8-1-1999

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

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Review
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Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3176652

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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 postmodern 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 train­
ing. The existence of over two hundred Tibetan consecration manuals going
back to the fourteenth century also reflects the tradition's persistent preoccupa­
tion with ritual. Bentor'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.

Bentor divides her study according to the tripartite framework of Khri-byang's
manual and the three-day sequence of the Bodhanatha stūpa consecration cere­
mony 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 (dngos-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 sms dpa', jñānasattva) into the recep­
tacle; unifying the visualized image (dam tshig sms dpa', samayasattva) and the
Enlightened Being into nonduality (guyis-su-med-pa, advaya); the transforma­
tion of nondual emptiness back into the original appearance of the receptacle;
requesting the ye-shes sms dpa' to remain in the receptacle. The parallel trans­
formation 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.

Bentor 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, pratisthā) localizes the universal
Buddha nature (dharmakāya, dharmadhātu) through the agency of transforma­
tion. 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 (śunyātā), and the doctrine of two truths. The
document of absolute and relative truth serves to explain the paradox created by
the instrumental agency of the ritual itself, namely, making present in a partic­
ular 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
Pedersen's book is a study on one of the Manichaean-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 Manichaean liturgy and possible persecutions of Manichaens from the Zoroastrian priesthood. Other