

Foreword

The present volume comprises the proceedings of an international workshop held in Vienna, November 2018.¹ The focus was on religion and its relation to social realities in early Tibetan societies, beginning with questions relating to the period of the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th cent.).

There is wide consensus in the literature that, with the adoption of Buddhism as the state religion in the eighth century, religion became an institution dominating polity and society, something which continued even more in the post-imperial period, in whose idealised memory the entire period of the Empire appears in the colouring of a Buddhist monarchy. At the same time, it is asked which religion (or religions) in the highlands were replaced by or superimposed with Buddhism, where it is often tacitly assumed that there must have been also a specific name for such pre-Buddhist beliefs (or for the religion of the élite whose specialists were known as *bon po* or *gshen*).

Such an academic search for religion seems to ignore the observation, especially common in anthropology, that points to the fact that in cultures before the emergence of religion as ‘organised religion’ (or ‘world religion’ / ‘salvation religion’ / ‘book religion’), the religious was indissolubly connected with the social. In fact, social anthropologists doubt the existence of religion as a discrete analytical category, “that we can expect to find and study across the whole range of human societies” (Wengrow and Graeber 2015). Historically, the creation of a separate religion was a consequence of the collapse of Bronze Age states, it is argued, a residue from early state structures where the ‘religious’ and the ‘political’ were originally fused (Bloch 2013: 32-36). Similar assessments of religion, with a slightly different derivation, can also be found within religious studies (cf. Bergunder 2014).

Looking at early Tibet, this unity of the ‘religious’ and the ‘social’ seems to have been reflected by the somewhat succinct formulations of ‘custom’ or ‘tradition’ (*chos, lugs*) that we find in inscriptions and old Tibetan documents for the pre-Buddhist context. More specifically, reference is made to the ‘tradition of the ancestors’ of the emperor, where religious practices were integrated in social conventions that ideally served the maintenance of the kingship as a divine order. Here the religious was the everyday life of the social and vice versa, and as far as we can see, it did not constitute an independent entity provided with an individual name before the emergence of Buddhism.

As is well known, the archaic world did not cease to exist after the 8th century and lived on in the Highlands in different forms of a ‘nameless religion’ (Stein 1993 [1962]), which on the edge (or partly in the midst of) Tibetan Buddhist culture had preserved significant elements of the world

¹ The workshop with the same title we give this volume was held at the Austrian Academy of Sciences’ Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia (IKGA), Vienna 21-23 November 2018. The meeting was part of the project “The Tibetan Empire and the Formation of Buddhist Civilization”, itself a sub-project of the large Vienna-based interdisciplinary project “Visions of Community – Comparative Approaches to Ethnicity, Region and Empire in Christianity, Islam and Buddhism (440-1600 CE)” (VISCOM), which ran from 2011 to 2019 (<https://viscom.ac.at/>). This project (SFB F42-G18) was supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF).

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from pre-Buddhist times.² Stein was the first to point out the characteristic ritual entanglements of the individual, the society and the landscape in traditional Tibetan societies, as can be seen in particular in the analogies of deities of the individual, the household and the (religiously classified) settlement area.³ In such an entangled cosmos, it makes methodically little sense, for example, to describe the respect one shows to a local deity as part of religion, and the respect for a person who represents this divine quality in society – the king, the (temporarily elected) chief of a village community, but in gradation also household father and household mother – as part of the social or political. Both are part of an abstract, larger whole, something that the anthropologist Maurice Bloch proposed describing as ‘transcendental social’ in his most exciting essay “Why religion is nothing special but is central” (Bloch 2013 [2008]).⁴

For these societies, academic classifications such as supernatural versus natural are also problematic, and do not find emic resonance in these communities. More recent suggestions in the literature are ‘meta-human beings’ or ‘metapersons’ for the designation of gods, demons, ancestors, ghosts, spirits etc.,⁵ appearances whose otherworldliness does not prevent them from being immanent in nature, however.⁶ In his *Unearthly Powers*, a theoretical work about the nature of religious changes in world history, Alan Strathern speaks of ‘immanentist religion’, which characterises a more monistic understanding of reality: all appearances – natural and apparently supernatural and society as a whole – are fused in a single cosmos. In such an ‘immanentist society’ it may well be that people encounter metapersons “inhabiting the world in exactly the manner that normal persons do” (Strathern 2019: 31), something that is well known to us from Tibetan ethnography, where it constitutes a prime example of the immanence of the religious in the every-day life of society-making.

This situation of an ‘immanentist religion’ is contrasted with the ‘transcendentalism’ of world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam) and other, less expansive religious traditions (Hinduism, Daoism and others), as whose core feature one identifies the “ontological breach between a transcendentalist and mundane form of being” (Strathern 2019: 6). Such a form of fundamental break is well documented from the earliest time in Tibetan Buddhist history, first in inscriptions of the late 8th century, where the explicit division into a world of the mundane deities (*’jig rten gyi lha*) and one outside of it (*’jig rten las ’da’s pa*)⁷ illustrates the encounter between Buddhism and the older indigenous tradition, the latter from now on also described as the “little religion” (*chos chu ngu*) in Old Tibetan documents.⁸

These recent discussions about religion include important developments from older concepts (such as the ‘little and great tradition’) and are undoubtedly useful in analysing historical transitions

² Later formulations and further developments in the succession of Stein are Ramble’s ‘civil religion’ (2008) or most recently Huber’s ‘mundane rites’ (2020). Cf. also Langelaar in this volume.

³ Cf. Stein 1993: 222f.

⁴ Maurice Bloch’s concept of the ‘social’ and the ‘religious’ is summarized by Christian Jahoda in this volume.

⁵ Cf. Sahlins 2017; Strathern 2019: 4-6, 31f.

⁶ Assmann 2012: 403, cit. in Strathern 2019: 32.

⁷ Bsam yas stele inscription, ll. 14-16; Richardson 1985: 29-30.

⁸ van Schaik 2013: 232; cf. also Hazod in this volume.

in the context of religious encounters and conversion. As Langelaar notes on Strathern's concept in connection with his analysis of ancestor cults (*mtshun*) in western Khams (in this volume), the notion of immanentist and transcendentalist religiosity represent a framework "that helps illuminate the dynamics behind Buddhism's ability to simultaneously embrace, challenge and gradually alter the ritual-cosmological landscapes it encountered."⁹ Yet it should be noted that the identification of this dividing line remains chiefly a model, and in any case the distinction of two types of religion within one community is not something which is very common in Tibetan cultural history. True, the situation varies from region to region; thus in certain peripheral areas we indeed find a coexistence of Buddhist and pagan rituals, or forms of a syncretistic blend of Buddhist belief and older cultic practices, where the distinguishing features remain clearly recognisable (cf. Ramble 2008: chap. 7 *et passim*); on the other hand, it is rather doubtful, for example, to find such a coexistence of religions somewhere in Central Tibet, historically the core region for the development of 'transcendentalist religions' (Chos and G.yung drung Bon); it rather seems that the adaptation processes allowed the continuity of archaic forms of community building that dominated everyday life, in other words that outside its spiritual and intellectual core structures Buddhism itself occurred as an 'immanentist religion', and this probably from the very beginning of the religion's historical encounter with 'tradition'.

All this leads us to seeing old questions in a slightly new light: what actually happened after the introduction of the (salvation) religion in Tibet? Was the historically older 'custom' gradually replaced by religion in the adaptation processes that started with the vision of creating a Buddhist empire? While it is rather easy to demonstrate the enormous impacts of the (book) religion on society, it is less clear how religion actually operated in this new context. The observation in Tibetan studies that points to the different forms of continuation (or new clothing) of ancient beliefs as one characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism may provide a guide to a principal methodological reorientation. Actually, what is proposed is to sound out an approach that sticks to looking at the interaction with the social, in other words to ask how much of the old mechanisms of 'tradition' remained in the making of a Tibetan Buddhist society?

We see these reflections as an external framework of the present volume. Here, the thematic spectrum of the contributions ranges from ancestral cults and other peripheral ritual practices to burial grounds and their landscapes, from examples of the well-known narrative topos of heavenly descent to questions of Tibetan identity in imperial and early post-imperial Tibet – all subjects whose history traces back either to the time before or immediately after the appearance of (Buddhist) religion in Tibet.

To briefly address the individual contributions, the first one by Joanna Bialek considers the use of "Tibetan" in scholarly literature related to the period between the 7th and 10th century – in terms such as "Tibetan Empire", "(Old) Tibetan language", "Tibetan society / culture", "Tibetan religion" etc. As pointed out by the author, there are hardly any reflections on these terms as to what "Tibetan" means to researchers of this period, and in this context, the author examines the "Tibetan-ity" of core elements of the early Tibetan cultural sphere in two case studies – from *lha* and the title

⁹ Langelaar in this volume; a more detailed discussion is in Langelaar 2021: 199f.

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of the Tibetan rulers (*btsan po*) to the features of the “Tibetan” funeral ritual of the imperial period. Preceding these analyses is an illuminating look at the way the Tibetan word *bod* (later the word for “Tibet”) is used in historical documents of the time in question. In contrast to earlier research, the author links the funeral ceremony described in PT 1042 to the Central Tibetan region of the imperial era, by pursuing a close linguistic examination of the Tibetan emperor’s title, underpinning her hypothesis about the source with a contextualisation into related geographic and topographic, architectural, and art-historical evidence.¹⁰

Guntram Hazod’s paper addresses the early (pre-Buddhist) Tibetan ruler image as an example of a “stranger king”, the latter a concept of recent anthropological discussions on pre-modern kingship.¹¹ In their self-representation, such dynasties typically originated with a heroic figure from a greater outside realm, a situation which the author compares with the well-known legend of the celestial (*lha*) origin of the Tibetan ruler. This myth left traces in the landscape of Lower Yar lung, the homeland of the Tibetan kings, and the author refers here to a continuation of the stranger king in the form of the central protector deity of Khra ’brug – reportedly Tibet’s first Buddhist temple situated in the heart of Lower Yar lung. He demonstrates that, in the context of the (post-imperial) cultic representations surrounding this temple’s deity, older forms of the transcending union of the social and the religious spheres are to be found, and the classical dichotomies usually associated with a “temple”, such as the sacred and profane, are actually rather blurred.

In his contribution, Mathias Fermer makes a detailed on-site inspection of an important district of the Southern Central Tibet (Lhokha) of the imperial period – the G.yo ru Gzhung valley. By drawing on a range of different evidence from post-imperial histories, photography, satellite imagery, cartographic material, ethnographic data and oral history, he meticulously looks at the historical geography of this area, in particular its links to imperial family lineages and their territories, as is claimed by later Tibetan historians. This relates to the presentation of the numerous burial mound sites in Gzhung and the neighbouring districts (Dol and Grwa) and their historical contextualisation as evidence of the presence of prestigious aristocratic families during the empire era. Fermer addresses general methodological issues for studying old Tibetan toponyms and discusses the task of proper localisation of old place names in case of limited or ambiguous textual data and under the natural condition of a constantly changing landscape.

The famous story of the heavenly arrival of the Buddhist religion in Tibet, known as “the advent of the sublime *dharma*” (*dam pa’i chos kyi dbu brnyes*), is the subject of Sam van Schaik’s contribution. This central episode in Tibetan Buddhist history is (in the classical version) formally based on the older motif of the celestial origin of the mythical ancestor and thus actually provides an example of how elements of pre-Buddhist Tibet were absorbed into the new religion. On the other hand, there is also an approach among Tibetan historians who distance themselves from these details of the textual tradition, and in this context the author refers to an interesting debate on religion and rationality within the Tibetan historiographical tradition.

¹⁰ On *bod*, for more details see Bialek 2021.

¹¹ Graeber and Sahlins 2017.

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In his contribution, Christian Jahoda focuses on Bloch's concept of the "transcendental social" (2013), and offers an illuminating re-examination of this theory on the basis of the relevant source material on the history of the West Tibetan kingdom of early post-imperial Tibet (10th-11th c.). The author engages in proofing its conceptual applicability to the creation of the West Tibetan kingdom under Skyid lde Nyi ma mgon and his successors in the wake of the collapse of the Tibetan empire. In search for transcendental agents or groups involved in successful forming of the new Buddhist kingdom of Mnga' ris Skor gsum (covering Gu ge, Spu hrangs, Mar yul, and lesser areas), Jahoda analyses largely unstudied, rare historiographical sources and material evidence from the region. We are made aware of a number of significant aspects of this seemingly essentially religiously dominated (and religiously defined) kingdom and in this context learn of certain continuities of the transcendental social and older forms of the fusion of the social with the religious.

Daniel Berounský's contribution leads us into the fascinating world of an as yet little-explored branch of non-Buddhist (and in its origin *pre*-Buddhist) ritual traditions from the broad spectrum of "Bon religion", whose origins the author finds in north-eastern Tibet (Amdo) and related to the people (and "clan") known as Dong (Ldong). It is a study that, on the basis of text and comparative local lay ritual traditions still practised until recently, contributes to the elucidation of the pre-Buddhist past and its characteristic combined forms of social and religious elements.

Anna Sehnalova and Reinier Langelaar both give examples from their text and ethnography-based studies on the Tibetan ancestor cult in eastern Tibet, each with their own accents and references to evidence from the time of the Tibetan empire. Reinier Langelaar examines a selected corpus of Karma Chags med's writings on *mtshun* ancestors. By drawing particularly on passages on the famed clan ancestor Ban thung of the 'Brong pa clan in Nang chen, he demonstrates how the 17th-century Bka' brgyud scholar makes effort in integrating beliefs of the 'immanentist' ancestor cult practised in this home region in the 'transcendental' cosmology of doctrinal Buddhism.

Anna Sehnalova compares funeral/burial practices and ancestor cosmology of the Tibetan Empire with the pre-modern and contemporary burial customs in Mgo log, reaching at the conclusion that "[b]oth the Spu rgyal and Mgo log tumuli can possibly be seen as creating a physical link between the origin of the dynasty, strongholds of its power, its divine apical ancestor and object of worship, and the passing and final resting place of its most noble members." (Sehnalova, this volume, p. 263). In both studies we not only experience different forms of Buddhist transformations of older local traditions but also significant comparative material on imperial traditions, specifically in the area of burial practice and the associated characteristic intertwining of social and religious realities.

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