When Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library was first conceived, it was our hope that in this academic series we could cover the widest possible range of high quality but accessible academic work on Tibet and the Tibetan Himalayas. The aim is not just to include academic monographs, edited volumes, works of reference and reprints of important works, but also to make available research materials of a more original, controversial and occasionally also preliminary nature that hold great potential of generating further discussion and research.

Many Tibet scholars are already aware of John Vincent Bellezza’s broad and detailed archaeological surveys of the Tibetan plateau and his earlier work on pairs of sacred mountains and lakes in the Byang thang area. Based on those publications most will no doubt agree that it will be difficult to find a scholar better introduced to the material culture, myth and folklore of North-western Tibet. Therefore we are very pleased to include in BTSL Bellezza’s most recent scholarly work, *Spirit-mediums, Sacred Mountains and Related Bon Textual Traditions in Upper Tibet*, which, as the title indicates, examines the ubiquitous phenomenon of spirit mediums in these upper regions of North-western Tibet that Bellezza knows so intimately.

The book’s underlying thesis is one that forms a *Leitmotiv* in most of Bellezza’s work. It is the assumption of continuities in present-day local religious practices and lore—in this case of spirit mediums—with earlier strata of culture, which are variously qualified by the author as “indigenous Tibetan” and “pre-Buddhist”. Following general perception, Bellezza identifies Bon as a privileged carrier of archaic indigenous relics into present-day culture. It is a thesis that has frequently been voiced in Tibetan studies, but its substantiation, due to a lack of data (and particularly the reliable dating thereof),

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in tantalising ways has managed to remain out of reach. And even though at this point our state of knowledge may still preclude a definite judgement on the precise nature and extent of those apparent continuities, Bellezza, while aware of these limitations—particularly of the sketchy chronological framework—here nonetheless presents the best case possible for a survival of ‘indigenous Tibetan culture’ in the phenomena studied, and in the process he provides us with a veritable treasure trove of data. Based on Bellezza’s detailed arguments, the reader will be able to draw his own conclusions. While some will feel inclined to follow his working hypotheses, others may remain unconvinced or may even prefer to draw other conclusions.

Herein resides a great asset of the present study. Beyond its theses and their detailed argumentation, its descriptive and analytical detail provides a vast compendium, previously almost entirely unknown, of ethnographic, ‘material’, textual and oral data. Since the author clearly identifies his position, because of this scholarly integrity, he is able to facilitate the reader who feels so inclined to attempt his own investigation, inquiry, and conclusions, based on the data provided. In other words, the research materials will be of considerable and lasting value, whether one feels inclined to agree with the author’s point of departure and conclusions or not; or, if I may be permitted to phrase that in the author’s own words: “I have elected to minimise theoretical design in favour of descriptive analysis for the simple reason that I see the process of chronicling all-important at this juncture in Tibetan history. I am therefore, applying much of my energy to the careful documentation of cultural and archaeological materials in the field”.

Bellezza provides much evidence for the Buddhist appropriation of lore surrounding spirit mediums in upper Tibet, implicitly presupposing non-Buddhist strata that, over a long period and no doubt in various ways, were affected by the influx and establishment of Buddhist culture in Tibet. When constructing his argument in this way, Bellezza at the same time opens it up to further inquiry (by others) into the possibility of invention or redefinition of ‘indigenous culture’, particularly in its supposedly privileged relation to Bon. Indeed, the data provided may not only allow positing a Buddhist appropriation of the phenomena described but also appropriation by Bonpos, and per se do not force us to prioritize one tradition as (closer to) an archaic stratum that the other transforms. Much will of course depend on one’s frame of reference.
As is well known, in this context supporting evidence from the earliest sources (Dunhuang) is fragile, usually unspecific, fragmentary and ambiguous, occasionally heavily dependent on interpretation; indeed, the preponderant and at the same time most pregnant and eloquent literary evidence for ‘an indigenous past’ in fact turns out to be remarkably late; while oral data in this context must remain of uncertain date. Adducing later literary evidence of course invites questions regarding the precise (timeframe and context of) formation and provenance of these sources, which in turn may reflect on the perceived nature of the investigated phenomena. When queried, literary sources may reveal as much (if not more) about the time and context in which they have developed as (than) they may reveal about the ‘early indigenous culture’ that they are presumed to refer to or thought to have preserved relics of.

These are crucial questions that remain to be answered—and partly also asked—in future research projects. Possibly forthcoming answers will doubtlessly lead to fresh questioning on these lines. A close examination of the phenomena studied and the data adduced for their further elucidation, with a particular focus on their formation as datable cultural artefacts and on the architecture of their meta-narratives, may reveal a great deal about the dialogic nature of the formation of Bon and Buddhist traditions in the area and perhaps also result in a new understanding of the perceived references to ‘indigenous Tibetan culture’ or the appropriation thereof.

I should like to stress that it is not my main intention here to highlight alternate approaches and future tasks as such, but to explicate the sincere appreciation that ilk considerations—and there may be many others—would not have been possible at this point, had Bellezza not facilitated them by gathering his data and aligning them in a transparent way with his theses.

Wherever future research in this area may take us, I am convinced that Bellezza’s book will be read with great and lasting scholarly interest and I should also like to express the sincere wish, no doubt also on behalf of the author, that this study may for long engender the scholarly discussion that has proven so vital to the construction of academic knowledge. I should like to conclude by complementing the author with this truly impressive achievement.

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