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 local gods and deities, and until recently, live animal sacrifices, have been viewed as heretical by Buddhists since the 8th century. Consequently, Bon believers in Tibet adapted to Buddhist influences and reconfigured themselves as a Clerical Bon primarily in reaction to the proliferation of Tibetan Buddhist schools in the 11th century. Nonetheless, Shamanistic Bon beliefs and practices, while still deemed antithetical to core Buddhist beliefs, still have a wide currency in the Himalayan hinterlands including in Bhutan.

This anthropological study examines the changing relationship between the Shamanistic Bon and Buddhism through an ethnography of Goleng village and its neighbours in Zhemgang district in central Bhutan. It is concerned with how the Bon practices have persisted in Goleng despite the systematised opposition to Bon from Buddhist priests for over one thousand years and in the last three centuries or so from the Buddhist state itself. It looks into the reasons as to why people, despite shifting contexts, continue to practise and engage with pre-Buddhist Bon practices, while still recognising what they are doing is antithetical to the civilising mission of the Buddhists.

In investigating this issue, I explore the ways in which Buddhists seek to control the Bon priests in the villages against the backdrop of local religious history, and document the centrality of Bon beliefs in shaping people’s everyday lives. While a significant reason for the strength of the persistence of Bon in the Goleng region is the recency of formal Buddhist institutions in the village, I show how Bon beliefs are so deeply embedded in village social life that some Buddhists paradoxically feel it necessary to reach a rather awkward accommodation with the Bon priests in Goleng and neighbouring villages.