetan biographical sources and Vanaratna’s own compositions in Sanskrit and Tibetan, he highlighted the religious, political, and social works of Vanaratna in the Kathmandu Valley and, through them, explored the complex religious history of fifteenth-century Nepal.

The second section of the final panel was dedicated to the ritual uses of visual materials in Newar religion. Drawing on his work on the elaborate series of old-age rituals performed by Newars to sacralise and protect elders who have reached a threshold age, Alexander von Rospatt (UCB) examined the scroll paintings or repoussés dedicated to the goddess of longevity (Usnīsavijayā). He decoded the complex iconography of these objects and explained how they serve both as icons and as commemorative objects that depict key moments in the old-age ritual as performed for Buddhists of Kathmandu when the latter reach the age of 77 years, 7 months and 7 days. Similarly, postdoctoral researcher Kunsang Namgyal-Lama (CEH) discussed Nepalese scroll paintings that are produced as icons and commemorative objects for the performance of the ‘Laksacaitya’ rite dedicated to the moulding of miniature clay caityas. She discussed different representations of the Laksacaitya ritual on paubhās and analysed the evolution of iconographic programmes to show how the representation of the ritual performance became a central theme. The concluding talk by Gérard Toffin (CEH) offered further analytical considerations regarding the link between rituals and images among Newars, drawing on his work on the masks of a Newar group of dance performers who belong to the Nardevī neighbourhood of old Kathmandu city. These masks represent a standard set of deities. Consecrated by local priests and worshipped with offerings, they are donned by traditional dancers who become possessed by the corresponding god or goddess. Toffin asserted that the role of adorned anthropomorphic forms of deities in religious life is one of the main features of Newar culture, a link that can also be found in other realms, such as paubhās scroll paintings discussed by von Rospatt and Namgyal-Lama. Patricia Berger (UCB) responded to these three final interconnected presentations.

Building on the launch of the Himalayan Studies initiative in 2017 at UC Berkeley (https://southasia.berkeley.edu/Himalayan_Studies_UCB), this workshop achieved the goal of invigorating Himalayan
Studies. It initiated the dialogue between regional specialists from different disciplines, both faculty and graduate students, and laid the groundwork for future collaborations. To foster continuing cooperation, a follow-up workshop took place on 26 September 2019. On this occasion, Keiko Yamanaka (UCB) and Tristan Bruslé (CNRS), both specialists of migration issues in the Himalayas, presented their work on a topic that had not be included in the March workshop.

The joint workshop between the two institutions from Berkeley and Paris is a first step and will hopefully be followed by further exchanges and collaborations that will also involve other institutions dedicated to Himalayan Studies.