Above the *Naga* Lakes: Kaplaś Kailas & Manimahesh Kailas

Introduction

Kailas-Manasarovar may now be considered Asia’s pre-eminent sacred mountain, but in the Indic world the concept of a mountain abode of Śiva known as ‘Kailas’ is not restricted to a mountain in Tibet. There are (at least1) five other such mountains in the western Himalayan regions of modern India; the Kaplaś, Manimahesh, Kinnaur, Adhi and Sri Kailas mountains.

The study of these sites draws attention to the fact that in both historical discourse and popular understanding the western Himalayan region is overwhelmingly contextualised as peripheral to some greater power. Whether the cultural centre discussed is the Kushan empire, Vedic, Epic, Hindu, Mughal, or colonial India, Zhang-zhung, Guge, or Buddhist Tibet, the region is almost invariably seen through the perspective of states or cultural empires. This reflects, of course, Western academic preoccupation with centralised polities, the reading of history as a lineal progression towards increasingly centralised empires, interspersed with fragmented periods of ‘darkness’ between epochs of elite central control.2 It also reflects the perspective of modern India with administrative divisions and regulations (e.g. Inner Line permits) enshrining the peripheral, albeit spiritually hallowed status of these regions in the Indian nation.3

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1 Neel Kanth, in Lahaul Spiti, is referred to as “Neel Kanth Kailas” in some modern literature; also see Madden (1848) who refers to a “Kylas” mountain apparently south of Almora, but I am unable to comprehend his geography. Tucci (1977: 27) notes a Kailas range northeast of Gilgit of which Rakaposhi is the highest peak. As this is now within Pakistan any Hinduisation processes have presumably ceased. The Indian Kailas mountains discussed here are those where the toponym *Kailas* is specified on maps or official publications.

2 That perspective is now being challenged, see for example Khazanov & Wink (2007); Beckwith (2009A).

3 That peripheral status does not imply neglect in modern India. The Himalayas attract numerous pilgrims, and strategic considerations ensure the presence of Indian Army personnel along with state activity aimed at development. The great majority of the population are from the higher castes, and economically the hill regions are among the wealthier Indian states.
Yet the ‘isolation’ of these places was relative. Not only were there organised systems for rapid communications from political centres to their peripheries (such as the ‘arrow letters’ in the Tibetan empire), but numerous individuals and groups regularly traversed the Himalayan regions. What did not travel easily across the mountain realms was external political authority. The Mughals, for example, whose cavalry forces were orientated to warfare on the plains, were unable to exercise direct authority in the mountains, and even British power in the Himalayas was largely mediated through local elites rather than imposed directly from the colonial centre.

What was characteristic of the Himalayan periphery was the latent development of modern state structures and processes. State formations retained a traditional character down to the British (and in the case of Tibet, the Communist Chinese), colonial period, with aspects such as summer and winter capitals, distinct religious and political centres, and imprecise external boundaries in which sovereignties merged or even overlapped. In that model of statehood there was none-the-less a centre, the physical body or symbolic presence of the king (usually representative of or closely associated with the regional deities), and there were replica centres around lesser regional rulers. Thus the model of statehood may be conceived of in terms of overlapping or even three-dimensional *mandalas* of power, or as “galactic polities” on the model famously proposed by Stanley Tambiah.4

From the perspective of the periphery, a separate identity and culture existed from that of the centre, indeed ‘peripheral’ Himalayan polities themselves claimed centrality, although factors such as limited resources mitigated against the wider or lasting acceptance of these claims. Thus while analysis focussed on the perspectives of centralised empires enables a centre-periphery division to be sustained and its processes demonstrated, the frontier model of historical processes and agencies seems to better represent the perspective of the periphery by locating it within dialectical historical processes.5

The western Himalayas were a cultural region in themselves. Given its frontier character the exact extent of that region is best left imprecise, but that referred to here is from the Kali river in the east (which forms the modern Indo-Nepali border), westwards through Kumaon and Garwhal, and northwestwards in the arc that includes the former Punjab Hill States, Kangra, Chamba, Kulu, and so on, while—for our purposes at least—ending with the Kashmiri realm.

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4 Tambiah (1985).
5 I have discussed the Himalayas as a historical frontier in McKay (2009); also see Lewis (1994: 25–46).