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Book review of 'The Navel of the Demoness: Tibetan Buddhism and Civil Religion in Highland Nepal' by Charles Ramble

Geoff Childs

Washington University in St. Louis

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THE NAVEL OF THE DEMONESS: TIBETAN BUDDHISM AND CIVIL RELIGION IN HIGHLAND NEPAL

BY CHARLES RAMBLE

New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, Pp. i-ix + 393, including 3 maps, 10 photographs, and 16 figures. \$89.00 (cloth), ISBN 9780195154156

REVIEWED BY GEOFF CHILDS

The Navel of the Demoness is an extraordinary book, the most ethnographically detailed and historically contextualized study ever produced on a Himalayan community of Nepal. The analytical focus is civil religion in Mustang District, Nepal. Civil religion involves rites of governance that are secular in orientation, and that are geared toward creating social solidarity, legitimizing a political system, and mobilizing a citizenry. Although the concept has generally been deployed to analyze state-level polities, Charles Ramble demonstrates how civil religion can be gainfully applied at the village-level, and in the process departs from previous scholarship in the region that focused on the interface between Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions.

Chapter 1 provides a highly readable treatise on the history of Mustang. In Chapter 2 Ramble narrows the frame of reference by focusing on one enclave in Mustang, Shöyul, from the tenth century to the present. Relying on oral histories, written documents, and his extensive travels throughout the area, the author demonstrates how this enclave formed through a “demographic implosion” resulting from the dissolution of outlying settlements and the concentration of the population into five villages. The second part of the chapter details strategies that the people of Shöyul used to present a unified front to regional powerbrokers, especially around the turn of the twentieth century. The focus on Shöyul forms a backdrop to the juxtapositions revealed in Chapter 3, where Ramble narrows the focus to a single village, Te, and illustrates how the Shöyul villagers’ unified front has veiled persistent inter-village tensions. The author sets forth evidence, in particular from a 1796 edict, to illustrate how people raised and mitigated disputes.

The remaining chapters (4 through 11) focus primarily on the village of Te, and present a skillfully interwoven combination of ethnographic and historical data. Chapter 4 documents a transition from kinship (clan) to residence as the primary basis for social and political organization. Chapters 5 through 8 depict Te’s encounter with Buddhism and describe many local rituals in great detail. These form a backdrop for the concluding chapters that return to the theme of civil religion.

Chapter 9 describes how civil religion in Te has both Buddhist and non-Buddhist components, and includes secular rites such as publicly sworn oaths and the annual selection of village leaders. Ramble does a brilliant job of documenting how community laws have evolved over time, and uses his keen ethnographic lens to explain how such laws shape the relationship between the individual and the community. Exceptionally rich ethnographic details illustrate precisely how civil religion works in context. For example, in Chapter 9 Ramble discusses an oath sworn annually by every member of the community. He describes the public setting in which the oath is administered, transcribes and translates the oath, and then provides a line by line analysis of the origin and meaning of each sworn statement. Similarly, Ramble devotes Chapter 10 to the annual selection of Te’s leaders. He grounds the analysis in a broader ethnographic context, namely, Tibetan ideas of the heaven-appointed king, and carefully documents the strongly-held notion that leaders must be accountable to the people. He then details the process whereby the people of Te select their headman, and how they use various cultural conventions to make it evident—both symbolically and in practice—that those leaders will be held accountable for maintaining social harmony and the well-being of villagers. The book concludes in Chapter 11 with an interesting argument on how local systems of selecting leaders foster communal unity in this part of Nepal. That unity, Ramble argues, can be undermined by a national-level political system that diminishes leaders’ accountability and results in an increase in intra-village strife.

My criticisms of *The Navel of the Demoness* are trivial in light of the overwhelmingly positive aspects of this book. One drawback is the impression the author gives regarding the rigidity of Te’s social boundaries. Certainly the inhabitants of Te had good reason to remain aloof from their neighbors as Ramble credibly illustrates through both historical analysis (they became an isolate by not assimilating Tibetan cultural and linguistic mores) and in reference to more contemporary events (neighboring villagers often pilfer important resources, such as dung). Although Ramble notes that migration into Te (e.g., through marriage) has been historically rare, what he underemphasizes is that the permeability of boundaries in remote locales is often facilitated more through out-migration than in-migration. This very

issue was debated during the heyday of the “ecosystems” approach in anthropology (Moran 1990). I am reminded here of Netting’s claim (1981) of systemic closure in the Alps, a claim refuted by Viazzo (1989) on the grounds that Netting had not fully accounted for the impacts of out-migration on local communities. Those impacts are not only generated by the formation of social networks outside of the village, but also by the ensuing flow of information, technologies, and remittances between those who leave and those who remain. Conservative and inward-looking as the Tepas may be, they have certainly been exposed to a wealth of information by community members who moved elsewhere (according to Ramble, out-migration is not a new phenomenon and has intensified in recent decades). I am not suggesting that the author implies Te’s inhabitants existed in a hermetically sealed environment of their own creation. What I am suggesting is that Ramble underestimated the impacts on village life that out-migrants have exerted on Te, for example, from people who settled in places such as Pokhara and Kathmandu yet who continually interact with Te’s residents either in their new locales or during return visits.

The fact that this quibble is my main critique is a testament to Charles Ramble’s achievement in researching and writing *The Navel of the Demoness*. This is by far the best and most detailed study of local governance in the Himalayan region. The attention to detail is extraordinary, resulting in a highly nuanced and ethnographically informed analysis of conflicts and their resolutions at the village level. Although the book focuses primarily on the small community of Te, it cannot be relegated to the status of a mere “case study.” For one, Ramble positions the analysis on a sturdy theoretical framework, thereby imbuing this work with comparative implications. Furthermore, he uses his considerable research experience throughout Mustang to continually identify regional similarities and differences in ritual practices, social organizational principles, and so forth. He also situates the analysis within nested layers of political complexity that extend from the local (Shöyul and Baragaon) to the district (Mustang) to the state (Nepal and Tibet). Ramble navigates these layers through a skillful reading of primary historical sources and a careful presentation of ethnographic data.

In summary, Charles Ramble’s holistic account of overlapping economic, social, religious, and political spheres is clearly written, convincingly argued, and permeated with a luxuriant texture of cultural detail that could only be achieved by a master ethnographer. *The Navel of the Demoness* is an exemplary work of scholarship, one that can rightfully aspire to a lofty status in many regards: as an inspirational template for conducting diachronic research, as a solid contribution to local and regional history, and as an unparalleled statement on political organization in the Himalayas.

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Geoff Childs is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis. His research centers on demographic and social changes in Tibetan communities of India, Nepal, and China. He can be reached at gchilds@wustl.edu.

THE STORY OF TIBET: CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DALAI LAMA

BY THOMAS LAIRD

New York: Grove Press, 2006. 470 pp. illus. bibliog. notes, index, \$ 27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8021-4327-3.

REVIEWED BY SIENNA CRAIG

In recent years we have witnessed a new wave of books by, or about, Tenzin Gyatso the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet. The books range in topic and scope, from autobiography and social history to Buddhist self-help titles and treatises on the inner connections between cognitive neuroscience and tantric meditation practices. *The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama* is a nice addition to these other books, yet also unique in its perspective. If the book were to be viewed as a piece of art, it would be decidedly “mixed medium.” The narrative fluctuates between a variety of genres. Through both Laird’s voice and that of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the reader is presented with aspects of both textual and oral Tibetan history and myth, as well as social commentary on this history. Yet what makes this book unique is that these stories / histories are told as a dialogue, a correspondence, between an insightful journalist and one of the 20th and 21st century’s most