

Marietta Kind, *The Bon Landscape of Dolpo: Pilgrimages, Monasteries, Biographies and the Emergence of Bon*

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THE STUDY of sacred geography has been one of the main devices through which our knowledge of Tibetan culture and society has advanced during the last two decades. A series of conference proceedings and monographs have demonstrated how religion, culture, history, and identity are rooted in understandings of sacralized space, and how these concepts are inscribed onto the landscape of the Tibetan plateau. Marietta Kind's *The Bon Landscape of Dolpo* is an outstanding contribution to this field and demonstrates both the variety of sacral constructions and the typological elements that lead to the multi-level understanding of sacralized landscape in this region. Essentially an ethnographic study, based on both text and fieldwork, it pays due attention to historical agents in Dolpo, a culturally Tibetan region of western Nepal in which both the Buddhist and Bon religions have constructed complex sacred geographies. That historical analysis sheds considerable light on the processes and strategies, successful or otherwise, by which those understandings have spread in this region.

The Bon religion, which is historically manifest in various forms, is here the systemized or clerical Bon, whose mode is in a particularly close relationship with Tibetan Buddhism. Like the Buddhist tradition, this Bon has been imposed from the outside by “lamas” who have settled in Dolpo and whose descendants or followers have adopted positions of religious leadership in local communities (169). Dolpo Buddhists also have their sacralized landscape patterns overlapping with those of the Bon, although the sense here is of two coexisting rather than strongly competing conceptions. The processes by which both Buddhist and Bon sacred geography have developed are similar and doubtless informed each other, indeed variants seem local rather than typical of one faith or other.

Seven Bon Dolpo pilgrimages are isolated and discussed here, three of which are sacred primarily due to their association with the activities of highly venerated clans of Bon masters: the Yangtons in Pawo Drunga, the Thabzhi in Khyungphuk (both of whose central sites comprise a cave and rock complex), and the Tretons in Lama Chumik (which comprises a cave and nearby sacred spring). The four other pilgrimages discussed here center on a sacred mountain. In two cases, those of Shey and Mugporong, they are *gnas ri* mountains, the “abode” of a Bon tutelary deity. But they are also abodes of a local *yul lha* (“territorial deity”; often conceived of as dwelling on a mountain), and in the latter case the *yul lha* still presides. At the other two sites, Jagdul and Riwo Palwar, there is no clear indication of the preexistence of a *yul lha* before these came to be considered the abode of the major Bon deities, Zhangzhung Meri and Walbon Takla Mebar, respectively.

Of particular interest is Shey “Crystal Mountain,” which is considered the sacred centre of Dolpo by both Bon and Buddhists. While each tradition understands the sacrality of the site in a different way, both groups circumambulate the mountain in the Buddhist style, that is, clockwise. The author identifies one aspect of this harmonious conception as being a shared interest in promoting a modern Dolpo identity in which the mountain is “an ideal identification marker appropriate for all groups” (253).

The author provides photocopies of the various forms of guidebooks (to the Jagdul, Riwo Palwar, Pawo Drunga, Mugporong, Khyungphuk, and Lama Chumik sites) and biographies of Bon masters that are the primary sources on which this work rests, along with Wylie transcriptions. Such primarily local texts are a resource of considerable value and add considerably to the long-term worth of this monograph. We might note, however, that in one case, unable to locate a guidebook to Khyungphuk (“The Garuda Cave”)—although one was rumored to exist—the author persuaded a local authority to write the basic points from memory, thus producing a work not entirely consistent with traditional forms. Kind acknowledges that local authority, Geshe Yungdrung Wangyal, as her main regional informant in Dolpo, but he unfortunately disappeared on a local trail in 2003. One is left to wonder if local minds connect the two events? While their composition is a living tradition, there are complex motivations and cultural associations behind traditional recordings of sacred knowledge and it would be unfortunate if the Western academic requirement prioritizing written sources over oral was to impact on these local processes. The author is clearly sympathetic to and immersed in her subject culture, and (having myself encountered a similar reluctance to commit orality to paper at a sacred Himalayan site), I am sympathetic to her efforts; nonetheless, some theoretical reflection on this issue would have been desirable.

In general it is not the author’s intention to critically interrogate the local worldview, but rather to represent it by analyzing Bon in Dolpo in the context of pilgrimage, “to comprehend the landscape of Dolpo as a cultural process” (23). In this the author succeeds admirably. We understand a process in which the local is drawn into the world religion, a mythical phase of early Bon sages subjugating and transforming other-worldly forces, “taming” the local environment and thus allowing human settlement. These sages and the miraculous incidents of their lives leave traces in the landscape, often associated with Zhangzhung, the semi-legendary early Bon kingdom, and classic Bon teachings and lineages. Their clans settle there and become key agents in the propagation of Bon, practicing, teaching, and establishing monasteries, and opening pilgrimages, a process of establishing Bon and inscribing that culture onto the landscape.

One key finding here is that Bon pilgrimage in Dolpo may be a recent phenomena, no older than the nineteenth century. Most of the sites have been “opened” to popular pilgrimage only since the mid-nineteenth and in many cases twentieth century, and in the case of Mugporong this ritually and historically significant action has not yet been carried out. This late development of at least aspects of Bon is consistent with the resurgence—or even the emergence (!)—of Bon in the adjoining western regions of Tibet during the nineteenth century. Indeed certain

individuals are agents in both regions and there are a number of visible attempts to link Dolpo sacred geography into wider Bon constructions such as those surrounding Targo/Dangra, Kongpo Bonri, and particularly Mount Tise (Kailas).

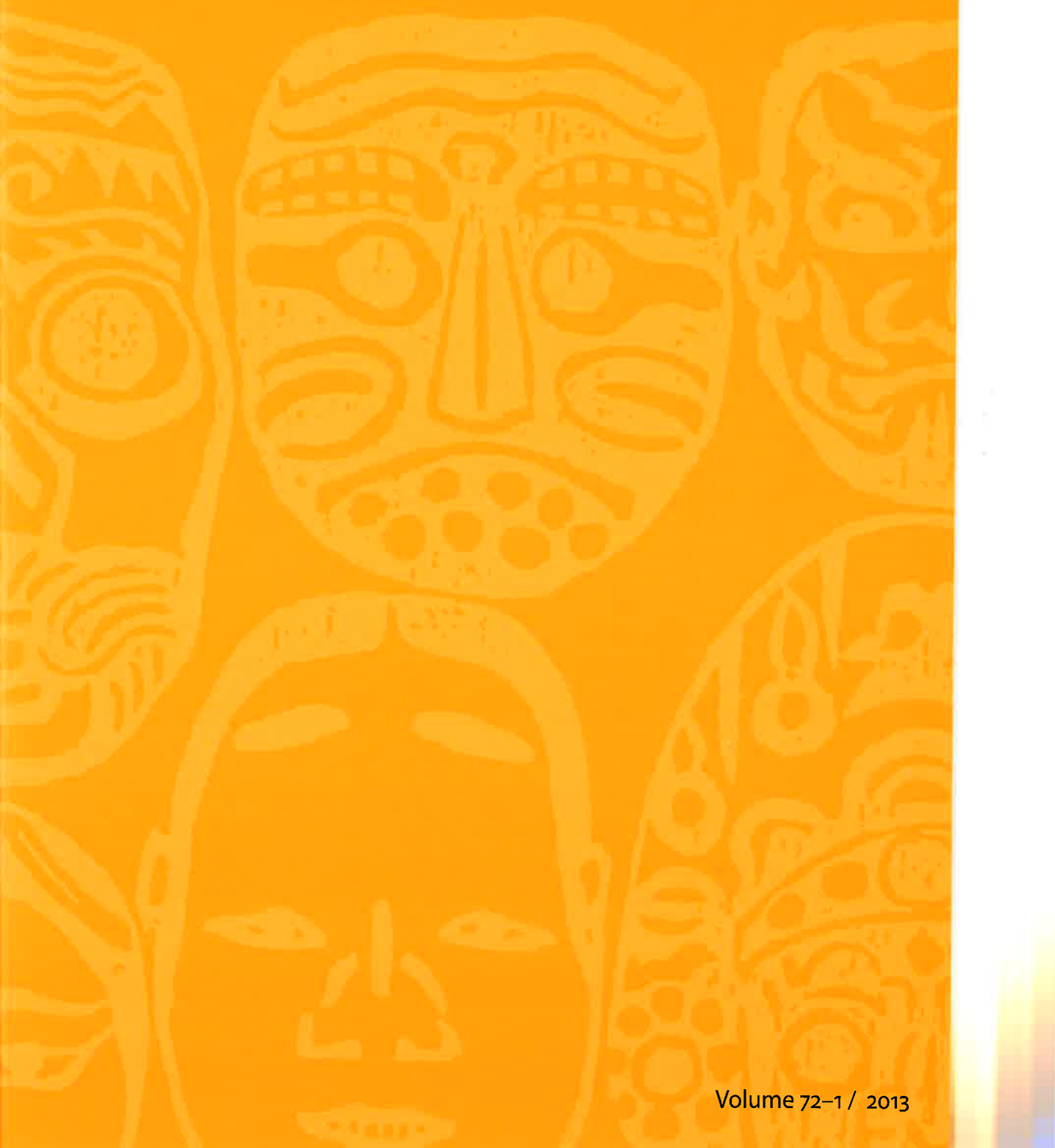
The author draws an interesting distinction as a result of her own extensive fieldwork in Dolpo, distinguishing an emphasis on the landscape in local oral biographies, while finding that the written texts focus more on religious activities. Generically Tibetan aspects—magic competitions between masters, lakes that drain away, events marked by impressions in the rocks, and so on—of course abound, but we may distinguish local elements in both types of chronicle, and even the continuing acknowledgement of non-Bon/Buddhist deities. That local world is outside the scope of this work, but will surely repay future studies; indeed it is a strength of this work that it suggests a number of lines of future enquiry. A brief reference to a Nepali version of one text being more Hinduized certainly raises interesting questions.

The work is extensively and well illustrated; indeed, the production values are high, and the text is enlivened by the author's scholarly but vivid accounts of pilgrimages and local individuals drawn from her own fieldwork. Descriptions of temples, landscape, and suchlike are extremely well presented. There are separate maps of Dolpo and the wider region included, along with various glossaries of people, places, Tibetan, and local terms. Any serious library in the field should include this work, and it should be of interest to students and scholars in related areas.

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