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Review Of "Consecration Of Images And Stūpas In Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism" By Y. Bentor

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Review

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Consecration of Images and Stūpas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. By YAEL BENTOR. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996. Pp. xiii+415. \$147.50.

In recent years, material culture has become a focus of scholarly interest among historians of religions. The reasons for this interest are numerous and varied but include the dramatic increase in the body of knowledge the field of religious studies addresses, greater specialization within the field, the influence of anthropology on religious studies, the importance of culture-specific fieldwork in dissertation research, the development of ritual studies, and even, I would suggest, the post-modern suspicion of essentialized systems. For example, Suzuki-like generalizations about Zen Buddhism have been deconstructed and replaced by detailed studies of the cult of Zen masters.

In the area of Buddhist studies, interest in material culture was advanced when Kevin Trainor (University of Vermont) and David Germano (University of Virginia) organized a four-year seminar under the auspices of the American Academy of Religion beginning in 1994 on the subject of Buddha Relic Veneration. The sixteen scholars of Buddhism who formed the core of the seminar shared an interest in relics, images, and other material signs integral to Buddhist devotional and philosophical thought and practice. Their areas of cultural study included India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Tibet, Nepal, China, and Japan. Yael Bentor, Department of Indian Studies, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, was a member of the seminar.

Bentor's detailed study of image and *stūpa* consecration rituals in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism is based on two years of fieldwork in the Katmandu Valley. It formed her doctoral dissertation at Indiana University under the direction of Gregory Schopen who himself has made a major contribution to the study of material culture in early Indian Buddhism. Bentor's monograph relies primarily on the three-day annual ritual reconsecration of the Bodhanatha Stūpa that took place in 1988. The ritual follows the manual written by Khri-byang Rin-po-che (1901–81), a junior tutor of the fourteenth Dalai Lama. The substance of Bentor's monograph is a translation and analysis of Khri-byang Rin-po-che's manual, "The Consecration Ritual, Immense Downpour of Virtue and Goodness" (*Rab-gnas Cho-ga Dge-legs Rgya-omtsho'i Char-bebs*) with additional references to the sections of the performance based on four shorter consecration manuals memorized by the ritual performers. A lengthy discussion of the substance and meaning of Tibetan consecration rituals precedes the author's translation and analysis of the text.

Bentor used Khri-byang's manual for reasons other than the consecration of the Bodhanatha *stūpa*. First, it is widely utilized in a variety of contemporary Dge-lugs-pa consecration rituals. Second, Khri-byang's reliance on earlier works gives Bentor's study both a diachronic and a synchronic dimension. Influences reflected in Khri-byang's work include Bu-ston, Tsong-kha-pa, Ratnarakṣita's commentary on the consecration section of the *Samvarodaya Tantra* and, most importantly, the consecration manual of the first Panchen Lama (1570–1620) on which Khri-byang based his text. Bentor's own analysis, furthermore, engages the complex historical debates among Tibetan pandits on particular points of ritual practice. She observes that although most Western scholars have shown little interest in these debates, ritual has been and continues to be a central part of

monastic training and is of major interest to Tibetan pandits. In this regard, the author sees her extensive work on Tibetan consecration rituals as a corrective to the preoccupation of Western students of Tibetan Buddhism with philosophy and meditation, largely ignoring the place of ritual expertise in monastic training. The existence of over two hundred Tibetan consecration manuals going back to the fourteenth century also reflects the tradition's persistent preoccupation with ritual. Bendor's observation regarding the relative lack of interest on the part of Western scholars in ritual texts and practice applies to other Buddhist traditions as well. Fortunately, recent scholarly attention devoted to ritual and to material culture is beginning to correct this imbalance and to provide a more accurate picture of both the monastic and lay religious cultures of Buddhist Asia.

Bendor divides her study according to the tripartite framework of Khri-byang's manual and the three-day sequence of the Bodhanatha *stūpa* consecration ceremony performed by the Dga'-ldan-chos-'phel-gling monastery. On the first day rituals to prepare both the performers and the receptacles for the Buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, and titular deity (*lha*) are held; the central and most elaborate part of the consecration ceremony (*dnegos-gzhi*) occurs on the second day; and the event concludes on the third day with a sequence of propitiatory and final rites. The major sequences of the ritual include: transforming the ritual performers into a chosen Buddha (namely, Vajrabhairava); dissolving the receptacle into emptiness; visualizing the chosen Buddha (*yi-dam*, *iṣṭadevatā*) out of emptiness; inviting this Enlightened Being (*ye shes sems dpa'*, *jñānasattva*) into the receptacle; unifying the visualized image (*dam tshig sems dpa'*, *samayāsattva*) and the Enlightened Being into nonduality (*guyis-su-med-pa*, *advaya*); the transformation of nondual emptiness back into the original appearance of the receptacle; requesting the *ye-shes sems-dpa'* to remain in the receptacle. The parallel transformation of ritual practitioners and material forms such as *stūpas* and Buddha images into the actual presence of the Buddha constitutes one of the remarkable features of the Tibetan consecration ritual. This dual transformation helps resolve the apparent dilemma of ascribing to the human ritualists the power to instantiate the universal Buddha body, for only by being transformed into a *yi-dam* can the performers then transform a material receptacle into an actual Buddha.

Bendor contends that the key to tantric ritual is transformation (*sādhana*) whereby ordinary reality and actual reality (i.e., emptiness, suchness) are merged. In essence, the consecration ritual (*rab gnas*, *pratiṣṭhā*) localizes the universal Buddha nature (*dharmakāya*, *dharmadhātu*) through the agency of transformation. Both ritual performers and receptacles—*stūpas*, *thang-kas*, images, books—are transformed by means of visualization and the performative power of chant. Three central Mahāyāna philosophical notions underlie the ritual: the three bodies (*trikāya*) of the Buddha, emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and the doctrine of two truths. The doctrine of absolute and relative truth serves to explain the paradox created by the instrumental agency of the ritual itself, namely, making present in a particular receptacle that which is already present. Ultimately, the universal Buddha body permeates to the four quarters of the universe but at the level of relative truth the consecration ritual instantiates the presence of the Buddha in reliquary and image for devotional purposes and for the accumulation of merit. The universal *dharmakāya* is transformed into a particular form (*nirmanakāya*). By means of visualization techniques and chant, the ritual performers transform a material

receptacle such as a *stūpa* or Buddha image into Enlightened Beings, thereby making them available for interaction with human beings.

Although not explicitly comparative in scope, the monograph is an invaluable resource for the comparative study of consecration rituals not only within the Indo-Tibetan cultural milieu but among other Buddhist traditions throughout greater Asia. In this connection, Bendor's analysis distinguishes between elements of the Tibetan consecration ritual unique to *tantra* and those adapted from earlier *sūtra* traditions such as the infusion of the reality principle dependent coarsing (*pratitya samutpāda*) into the receptacle through the ritual agency of various material objects including water and a bronze mirror.

If readers look to Bendor's study for a discussion of contemporary Western ritual theory, they will be disappointed. Such is not the author's intent. The monograph is a work of "thick description," making any review of its rich detail problematic at best. Nonspecialists in the area of Tibetan Buddhism are advised to tackle the *Consecration of Images and Stūpas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism* after first reading Bendor's shorter and more accessible treatments of the subject. These include, "Downpour of Virtue and Goodness: The Consecration Ritual Based on the Dge-legs Char-'bebs Composed by the First Panchen Lama," in *A Turning of the Wheel* (New Delhi: Tibet House, 1993), "Literature on Consecration [*rab-gnas*]," in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, edited by José I. Cabezón and Roger Jackson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1996), and "Horse-Back Consecration: The *rita-thong-ma* Consecration Ritual," in *Religions in Tibet in Practice*, edited by Donald E. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

The detail in Bendor's monograph reminds me of Fritz Staal's monumental study the *agnichayana*, which also led to a film on this ancient Vedic ritual. While readers of the *Consecration of Images and Stūpas* cannot help but be envious of the author's opportunity to have experienced the reconsecration of the Bodhanath *stūpa*, they may also regret that more of its affective power is not conveyed in the book. Both our affective and cognitive comprehension of the performative and philosophical complexity of the ceremony would be enriched by a cinemagraphic presentation of its visual richness. One hopes that the author will have the opportunity to return to the Kathmandu Valley to oversee such a project. Such caveats aside, Bendor's monograph plus her numerous articles on the subject of Tibetan consecration rituals greatly enhance our understanding of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and establish her as one of the foremost authorities on the subject of *rab gnas* (*pratiṣṭhā*).

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Studies in the Sermon on the Great War: Investigations of a Manichaeian-Coptic Text from the Fourth Century. By NILS ARNE PEDERSEN. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1996. Pp. 508. \$85.00 (cloth).

Pedersen's book is a study on one of the Manichaeian-Coptic texts from the Chester Beatty Collection published in 1934 by H. J. Polotsky. The main questions concerning the setting of the text are its relevance for Manichaeian liturgy and possible persecutions of Manichaeians from the Zoroastrian priesthood. Other