

Buddhist, Bonpo or 'Nameless'? Healing in Humla (NW Nepal) and the Kailash-Khyunglung connection

Mariette Wiebenga

This paper is based on explorations into West Tibet in 1998 and 2002, and ethnographic research in the Himalayan borderlands of Humla, NW Nepal, in the period in between. The Nyinba, a small Tibetan-speaking community inhabiting a mountain valley on a side stream of the Upper Karnali, had links to West Tibet since time immemorial, as evident from their origin myths, ancestor worship, incantations and healing practices. They have managed to maintain these links over centuries through trade and pilgrimage, though reshaping them time and again in response to fundamental socio-political change in the region.

In this paper, scenes from Nyinba healing practices will form the entry to examine first, the roles of dhams, dangris and lamas in changing social and political contexts; second, the links of their practices with West Tibet, notably Kailash and Khyunglung; and third, some epistemological questions related to the '(re-) imagining of history'.

The first point concerns matters of ethnographic interest, such as how Nyinba healers and their clients (used to) negotiate positions through ritual practices, how village rituals (used to) reinforce their 'Tibetan-ness' in a mainly Hindu country, and how these things change in face of recent developments (including the Maoist revolt). The second point, concerning the 'Kailash-Khyunglung connection', pertains to sacred geography, power places and related religious history. This point, finally, raises epistemological questions as to what extent ethnographic research and oral history, in combination with study of textual sources and ancient sites, may contribute to 'imagining history' (in this case pre-Buddhist, or early Buddhist and Bon history).