“Contested past, challenging future: An ethnography of pre-Buddhist Bon religious practices in central Bhutan”

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Abstract

The pre-Buddhist Bon beliefs, which concern the worship of unenlightened gods and until recently, live animal sacrifices, have been viewed as false and heretical by Buddhists since the 8th century. Consequently, Bon believers in Tibet became adapted to Buddhist influences and reconfigured themselves as an orthodox Bon primarily in reaction to the proliferation of Tibetan Buddhist schools in the 11th century. Nonetheless, the heterodox Bon beliefs and practices, while still deemed antithetical to core Buddhist beliefs, have remained widely practised in the Himalayan hinterlands. Despite the ubiquity of pre-Buddhist Bon worldviews in the Bhutanese way of life, Bon in Bhutan remains a slippery concept that is relatively little known outside of a small circle of academics.

This study examines the changing relationship between Bon and Buddhism through an ethnography of Goleng village and its neighbours in Zhemgang district in central Bhutan. It is concerned with the persistence of pre-Buddhist Bon religiosity despite the systematised opposition from Buddhist priests for over one thousand years and in the last three centuries or so from Buddhist state itself. Based on a 12-month fieldwork, this anthropological study investigates why ordinary people, despite shifting contexts, continue to practise and engage with Bon rituals, while still recognising what they are doing is antithetical to the civilising mission of Buddhism. Participant-observation among Bon believers and semi-structured interviews with farmers, government employees, prominent people, housewives, students, and above all Buddhist and Bon priests reveal how Bon beliefs are so deeply embedded in history, village sociality, and the ideas about economy, health and healing that some Buddhists paradoxically felt it necessary to reach a rather awkward accommodation with Bon priests. While the reasons for the persistence of Bon are manifold, multi-layered and overlapping, this study offers a more comprehensive picture of Bon beliefs and practices on the ground than is often presented, and the political, social, economic and religious situations that perpetuate, or otherwise affect the expression of those belief systems.