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Charles Ramble

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## THE COMPLEXITY OF TIBETAN PILGRIMAGE

CHARLES RAMBLE

### Introduction

Paulo Coelho's *The Pilgrimage* tells the story of an inner voyage undertaken in the course of a physical journey to Santiago de Compostela. Not long after the inception of the long walk there is an incident in which the author and his spiritual mentor, Petrus – a senior fellow-member of a the mystical order known as Regnum Agnus Mundi (RAM) – encounter two boys kicking a football about near the pilgrim trail. The ball is miskicked and passed to Coelho, who is about to return it to the players when something in Petrus' demeanour suggests to him that he should not do so. The boys ask politely for their ball to be returned, and one of them becomes tearful when Coelho continues to demur. At last the frustrated children offer to reveal the location of a hidden relic, and as soon as they have secured the return of their ball, make good their escape from the two duped pilgrims. Petrus later explains the occult significance of the episode: that Coelho's reluctance to return the ball was due to his (Coelho's) unconscious awareness that his inner devil had manifested in the boy; and that there really *had* been a relic, because "a devil never makes false promises".<sup>1</sup>

The episode could be taken simply as a particularly bizarre instance of the kind of misunderstanding that might happen in any intercultural encounter; but a factor that is clearly relevant in the present case is the place itself. The attitude of either party is conditioned by the significantly divergent understandings of where exactly it is they are. While the two pairs are obviously sharing roughly the same set of geographical coordinates, for one pair these coordinates mark a makeshift football pitch, and for the other they are a section of a mysterious highway in which any number of praeternatural denizens might lurk in wait.

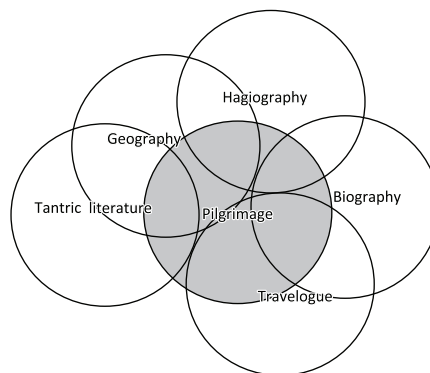
The point I wish to make is this: Coelho is the pilgrim in this story, and as students of pilgrimage we are likely to give his narrative about the place and the journey more attention than we would that of the footballers. The result of privileging this one perspective is the depletion of a complex phenomenon to a single strand, since we would be ignoring the complementary or rival narratives that are running concurrently with the official account. It is precisely the multi-strandedness of pilgrimage that I wish to examine in the present article. I propose to do so by excerpting passages from selected examples of pilgrimage-related literature and juxtaposing them with

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<sup>1</sup> Coelho 1992: 67-71.

alternative perspectives on the same location or activity. Not only is pilgrimage complex, but it is complex in different ways: there may be rival conceptualisations of the same place; a single place may be characterised differently by different commentators, or else the same individual or group may maintain a multiple view of the process or locus of pilgrimage. While the diversity may consist of a plurality of religious interpretations – a type of polysemy that is particularly well documented in the scholarly literature, especially in the field of ‘contested landscapes’ – we are also likely to find a superimposition of spiritual and worldly (for example, commercial) interests. In most cases the ‘profane’ perspective is explicit, but in certain instances, as we shall see, it has to be read between the lines of the official account.

In much the same way as we benefit from seeing the plurality of perspectives on a single location, an overly strict selectiveness with regard to what constitutes pilgrimage literature might also result in an artificially narrow, decontextualised image of the activity. There is, in fact, no one Tibetan genre that can be regarded as “pilgrimage literature”. The most obvious candidates – the *dkar chag* (‘register’), the *gnas bshad* (‘guide-book’) and the *lam yig* (‘passport’) – are three of the four forms (the fourth being *go la’i kha byang*, ‘global-description’) that Wylie singled out as constituting the corpus of Tibetan geographical writing.<sup>2</sup> Other genres for which I hope to justify inclusion in the pilgrimage complex might be tantric literature, hagiography, biography and travelogue. The way in which they relate to one another in the context of pilgrimage could be represented roughly with the use of a Venn diagram, as follows:



Let us return briefly to the path to Santiago de Compostela. In considering the divergent perspectives of Coelho and Petrus on the one hand and the two footballers on the other, I suggested that the differences might be due in part to the place itself. A few words should be said here to clarify how this might be the case.

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<sup>2</sup> Wylie 1995.

To begin with, it could be objected that there is nothing inherent in the place that it should determine these different perspectives. After all, the meanings that the location has are nothing more than the projections of the protagonists' preoccupations: the boys want to play football, whereas Coelho on his own admission, and Petrus by implication, have been reading Carlos Castaneda.

According to a certain theoretical position that has widespread support, the relationship between humans and their physical environment is not one of subject and object; the distinction implicit in the latter is false, and we should understand that the two – a person and the place he or she inhabits – are mutually constitutive. This 'strong' phenomenological view, advocated particularly in the work of Tim Ingold (1990), proposes that an individual's knowledge of a place derives from physical interaction with it, and not from theoretical constructs independent of such direct experience. The implications of this position are discussed in an important study of the urban environment of contemporary Lhasa by Kabir Heimsath, who goes on to present a summary of the criticisms it has attracted, and to assess the limits of its applicability. The position that "place and knowledge are inextricable" has "been put to valuable, if often implicit, uses within Tibetan studies in which people, landscape and deities blend through mutually constitutive pilgrimage practices...". However, this place-based phenomenological approach "runs into problems when there is no clear and stable relationship between a person and a place and thus also no clear homology between society and culture."<sup>3</sup> Heimsath's point has important implications for the study of pilgrimage. Pilgrims, by definition, do not live in the localities they visit, and arguments – notably on the part of Gosden (1994) – against the phenomenological approach are surely fatal in the case of pilgrimage.<sup>4</sup>

The inherent qualities of a space may well be influential in the first instance by virtue of their impressive or constraining physical features. However, the *particular* meanings invested in the space and its features, and the sanctioned modes of being in it, will be largely a matter of culturally (including politically) inspired attribution. These representations are canonised and naturalised to the extent that anyone who has undergone the corresponding socialisation is unlikely to be able to perceive the place as a meaningless topography. In the episode with which this article opens, it may well be the case that the relationship of the boys to their locality is of the mutually constitutive variety; but it is certainly the case that Coelho's and Petrus' relationship to it is not.

These observations lead to a second consideration: notably, the plural identity of the location in which the two parties encounter each other. The point requires a clearer definition of certain crucial terms related to locality. Heimsath makes the important point that the words *space* and *place* are given significantly different meanings in the works of certain authors.

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3 Heimsath 2012: 6-7.

4 *ibid.*: 8.

In the standard anthropological formulations ‘place’ denotes the human perception and experience of an abstract ‘space’. ‘Place’ holds meaning, identity, culture, etc. for people while ‘space’ remains an objective, impersonal, and empty category in this formulation...”.<sup>5</sup>

In the writing of contemporary geographers, Heimsath points out, the meanings of the two terms are exactly reversed. In the present article I shall follow the anthropological convention, whereby space signifies a natural location and place the cultural significance accorded to it.

The secondary literature on Tibetan pilgrimage and sacred geography abounds in examples of a given space being perceived and treated as two or more quite different places. Most commonly, a single mountain may be the abode of a territorial *yul lha* to whom locals pay pagan reverence, often with blood sacrifices, and which lamaist pilgrims from far afield might revere, with circumambulations, as the citadel of a Buddhist or Bonpo *yi dam*. Shardung Ri, a mountain in Amdo sacred to the Bonpos, was converted to a shrine of the Maoist civil religion on the grounds that the Long March once paused there (it actually bypassed the site by 170 kilometres);<sup>6</sup> the Halesi-Māratika caves, in eastern Nepal, are the subject of an acrimonious set of competing claims, with sectarian, ethnic and economic currents, on the part of at least four different communities;<sup>7</sup> Kailash is only one of numerous polysemous mountains held sacred by a multiplicity of faiths, each for its own reasons; and so on.

For a single space to be a plurality of places does not require the ideological investment of a corresponding number of interest-groups: a patch of monastery ground daily trodden by monks who do not give it a second thought can be ritually transformed into a mandala for tantric divinities represented by the same monks dressed as masked *'cham* dancers. A particularly vivid illustration of this phenomenon of what we may call single-sited multilocality, together with the procedures adopted in order to generate this, is to be found in the context of certain local cults in Nepal's Mustang District. The main triad of territorial gods in the community of Te features a divinity called Shartsenpa, whose principal shrine is a cairn that stands above the village on a trail leading to the pastures. There are in fact two trails from the village to this point: the trail that is used for everyday purposes is an easy route known as Gyamsampa, the “New Road”, and villagers driving their animals to graze will pass by the cairn with little more attention than they would give to any other pile of stones. Shartsenpa must be worshipped once a month by village officials who make a fumigation offering at the shrine. To reach the location, the officials must follow a longer, more dangerous route known as the “Fumigation Road” (Sang Tepe Gyam),

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5 *ibid.*: 14.

6 Huber 2006.

7 Buffetrille 2012. The bibliography of this work provides references to the author's earlier studies on this pilgrimage site.

and failure to use this older trail will result in their being fined. Both the trails lead to the same *space*, marked by the cairn, but the *places* that are reached are different: in one case the cairn is a heap of stones, and in the other it is the very presence of the territorial god Shartsenpa.<sup>8</sup>

Let us now examine some examples of the literary genres comprising the Venn diagram of pilgrimage literature. To begin at the top, so to speak, there is a well-developed reflection of the status of pilgrimage to be found in some of the higher tantras. As one might expect, the Kālacakratantra has little time for the practice of making physical journeys to the sacred places of the Indian subcontinent: insofar as there are exact correspondences to each of these sites – as well as to vaster cosmic phenomena – within the components of one’s own body, one might as well stay at home and cultivate the means to undertake an inner voyage around these nodes. These various sets of correspondences are clearly set out in tabular form in Vesna Wallace’s study of the text, the Inner Kālacakratantra.<sup>9</sup> The Kālacakra tradition

rejects the inherent sacredness of one place or one human being over another. It suggests that all regions of the world and all human bodies are equally sacred. This view of the human body as containing within itself all the pilgrimage sites is not unique to the Kālacakra tradition. It is also found in other anuttara-yoga-tantras and in the literature of the Sahajayāna. For example, the well-known Sahajīya poet, Sarahapāda, affirms in his Dohākoṣa that he has not seen another place of pilgrimage as blissful as his own body.<sup>10</sup>

A similar depreciation of the qualities of physical sacred places is to be found in twentieth-century work by the Bonpo scholar Tenzin Namdak. Invoking the authority of the Zur byang (a work by Blo ldan snying po, b. 1360), Tenzin Namdak proposes a hierarchical list of religious activities arranged according to the spiritual accomplishments of those for whom they are prescribed. Pilgrimage features at the bottom of the list, as a preparatory exercise recommended for those “who are unable to undertake these [more challenging] religious activities”.<sup>11</sup>

Insofar as it is presented as a classical pilgrimage guide of the *lam yig* or *gnas bshad* variety, the work describes the author’s itinerary through Tibet and northern Nepal, and cites scriptural works concerning the special qualities of the places he visits. Nevertheless, it is clear that Tenzin Namdak adopts a discreet distance from the extravagant and inspirational claims made in such works for the properties of these sites, and even their identification as the citadels of particular tantric divinities. Compare these two excerpts on the subject of Kongpo Bonri, the main power-place

8 Ramble 2008: 204-205.

9 Wallace 2001. See especially pp.78–86, tables 5.7–5.11.

10 *ibid.*: 77.

11 Bod yul gnas kyi lam yig: 6.

of the Bon religion. The first is from the *dkar chag* of Bonri, the second from Tenzin Namdak's "Guide for the Blind:"

...The Teacher raised [the mountain] with his hand and set it to the left, and from his heart there emanated a ray of brown light the length of an arrow which penetrated the hundred million realms and produced a mountain like a [heap of] blazing jewels, created with the forms of a circle, a square, a semicircle and a triangle. It appeared as gTso mchog mkha' 'gying standing in union with his consort (6b), having three faces, six arms, and two legs, one drawn up and the other extended, entwined in an embrace with his consort, with the wings of a garuda and the tent of a fire-mountain, and complete with terrifying and wrathful attributes. There appeared circular, square, semicircular and triangular [natural features] with the form of his divine entourage.

With his two legs in the extended posture he trod down the noxious serpent spirits and goblins as well as the black hill of the demons, which was like the platform for his feet. It became a sign of his subjugation of the demonic realm and came to be known as 'the Great Mind-Emanation Bon Mountain'.<sup>12</sup>

And now Tenzin Namdak's prescription for circumambulating mountains such as Kongpo Bonri:

When you walk around places such as the Bon Mountain of Kongpo, since they are receptacles that have been blessed by the Enlightened Teacher, you should imagine that while performing your circuits you are walking around the Enlightened One. It is not merely a matter of making prostrations and circumambulations while bearing in mind the local genii, territorial gods and swastikas of these places: whatever sacred receptacle you visit you should consider that it is this or that Enlightened One, and be reverent and rejoice. This is what is important.<sup>13</sup>

The second excerpt represents a significant shift in emphasis: the importance of the mountain is not that it is an actual mandala of gTso mchog mkha' 'gying, with remarkable properties, but an aniconic screen on which pilgrims should project their inner devotion and aspirations.

#### Pilgrimage narratives: information or inspiration?

Tibetan pilgrimage narratives have not always been kindly treated by Western scholars. Tucci's frustration with the genre is a case in point:

12 Bon ri dkar chag fols. 6a-6b. For the Tibetan text, see Ramble 1997 Appendix A. Where the Tibetan text of the excerpts cited in the present article has already been published, it will not be reproduced here.

13 Bod yul gnas kyi lam yig: 55.

These itineraries of the Tibetan monks are far from that exactness which we admire in the writings of the Chinese travellers....Not only does a great deal of legendary and fantastic elements permeate their descriptions, but the itinerary itself can hardly be followed from one place to another.<sup>14</sup>

Among the deficiencies for which Tucci takes the Tibetan authors to task are the inconsistent transcription of names, the proliferation of errors due to the slipshod work of copyists, the fact that direction of travel is rarely given, distances are never registered except in days, and that whereas “in some cases the places are mentioned one after another; in other cases our pilgrims seem to forget the intermediate halts and record only the starting-point and the place of arrival”.<sup>15</sup>

The Tibetan accounts may not have the precision of their Chinese predecessors, but perhaps Tucci is being too harsh. Brenda Li’s study of the travels of Khyung sprul ’Jigs med nam mkha’i rdo rje in the early twentieth century, and those of O rgyan pa in the thirteenth, demonstrate that these works do contain a great deal of reliable information concerning routes, sites, toponyms and suchlike – often corroborated, in the case of the latter, by Persian and European sources.<sup>16</sup> These pilgrimage accounts may also contain precious ethnographic vignettes of communities encountered in the course the authors’ travels. Surely one of the most interesting in this regard is the autobiography of dKar ru Grub dbang bsTan ’dzin rin chen (b. 1801), whose keen observations offer valuable insights into life in the Nepal Himalaya more than a century before the first professional anthropologists entered the country.<sup>17</sup>

Now, the narratives produced by the authors mentioned above are not free-standing pilgrimage accounts but biographical works. Insofar as pilgrimage guides are themselves often compilations of excerpts from a number of biographies and hagiographies, life writing must also be considered an important literary genre for a broader understanding of the practice: while the compilation of excerpts tends to be piecemeal, the biographies they cannibalise generally give important information about the circumstances in which the journeys were made, and the authors’ motivations for undertaking them in the first place.

If Tucci’s complaint about Tibetan pilgrims’ cavalier treatment of concrete information is partly justified, that is because the main purpose of these authors was less to deliver accurate route descriptions than to instill devotion in their readers through their depiction of the wondrous places they visited. Such accounts may stand in stark contrast with more prosaic representations, albeit by self-styled pilgrims.

This sort of contrast is vividly illustrated by the accounts of visits to Amritsar, in Punjab, made by two travellers from eastern Tibet a few years apart from each other.

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14 Tucci 1940: 61.

15 *ibid.*: 61.

16 Li 2008; 2011.

17 Ramble 2008b.



The first is by a certain rKyang btsun Sher nam, a Bonpo from Khams who visited the sacred sites of India in the mid-1940s. He returned to Tibet via Mustang, and left a draft of his account in the Bonpo village of Lubrak, where he stayed to write up a fair copy of his travels that, to the best of my knowledge, has never come to light.

The part of the journey with which we are concerned<sup>18</sup> takes him by train via Lucknow, and then on to Haridwar. After a brief visit to the city (*rgyal sa*) of Dehradun (Ghu ru sDe ra 'dun), a place blessed by Padmasambhava, he travels on to "rGya mkhar ba chod, known as A 'bar".<sup>19</sup>

A 'bar is Amritsar, and the rGya mkhar ba chod with which he identifies it is nothing less the palace built by Mi lus bsam legs, the Royal *gshen* who, according to Bonpo tradition, was the revealer of the Mother Tantra (*Ma rgyud*). The focus of the writer's interest is the Golden Temple of the Sikhs, a building situated in the middle of the town, "standing on the firm foundation of an island in a lake". Engraved swastikas are displayed, it has arched doors on each of its four faces and is set with a variety of precious stones, too numerous for him to list by name. After describing the impressive appearance of the place at some length, the author compounds his identification of the Golden Temple as a Bonpo holy place by conflating the Sikh priesthood with that of his own faith:

Their principal *gshen* is the Subduing *gshen* with the 'bird-horns'. His secret name is Guru Nanak. His teachings were the Bon of Relative and Absolute Truth. He holds in his hand the Sword of Wisdom... This place was established as a citadel for the life-force of the eternal [Bon] tantras until such time as the future teacher should come. The essence of the sect is the sphere of supreme Bon. These are the haunts of the saints of the Supreme Secret *Ma rgyud*. At this holy place the oceanic assembly of the tutelary gods and buddhas, the divine community of the nine tiered ways, gather like the clouds. On the fifteenth, thirtieth, eighth [and twenty-second of each month] and on the special days of the *Ma rgyud*, the right kind of people, faithful and endowed with merit, may see the face and body of the Royal gShen himself.<sup>20</sup>

The basis of the association seems partly to be similarities in the appearance of the Sikhs and the descriptions of certain ancient Bonpos. Like some of the latter, Sikhs are conspicuous for their beards and elaborate headgear. While the 'bird-horns' are a distinguishing feature of the eighteen kings of Zhang-zhung, they were also apparently an insignium of early Bon priests.<sup>21</sup> The corresponding item in the case of Guru Nanak is undoubtedly the Khanda, the crescent horn-like motif of two crossed kirpans

18 A more extensive account of his travels may be found in Ramble 1998: 23-25.

19 rGya gar gnas kyi dkar chag: 15.

20 *ibid.*: 16.

21 Norbu and Prats 1987: 71-73; 127-128; Vitali 2008. For the relevant sources see Norbu and Prats 1987: xix; a priest called sTag lo Bya ru can is also mentioned in Karmay (1972: 45-46).

that appears in the Sikh crest, while the ‘sword of wisdom’ is surely the kirpan itself. The identification of the Golden Temple with rGya mkhar ba chod apparently enjoyed a quite widespread popularity among Bonpos.

Among other things, this excerpt offers a vindication of Heimsath’s scepticism of the ‘mutual constitutiveness’ of place and person in the case of pilgrimage. rKyang btsun’s vision of the Golden Temple has little to do with either devotional or historical local knowledge, but represents the imposition of a scheme conceived a long way from Amritsar, and fabricated out of Bonpo piety and the literary conventions of pilgrimage writing.

Another Tibetan account of Amritsar that it may be instructive to juxtapose with rKyang btsun’s is contained in a Tibetan work with a bilingual title: “Phyi lo 1944 nas 1958 bar bod dang bal po rgya gar bcas la gnas bskor bskyod pa’i nyin deb; A Pilgrim’s Diary: Tibet, Nepal and India 1944-1956” (short title: “A Pilgrim’s Diary”).

Tucci would have approved of “A Pilgrim’s Diary”. In 1944,<sup>22</sup> in his 49<sup>th</sup> year, the author, Tshongpon Khatag Zangyag (1896–1961), set off from his native Zalmogang, in Kham, through Central and Western Tibet and subsequently into Nepal and India. Although the title implies that the journey is a pilgrimage, the author’s attention is given to a far wider range of concerns that is typical of such works. The journal format – it is evident that the writer was assiduous in keeping notes about his daily activities – offers a clear temporal structure, and while the main focus is on the religious monuments seen in the course of each day, there is a good deal of incidental information that does not characteristically feature in pilgrimage narratives. The descriptions are factual, leaning more towards history and iconography than to the metaphysical, and the meticulous record of donations he made to each religious institution reminds us that though Khatag Zamyag may have been a devout Buddhist, his title of Tsongpon (*tshong dpon*) – ‘master merchant’ – was by no means merely decorative. There is a great deal of other incidental information that makes this diary far more than just a catalogue of worthy sites: how the author successfully evaded brigands on several occasions; spent several days in an outcaste community; saved deer from hunters; fulminated against the trade tariffs imposed by the Central Government; stitched up the face of a beggar-woman who had been savaged by a dog – this backdrop of quotidian miscellanea paints a scene of daily life in Tibet on the eve of its Peaceful Liberation far richer than we might find even in works that purport to do precisely that. However, it is not the emerging picture of Tibet in the 1940s that concerns us here, but rather the fact that the protagonist’s ‘pilgrimage’ is at once a religious and worldly journey. For this reason among others, it would be most appropriate to consider this work not as pilgrimage literature strictly speaking but rather as travelogue.

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22 The date given on p. 13 is actually Earth Monkey (1908), which is surely an error for Wood Monkey (1944).

The following passage is a typical instance of his superimposition of the worldly and the spiritual, while providing a wonderfully sober counterpoint to the conventionally fantastic lyricism of his Bonpo contemporary, rKyang btsun, on beholding the city of Amritsar. The passage comes after an extensive description of the Buddhist sites of Varanasi and adjacent areas.

We spent one night in a pilgrims' resthouse in Varanasi, and on the following day went to visit the market and the silk factories and relaxed a little bit. We then returned, and in the evening bought tickets for a train that left at eleven o' clock. We changed trains at Bareilly, and then went on to Amritsar, a journey that took altogether four days and nights.

This is a place that has been blessed by Guru Nanak, who is a teacher of the Sikh religion. They have a tradition of distributing two pieces of bread twice each day. At that holy place, the outer, middle and inner parts of that place are made of stone. In the middle there is a very limpid lake, and the doors of that temple are made of pure silver, and the upper parts of that temple comprise four chapels that are made entirely of copper and gold.

Inside, the Sikh priests were reading the scriptures representing the utterances of Guru Nanak, that are their foremost sacred receptacles. People were coming in through the four entrances to make offerings of flowers and other items, and we tried our best to do as they did. Inside one temple there were ornaments that are said to be the ornaments worn by the divine consort Mandarawa, and in another temple we saw objects that are said to be the possessions of O rgyan rin po che.... In the evening we bought tickets and went on our way in a small train.<sup>23</sup>

The fusion of the economic and religious spheres in Khatag Zamyag's pilgrimage presents the perspective of the user – the man on the road, so to speak; but the two spheres might be combined in a genre of literature that, to the best of my knowledge, has been given little attention in the domain of pilgrimage. That is, documentation dealing with the infrastructure, the material and administrative aspects of travel.

### Managing pilgrimage and trade in Western Tibet

Some idea of the importance of this aspect of pilgrimage can be obtained from administrative records concerning the regulation of cross-border traffic between Tibet and India. Original documents of this sort are not available to me, but summaries of such resources are to be found in a compilation from Western Tibet, entitled "The Garland of Precious Treasure: An extended account of such things as the political

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23 "A Pilgrim's Diary:" 145-146.

history of Tibet's Ngari Korsum in recent times, the situation of several restored monasteries, and the development of contemporary society."<sup>24</sup>

As is unfortunately the case with many such recent gazetteers from different regions of Tibet, the "Big History" is vague about the period and nature of its sources, stating only that its content is based on local documents from different periods and on the oral testimony of elderly people who once plied these trade-and-pilgrimage routes. We therefore have no idea from this summary about any developments that might have occurred between the late seventeenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, we do obtain an idea of some conventions that operated at certain times over this period with regard to the regulation of religious and commercial cross-border traffic. The "Big History" contains a wealth of detailed information about the locations of trade marts, the trajectory of various trade routes, the kinds and quantities of commodities bartered and so forth, but since this material is not our main concern here I shall simply give an overview of the section and focus on the information relating to the structures for the management of trade and pilgrimage.

The point of departure is 1683, when Ladakh was expelled from Western Tibet by Central Tibetan forces under the command of the Mongol general dGa' ldan tshen dbang. The conclusion of hostilities resulted in the establishment of boundaries, and the formulation of strategies for maintaining what would subsequently become part of the international Indo-Tibetan border. Trade agreements were established between the various enclaves on either side of the border. To take the example of one enclave on the Tibetan side, Ruthog had such agreements with Ladakh, Garsha and Khunu in India. The largest number of registered trading parties came from Ladakh – over 100 households from 84 communities, with between five and eight individuals per household. Garsha and Khunu had a smaller representation, with 60 and 10 households respectively. In each case there were a number of different recognised routes. The exchange ratio for different commodities was fixed, and undercutting was illegal. The main occasion for trade into Tibet was a month-long mart in June and July.

Tibet concluded agreements with three different polities: Khunu, Ladakh and Triri, whose respective kings at the time were sKyer seng, bDe legs nam rgyal and Padam Singh. Tibet also had agreements with enclaves with which it did not share a border, such as Rampur, which every three years (the "Big History" is not quite clear on this point) would send emissaries to Tsarang with gifts of incense, aloes, three or four rolls of fine muslin, a gun and a sealed letter. Tsarang, in turn, sent Rampur a horse, together with a sealed letter and a ceremonial scarf. From the part of their hosts, the emissaries from either side were entitled to horse transport (*rta 'ul*), pack

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24 Bod ljongs stod mnga' ris skor gsum nye rabs chab srid kyi lo rgyus dang dgon sde khag zhig gsos grub pa'i gnas tshul / spyi tshogs gsar pa'i 'phel shugs sogs rgyas par brjod pa'i 'bel gtam rin chen gter gyi phreng ba zhes bya ba bzhuks so / The work also carries the more convenient English-language title "Big History of Ngari Korsum", and I shall therefore refer to it here by the short title "Big History".

animals, milk, tsampa, tea, lodging and firewood. Representatives from the Tibetan and Indian sides would periodically travel the route to ensure that traffic was moving smoothly and that all parties involved in its use and maintenance – and especially their own expatriate communities – were happy and flourishing. The work refers to the custom whereby trading partners on either side of the border would break a rock in two and each keep a piece, but does not explain the purpose of this procedure. Here we are fortunate to have an account by an Indian author writing in the 1930s. Trade was based on cross-border partnerships that were perpetuated over generations, and the half-stones served as guarantees of the bearer's genuineness: "An ordinary stone is broken into two parts, one portion remaining with the [Tibetan] correspondent and the other with the [Indian] Bhotiya. The representatives to the two men are to be recognized by these tokens. If the two parts fit together the representatives' bona fides are established" (Pant 1988 [1935]: 218)."<sup>25</sup>

The border arrangements were written on copper plates. While – as one might expect – the agreements were concerned primarily with trade, a certain amount of attention was also given to pilgrimage connections (*gnas 'brel*), monastic affairs (*chos 'brel*) and cross-border kinship ties (*nye 'brel*). It appears to be the case that reciprocal arrangements operated between enclaves. Thus when pilgrims from rTsa rdzong travelled to Rewalsar (mTsho padma), the people of Khunu were obliged to provide them with accommodation and other facilities. It is not actually stated explicitly, but we may suppose that corresponding hospitality was provided by Tibet for Indian pilgrims to such places as Pretapuri and Kailash. These pilgrimage connections, the "Big History" states, contributed to the development of close ties between the communities on either side of the border.

The information about pilgrimage management given here is certainly slender, but it is worth mentioning if only because of the general paucity of such material. Scholarly interest in Tibetan (and presumably other traditions of) pilgrimage have understandably tended to concentrate on the more obviously religious and experiential dimensions of the practice, but to comprehend the activity as a *fait social total*, the effort of tracking down and analysing documentation on the material and administrative aspects of the tradition would surely be rewarding.

Control by groups of individuals over certain nodal pilgrimage sites can yield rich rewards in terms of political power, prestige or wealth. Well-known historical demonstrations of this fact are to be found throughout South Asia, though instances of such appropriation in the Tibetan world have formed the subject of relatively few studies.

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<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to John Bray for drawing my attention to this work.

## Virtuous works: reading between the lines

The last example I wish to examine also falls into the ‘administrative’ category, in that it deals with the disbursement of government funding for the development of a famous pilgrimage site in highland Nepal. Like the previous example it concerns the intersection between the commercial and the spiritual, but here the relationship between the two is less explicit and more insidious. The case dates from the late 1950s and relates to the infrastructural development of Muktinath, a sacred site located in the southern part of Nepal’s Mustang District. Known in Tibetan as *Chu mig brgya rtsa*, the Hundred and [eight] Water-spouts, Muktinath is sacred to Buddhists but especially to Hindus, who come to visit it in increasingly large numbers (thanks to recently-opened road access) from throughout South Asia. Until recently, access to the shrine entailed a walk of almost a week from Pokhara, and since the nearest villages are at some distance from the site, pilgrims would often have a hard time of it with inadequate lodging and unfamiliar cold.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Mustang had been under the effective control of the customs contractors, who had the title of *subba* and exercised a considerable degree of jural and economic authority. The majority of the *subbas* were Thakalis of the Serchan family, with their homeland about a day’s walk to the south of Muktinath. The document in question, which is contained in the archive of Baragaon, was issued in 1958 by the *subba* Lalitman Serchan. The government of Nepal and a number of private patrons have given funding for the provision of basic facilities for long-distance pilgrims, and the document is at once a sort of project report and an appeal for further endowments. The first eighteen lines or so summarise the well-known myth of the founding of Muktinath<sup>26</sup> and extol the spiritual qualities of the place before coming to the main matter of concern:

The fine qualities of this place with regard to accumulating merit and wisdom are continuing to increase, and there is no doubt it will eventually cease to abide here and will be transferred to the sphere of transcendence – this much is clear from numerous scriptures. And nowadays there are people who, naturally, hope to find shelter, clothing, and a mat to lie on, but since there are no villagers near the site there is no one who can provide mats or clothing, with the result that the indigent or the unwell who have travelled great distances experience considerable hardship. ...In the ninth month of the Fire Monkey year (1956), the Thak *subba* Lalitman led an appeal to the local community, to the effect that “You six villages are in possession of a pilgrimage site so exalted and blessed the like of which is not to be found anywhere in India, Tibet or Mongolia.” [A committee was formed consisting of] three piously

26 For a description of the shrine of Muktinath from about the time this development project was conceived, see Snellgrove 1981: 119-201; for the text and translation of the foundation myth, see Snellgrove 1979: 106ff.

inclined people from each village, a doctor to provide medical assistance, and us [two] officials – about twenty-one people; for all those pilgrims from different places who travel to this holy site, a guest house, beds, mattresses, pillows, clothing, and someone who has knowledge about all necessary medical attention and especially as the means of supporting devotional activities as fully as possible, His Majesty's Government and certain prominent individuals provided support. In the ninth month of this Fire Bird year (1957), a guesthouse, fifty beds, 300 mats and pillows as well as clothing were made available, and we request individuals to provide donations like droplets in the ocean in the future. If this happens, there will be a progressive annual development at this sacred place, and for this we are sincerely grateful.

(The members of the 21-man committee are listed)

The list of names given above shows the president (*sku ngo*), the overseer (*las dpon*), and the doctor, as well all the other pious officers who were appointed from the respective villages. Last year, in the ninth month of the Fire Monkey year (1956), the chairman presented each of them with an auspicious white scarf; and this year, from the first part of the third month of the Fire Bird year (1957) of the sixteenth Prabhava Cycle, 100 workers per day, and never fewer than fifty, completed the construction of the guesthouse in the ninth month. With this, thanks to the benefaction bestowed by His Majesty's Government of Nepal in response to our appeal, the pious task was brought to a successful conclusion. Small contributions were also made for the workers, and moreover, with the donations made by the high and lowly alike the expenditure ran to many thousands of rupees. It is our wish that further benefactions for this sacred enterprise may enable it to continue to flourish in the future.<sup>27</sup>

27 In the (unedited) line-by-line text of this passage given here, the following conventions have been adopted: single underlining denotes an insertion above the line; double underlining an insertion below the line; Z stands for the *che rtags* symbol; text in square brackets [...] indicates lacunae that can be filled with reasonable certainty from the context; text in round brackets (...) represents the full-length rendering of contracted forms (*bskungs yig*) that are reproduced as precisely as possible immediately beforehand.

18. ... / *tshogs sogs sgrib sbyong sa lam gyi yton (yon tan) kyang gong nas gong 'phel du brgyur nas thar mi gnas pa'i myang 'das kyi go 'phang kyang 'khrod par the tshom medr (med par)*
19. *mdo brgyud mang por gsal bas yang 'ding sang snying mi rang mdangs kyi mi rnam 'phal cher gnas dgos gdan sogs la re ba byed mi yod kyang / gnas 'dir grong mi sogs med par gdan gos dbyar mi*
20. *yang med cing / thag ring 'brul ba nyam thag rnam dang nad pa sogs 'byung pa rnam la 'o rgyal chen po dang / gzhanng (gzhan yang) gnas 'dir gra grigs byed gos gos gi sku brag sogs phebs kyang / gnas sa bya tho*
21. *bas kho gos gis rgyus yod byed mi sogs gang la yang phan 'phyir du / me pho spres lo'i zla dgu pa'i nang du thags krugs cad su pa la sli sman gis dbu 'dren dkas bskul ste khyed rang yul 'isho*

On the evidence of this document, then, the *subba* acted as the conduit for government funding with which to build a lodge and to provide beds and bedding for pilgrims. A committee of local representatives was constituted, and the virtuous local population provided labour for which they received pecuniary tokens of appreciation, even though they had no expectation of being reimbursed for their work. “Many thousands” of rupees were spent on the construction, and the members of the committee were honoured with ceremonial scarves. The document does indeed have the binocular perspective of the temporal and the spiritual, but the two aspects are so much in unison that they cannot really be said to give the three-dimensional vision that more dissonant voices might provide.

These events took place almost sixty years ago, before the living memory of most people in the Muktinath Valley, and within a decade or two from now all that will have survived of this episode is this testimony of harmony and piety. All the members of the twenty-one man committee are dead – except one. The sole survivor is a certain Pema Wangdrak from the village of Chongkhor, who is now in his 80s and has a very lucid memory of this particular project. It is on his unwritten recollections of the episode that we must depend for a perspective that enriches the dull harmony of the official narrative.

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22. *drug gnas chen 'di ltu (lta bu) rgya bod hor gang las kyang khyadr (khyad par) 'du 'phag bzhing sbyin rlabs cheno (chen po) dug pas / yul so so nas mi dge semsn (sems can) gsum res dang / sman bcos byed pa 'i sman pa gcig /*
  23. *sku ngo bcas khyun sdom mi ngo nyiu (nyi shu) rtsa gcig rtsam gyi gnas 'dir phyogs mi mtha' tad kyi gnas bskor ba rnam la / mgron khang khri 'u shing / gdan / sngas / gos / sman khos bya gang rig gi rgyus*
  24. *yod bcas dang / khyadr (khyad par) gnas 'dir phyag chod sogs gang zabs byed rgyu 'i rgyu yi brten phyir du si ri gor brgyal dang mi grag so 'i snangs sbyin 'brel pa bcas nas / 'di lo me bya zla dgu pa 'i tshe nang mgron khang*
  25. *khri 'u shing 50 sngas gdan 300 gos bcas legs par 'grub shing / rjes sor so so nas rgya tsho chu thigi (thig gi) 'brel ba gang zab re snang rog Zzhu zhu / 'di ltar 'byung na gnas phyog 'dir lo rim bzhin dar rgyas su bsgyur bar (25b) dug pas thugs byag Zzhu zhu mkhyeen (mkhyen mkhyen) mkhyeen (mkhyen mkhyen) /...*
  31. *'di ltar gong bsal ming byang nang ltar gis sku ngo las dpon sman pa rnam [dang?] las byed dge sems can sha stag rnam yul so so nas gdam kha byas nas na ning me spre zla dgu ba 'i nang du smonm (smon lam)*
  32. *'debs rten 'brel gi dar kha re sku ngo nas snang ba yin bzhin / 'di lo rab 'byung bcu drug 16 gi nang tshan me bya lor zla 3 ba 'i yar ngo nas bzung ste las mi nyin re bzhin brgya 100 dang lditr ('di ltar) nyung*
  33. *yang lnga bcu 50 las mi nyung bar byas nas zla dgu pa 'i nang 'du mgron khang legsr (legs par) 'grub / de thogs la si ri gor brgyal la snyan Zzhu phul nas sngas sbyin dang de ltar dge ba 'i las grub pa legs 'byung gsung nas / so*
  34. *re kyang snang 'byung / ma tshad da lta thub la 'byung pa 'i bzhal 'debs tho dman mang po nas 'byung pa 'i thogs nas 'gro tshong stong stong phrag mang po song dug shing / slad nas rnam dkar gis las*
  35. *la 'brel ba jitr (ji ltar) 'byung ba rten nas gong nas gong 'phel du byed rgyu yod pa 'zhu zhu /*



According to Pema Wangdrak, the ‘voluntary’ labour of the local population was largely coerced, and the ‘small contributions’ were so small as to be derisory. The oppressive Rana regime under which the *subbas* had flourished had been ousted six years previously, and Nepal was now enjoying a period of democracy under the rule of the Congress Party. But *subba* Lalitman was closely associated with the Congress Party, and the power of the *subba* was still something to be feared in Mustang. The ceremonial scarves with which the committee were honoured were regarded by all the recipients as a contemptuous substitute for the honorarium they had been expecting. Only a relatively small part of the construction costs were used for the designated purpose – the *subba* kept the rest – with predictable consequences for the resilience of the lodge. All that is generally known is that within a year or two of the building’s completion the roof began to leak, and before long, fell in altogether. No maintenance was carried out, and after a decade the house was reduced to a derelict shell.

### Conclusion

Pilgrimage is a physical activity intended as a discipline for those whose low level of spiritual achievement requires that they engage in such bodily routines; for more accomplished aspirants, it offers the opportunity to frequent powerful places whose inherent qualities ensure higher-yield meditation. While a narrow focus on emic theories of pilgrimage is likely to yield characterisations of this sort, the guide-books to individual power places will provide the diversity of features that such extrapolations obviously lack. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that – as in the case of hagiographic literature, and with the same occasional exception that adds welcome contours – *gnas bshad* are largely formulaic, and differ from one another mainly in matters of local detail.

While the Tibetan term for pilgrimage, *gnas skor*, is explicit enough with regard to the activity it designates (‘going around places’), this does not mean that the study of the institution should be confined to its narrowest definition. Any more than a study of marriage should – or could – ignore the domains of kinship, social hierarchy or domestic economy. Thinking outside the confines of the core activities of pilgrimage is of course nothing new in Tibetan Studies, as even the few examples of recent scholarly literature cited above will surely have made clear. The present contribution, I hope, will have helped to emphasise the worthwhileness of a catholic approach to the question of which literary genres an investigation of the phenomenon might embrace. A *gnas*, after all, is a place, not just a space, and it is only this kind of inclusiveness that will permit us to appreciate the density of the places around which Tibetans go.

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**Lumbini International Research Institute**

P.O. Box 39, Bhairahawa, Dist. Rupandehi  
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