Chapter 11

Tibet’s Tise

Introduction

The modern understanding of Kailas-Manasarovar as a ‘World mountain’ is largely shaped by Indic perspectives and owes little to Tibetan understandings of the site. While Tibetan ritual practices enhance the modern experience of its sanctity the perspectives these performances represent are still poorly reflected in the modern construction. In this and the following two chapters we situate the site in Tibetan history, considering the disparate perspectives presented by the Buddhist and Bön faiths which both lay claim to particular representations of the mountain-lake complex.

We are well-informed as to the nature of Tibetan pilgrimage, particularly to sacred mountains. The great Italian Tibetological pioneer, Giuseppi Tucci, advanced the earliest model in which a tribe dwelling around a mountain came to identify it as their protector-deity.1 The mountain provided the necessities of life for the tribe and its herds and in return was worshipped through annual or biannual rituals carried out on the mountain-side. The mountain and/or mountain deity (for the two identities may subtly merge), came to be understood as being in a relationship with the tribal ancestors and leaders (as we saw was also the case in Korea). Thus the identity of tribe, rulers, and mountain were linked and the mountain served as a tribal identity marker vis-à-vis neighbouring tribes, each of which was in a similar sacred association with a particular mountain.

Although Tucci’s ideas survive more recent studies have refined this model and brought out the extensive variations in the world of Tibetan mountain deities, which exist in diverse contexts and ideologies.2 There is neither a single

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1 On whose scholastic legacy, see de Castro & Templeman (2015); for Tucci on sacred mountains, see in particular Tucci (1980: esp., 193, 202, 219).
2 There is now an impressive body of literature concerning pilgrimage and sacred space in Tibet, to which this present study is greatly indebted. See the bibliography for details. To briefly note only major edited collections and monographs, see Blondeau (1998); Blondeau & Steinkellner (1996); Buffetrille (2000); Ekvall and Downs (1987); Gutschow, et al., (2003); Huber (1999); (1999A); and (2008); Karmay (1998); Kind (2012); Macdonald (1997); McKay (1998); Ramble (2008); Tautscher (2007). For wider theoretical and contextual considerations, see in particular Huber (1999A) and a convenient summary of her thesis by Buffetrille (1998).
model of such deities nor even a specific Tibetan term for ‘mountain god’. The most common term—*yullha*—actually indicates a ‘village’ or ‘territorial’ deity, but in central Tibetan usage does frequently refer to a mountain deity (and the term is used here in that sense). The *yullha* is usually depicted as a fearsome warrior, to whom prayers might be offered on the following lines;

> In going to war, be our general. In trading, be our greatest trader. Whilst robbing, be our head of robbers. Lead the army to the land of the enemies, destroy them and achieve victory.³

A distinction can be drawn between sacred mountains presided over by such *yullha* (usually understood to have been converted to Buddhism), and ‘*gnas ri*’ mountains, where the presiding deity is from the Buddhist (or Bön⁴) pantheon. This distinction is in some senses one of stages in a process. As Toni Huber states;

> One can only consider all Tibet’s cult mountains in terms of a gradient along which they vary, from the “model” *néri [gnas ri]* at one extreme to the “typical” local cult mountain at the other, with most falling somewhere in between.⁵

Tise (as the Tibetans call the mountain now identified in India as Kailas), is at the “extreme” end of this gradient in that its presiding deity is entirely Buddhist. No certain trace remains of those elements that Samten Karmay and Katia Buffetrille isolated as defining a *yullha* mountain, notably a close relationship with local tribal leadership. What is prominent at Tise are the elements characteristic of a Buddhist *gnas ri* mountain; ritual circumambulation, a historical ‘opener’ of the pilgrimage, and the “ritual appropriation of space, in which written sources serve an important function.”⁶ This indicates that either Tise has been so thoroughly overlaid by Buddhist concepts that it has been completely

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³ Invocation to the mountain deity Gangmar (*sgang dmar*), cited in Diemberger (1998: 46). Very similar sentiments or formulas are cited by Charles Ramble (1998: 128) from a recitation by the *lha bon* (priests) of Khyenga village; “[i]f we go trading, make us the foremost traders, If we go to war, make us the generals …”

⁴ Huber (1999: 23) identifies “the cult of both Buddhist and Bönpo *néri [gnas ri]* as conforming to exactly the same cultural pattern.”

⁵ For a discussion on *yullha* and *néri* mountains and the complex range of forms these sites have taken in space and time, see Huber (1999: 21–35).