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Introduction

Everyday Religion among Pastoralists of High and Inner Asia

Introduction. La religion chez les pasteurs de Haute Asie et d'Asie Intérieure

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Introduction

Everyday Religion among Pastoralists of High and Inner Asia

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Gillian G. Tan and Nicola Schneider

- 1 The various papers collected in this volume were part of a panel at the 13th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies held at Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, in July 2013. The location of the conference provided a special opportunity for collaboration between academics in Tibetan and Mongolian Studies, and particularly in the twin areas of nomadic pastoralism and everyday religion. The opportunity to explore comparative potentials by looking at the similarities and differences among daily religious practices both within and among Tibetan and Mongolian pastoralist societies was taken up by the various panel members, who have each contributed a paper to this volume. An additional overarching frame that emerged from the panel itself was the contextual backdrop against which these daily religious practices were occurring. Both Tibetan and Mongolian pastoralists¹ have been influenced by the policies of communist China and Russia respectively, and each set of communities is undergoing significant transformation in the light of an increasing “opening up” in social and economic control. In view of these contexts, what kinds of religious practices are emerging, or re-emerging, as a result of this changed socio-economic environment? How are connections and relationships to past practices modified and altered? Who are these agents of change, and from where did they receive inspiration? What conclusions might be drawn about the persistence of daily religious practices among these pastoralists?
- 2 If one thing has emerged from the preparation for this volume, it is the realisation that there is relatively little written about religious practices in pastoralist communities, particularly in Tibetan Studies. Ekvall and Samuel are notable exceptions to this statement and both have written in a comparative manner in the context of Buddhist and folk religious practices, noting that a “dualism” of these concepts does not hold for pastoralists themselves, who in their everyday lives, seamlessly combine the “clerical” and “shamanic”. Notwithstanding individual studies on religious practices in pastoralist communities, this volume presents the first concerted effort to consider contemporary religious practices of both Tibetan and Mongolian pastoralists. It is not meant to be

exhaustive or representative of the different modes of pastoralists' religious lives found all over Tibet and Mongolia. However, it is our conviction and hope that this will at least represent a first step and will encourage further research in this regard. In so doing, it also presents a clear effort to consider religious practices *ethnographically* and *anthropologically*. As Lindskog (this volume) notes among Mongolian pastoralists and the revived *ovoo* tradition, the focus is on the “doing” of ritual practices rather than “understanding” of ritual texts. This aspect is also in line with Adam Chau’s recent work on different religious modalities and the necessity to take into account what he calls “doing religion on the ground” (Chau 2011, p. 594), that is the study of relationships between humans and deities and those among worshippers, of building of temples, making offerings, taking vows, organizing temple festivals, pilgrimage, establishing religious communities, and so forth. In short, it is important to consider sociability and connectedness, which are induced by religious practices (*ibid.*, pp. 551-552) and, indeed, to call into question a general separation of “religion” from other domains of life (Powers 2007, Tan 2014).

- 3 The volume begins with Lindskog’s consideration of a revived *ovoo* tradition among Halh herders in post-communist Mongolia. Describing with detailed ethnographic precision and sensitivity the various stages of the ritual process for participating pastoralists, Lindskog suggests – following Lindquist and Evens – that the power of the ritual lies in its performance and in the ability of participants to draw relations not only from religious aspects but also from social interactions. In fact, the underlying power resides in how the doing of the ritual connects participants to ontological notions of *baidal* (the state of things as they are) and *baingal* (that which is nature). In light of post-communist Mongolia, these notions are even more relevant for herders as they negotiate contemporary changes in their socio-economic contexts.
- 4 Charlier’s article aims at showing how movement and fixity are complementary aspects in the life of Dörvöd herders, living in Western Mongolia. Whereas mobility is at the heart of their extensive rearing of sheep and goats, nomadic herders remain strongly attached to their “homeland” (*törsön nutag*). This attachment is not only established at birth, but actualised and developed regularly through daily, occasional and annual ritual actions carried out by both men and women. Thus ritual practices convey an idea of fixity and rootedness in the land, while mobility is a necessity for livestock rearing.
- 5 Gaerrang’s paper in this volume focuses on the contemporary vegetarian movement in Eastern Tibet, particularly as it is disseminated by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro and taken up by various Tibetan communities, not only pastoralist. Gaerrang argues that, despite various reasons for the growing popularity in vegetarianism, an important factor behind Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro’s uptake of these teachings comes from his interactions with, and reactions to, Chinese Buddhists. Providing valuable data both on the Khenpo’s interactions with Chinese Buddhists and local Tibetan interpretations of “vegetarianism” as everyday religious practice, Gaerrang concludes his paper by suggesting that the conceptual development of religion as a form of cultural identity emerges from a double historical movement: in the first instance, from the separation of religion from society forced by Chinese Communist policies, and in the second instance, from a re-integration of religion into, and as, cultural identity by Tibetans themselves.
- 6 Sulek’s article explores entangled relations between the “economic” and “religious” in the lives of pastoralists in the region of Golog, north-eastern Tibetan plateau. By examining the example of an economy based on a medicinal resource called caterpillar

fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), the article asks how compatible this economy is with the religious domain of local people's lives. It reveals where the conflict zones are and shows them as opening the field of possibilities for human agency in minimising their effects. It proposes an "economy of sinning" as a conceptual tool to analyse pastoralists' decisions made in various ("religious" and "economic") domains and shows how interdependent these domains are.

- 7 Tan's contribution to this volume looks squarely at one ritual practice among Tibetan nomadic pastoralists, namely the ritual of freeing life (*tshe thar*). She complements a consideration of one form of this ritual practice in a contemporary local community, with a detailed description of a vernacular understanding of "life". She then argues that this collective data reveals a complexity of thought and practice that cannot be reduced to a conceptual binary between mental and material forms. Attention to practice contributes to the ongoing critical discussion about the intersections between religion and the environment.
- 8 The two final papers both draw on the subject of the Buddhist monastery in Tibetan pastoralist contexts. Schneider asks in what way the monastery is a product of, as well as an agent in, the Tibetan pastoralist world. She compares two institutions situated in the Minyang region, Lhagang Monastery and the more recently founded monastic settlement of Manijango. After presenting the historical context for both, she shows how the latter has contributed to the modernisation of Tibetan pastorals' lives and how, in turn, the population has chosen the vicinity of the monastery in which to settle by building their own houses, in some cases even with the authorities' assistance. In the light of current politics of "forced settlement", the monastery seems to be an ideal place for more permanent residence.
- 9 Sonam Wangmo, in turn, examines the relationships between the monastery and its surrounding lay community in the light of the rapid developments in Kham Minyang. She discusses how the economic growth, and especially the expansion of tourism, have led Lhagang Monastery to play new roles in the community, beyond the traditional function of ritual service. She also examines the discrepancies existing between elder generations of monks and laypeople on the one hand and, on the other, the younger members of the community who try to find new ways of practising Buddhism and promoting the monastery.
- 10 In summary, the articles in this special issue highlight the various integral ways that "religion" – through rituals of belonging and notions of homeland, through teachings of Tibetan incarnate lamas on vegetarianism, through clear interactions with economic activities and ritual activities related to the environment, and through increasingly interdependent connections between monasteries and pastoralist communities – continues to be important for pastoralists of Tibet and Mongolia.

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NOTES

1. For convenience, we have chosen here to use nomadic pastoralists for Tibetans and nomadic herders for Mongolians. For a discussion on the different terms, such as “nomad” and “pastoralist”, we refer to Dollfus 2012, pp. 23-28.

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Keywords: Tibet, China, pastoralism, religion, ritual

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