Enspirited Places, Material Traces: The Sanctified and the Sacrificed in Modernizing Bhutan

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I argue that a politicized study of religion and ecology, drawing on the political ecology approach, and incorporating religion and spirituality as potential analytical variables, in the analysis of environmental dilemmas, is necessary. I illustrate my claim with case studies from the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan, in which I demonstrate the myriad ways in which religion and spirituality have material ecological effects in Bhutan and the Himalaya, through taboos that mediate human-environment relations, with regard to both forests and waste issues.

Religious and spiritual beliefs therefore leave material traces on areas that are protected and areas that are polluted. Through this analysis of the role of sacred natural sites in village life in Bhutan and around the world, I demonstrate a perspective that values the agency of non-human nature and landscape. Drawing on theoretical perspectives on pollution and waste, and Tibetan cultural perceptions of space, purity and pollution, I show how ritual and material pollution are related in traditional Tibetan concepts of space. At the state level, I demonstrate how Bhutan's waste crisis is not only a material crisis, related to increasingly uncontrolled and unmanaged refuse, but also a spiritual and political crisis of territorialization. I argue that 'green' and 'brown' environmental issues, and rural and urban issues, are inseparable in Bhutan. I conclude that indigenous and traditional spirituality, such as the deity beliefs of rural Bhutan, is one form of (everyday) resistance (Scott 1987) against the simplifying activities of the state such as functional territorialization (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995a).