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Religious Bodies Politic: Rituals of Sovereignty in Buryat Buddhism is an original and timely contribution to our understanding of the transnational and political dimensions that Buddhism develops in a postsocialist context—in the present case, the shifting terrains inhabited over the last century, and in particular since the 1990s, by Buryat Buddhists between Russia and the larger Mongol and Tibetan Buddhist worlds. Drawing on recent conceptualizations of “bodies politic,” “sovereign bodies,” and “biopolitics,” Anya Bernstein focuses on a variety of settings in which bodies of living, dead, or reincarnated Buddhist practitioners become sites upon which politics of religio-cultural sovereignty plays out, and postsocialist economic, moral, and political transformations can be read. The central argument is that Buryats have had recourse to Buddhist varieties of “body politics” in their attempts to weather the political and social transformations over the past century and to articulate their relations with centers of political or religious authority (Russia/Tibet). The analysis is primarily anthropological and draws on a kaleidoscopic variety of historical and ethnographic sources: in each of the thematically quite distinct chapters, permutations of the central themes (transnational politics, capitalist and gift economies, Buddhist actors and bodies) are examined in multiple periods and/or locales. The author demonstrates a strong command of both thematic and areal literatures and has extensively read in both English and Russian (in the field, Russian, which is spoken by all Buryats, was the primary language of communication).

The structure of the book roughly follows the different types of bodies that the author brings into consideration. Thus the body of the former Russian President Dmitrii Medvedev (who in 2009 was declared by the official leader of Buryat Buddhists to be an emanation of the Buddhist deity White Tārā) is briefly discussed in the introduction. Chapter 1, working less from the angle of bodies strictly speaking, presents early twentieth-century Buryat Buddhologists and their lasting influence on Buddhist cultural politics in Buryatia. The author shows how this scholarly tradition was informed by, and today remains interpreted through the lens of, competing Asianist/Eurasianist ideologies of empire and competing visions of the relation between Buryat and Tibetan Buddhism: to put it simply, between those who uphold the superiority of Tibetan Buddhism and proponents of a distinctive and autocephalous Buryat Buddhism. Chapter 2 examines how Buryat-Tibetan teacher-disciple and reincarnation lineages (and thus “bodies” spanning several lifetimes) have facilitated the crossing of borders and ethnicities. These lineages, by which prestigious former Buryat masters extend their influence into the Buryat present—albeit

through Tibetan bodies—provide arguments for contemporary geopolitical imaginaries. Chapter 3 considers perhaps the most extraordinary of Buryat Buddhist bodies, the “incorruptible” corpse of Dashi-Dorzho Itigelov, a prominent master who died in 1927. His bodily remains, with implications in terms of the grandeur of the Buryat Buddhist tradition, constitute today an important site for debates on cultural sovereignty. Necropolitics appears to be a powerful means of (re)configuring histories and moral/political orders.

Turning more to ethnography, chapter 4 discusses the ways in which monastic bodily discipline (in particular, celibacy) is negotiated among contemporary Buryats in Tibetan exile monasteries in India and back at home. Buryatia, in its relatively short Buddhist history, has never fully developed a tradition of celibate monasticism, and celibate monks trained in exile Tibetan monasteries embody alternative, challenging, and vulnerable forms of authority and masculinity. Chapter 5 focuses on the visualized bodies of practitioners of the *chö(d)* (Tibetan *gcod*, “cutting” or “severance”) ritual practice, in which they visualize themselves being cut up, transmuted to ambrosia, and offered to all beings. This chapter reexamines certain theories of the gift but lacks perhaps in conclusiveness, as I will argue below. The final chapter leaves aside the guiding thread of bodies and examines how some Buryats—in particular, one monk-cum-capitalist entrepreneur—voice particular interpretations of Buddhist doctrine that resonate with newer postsocialist values of entrepreneurship and money. Here, as in preceding chapters, one finds original engagements with modernity. The epilogue concludes with reflections on the diverse and fragmentary nature of the contemporary changes in Buryat religion.

Through its transnational angle and its analytical articulateness this study succeeds in drawing what for many scholars might be a minor periphery of the Buddhist world into a larger web of fundamental issues of modern (state vs. minority, religious and otherwise) politics and identity. Another notable achievement is the demonstration of the importance of the bodily dimension in the political relations examined here; it is also a welcome and original contribution to the still incipient attempts to “rematerialize” the study of Buddhism (cf. Trainor 1997). The book is, finally, very well written and has been awarded the American Academy of Religion Award for Excellence in the analytical-descriptive category.

I would also like to offer a few minor critical comments. The chapter on *chöd* practices is perhaps unevenly successful. It provides interesting suggestions, for instance on the links with Buryat shamanic ideas that appear in particular in certain female lay practitioners’ discourses: the gift relations with spirits inscribed within the ritual enable one to conceive of this practice as compatible with shamanic patterns of human-spirit relations (170–173). However, the brief mention in the chapter’s introduction of the author’s “mixture of fascination and nausea” regarding the ritual’s “somber performance” (153) seems to draw us back somewhat unhelpfully to the exoticizing, “othering” style (criticized by the author, 157) of Alexandra David-Néel, one of the first French explorers of Tibet, and her early twentieth-century contemporaries. More importantly, the chapter’s analytical attempts strike one as somewhat inconclusive. A substantial section of the chapter (173–180), introduced by a

single informant's brief mention of unidirectional giving by the practitioner to the spirits (172), is devoted to a lengthy discussion of the anthropological literature on the notion of "free gift" and of its possible applicability to the case of giving one's body in the *chöd* practice. This section concludes however with the observation that the notion of "karmic creditors" is strongly present in practitioners' understandings and that therefore the notion of a "free gift" is not that relevant (177), something which seems to be explicitly echoed by the practitioners themselves (181). Other attempts aim at analyzing the *chöd* practice as a performance of "sovereignty" (176), as involving (how exactly is not clearly spelled out) "politicized" bodies in a postsocialist context (211), or as a practice of giving aimed at saving one's ancestors, more precisely through the gift of the *dharma*, the Buddhist teachings (180). In this last case however the author follows maybe too closely the discourse of one rather elite practitioner, who, faced with a Russian Buddhist's criticism of the invisible (imaginary, useless?) "giving" in the *chöd* practice, emphasizes what in traditional Buddhist classifications is the highest gift, that of the *dharma* (179). This authoritative voice should not be taken for more than what it is—a context-specific reaction to a particular criticism. Overstating the importance of that discourse results in emasculating the *chöd* of what makes it such a distinctive and valued practice: on an inner level, the powerful visualization of cutting up one's own body, this core site of attachment to the ego, and, on an outer level, the offering of the transmuted body parts to satisfy karmic debtors and other (in particular, potentially harmful) beings—a practice understood, as the author acknowledges, to have exorcistic power. Finally, how well this chapter coheres with the rest of the study and with its central, more political thrust is unclear—as the text seems to partially and implicitly acknowledge itself, leaving open, at the close of the chapter, "[w]hether or not the particular situation of postsocialism might have informed the understandings of the transactions in the symbolic universe of *chöd*" (183).

Considering the centrality of the theme of bodies (even if it might be perhaps more accurate to say that a number of phenomena are referred to through the trope of "bodies"), one may be slightly puzzled by the absence of any general account of Buryat ideas of the body. In the introduction the author provides a brief discussion of Soviet versus Buddhist ideologies of the body, typified as "closed" versus "permeable" (10–11). This opposition seems too schematic: indeed, do not all systems of representations of the body comprise both views of flows across body boundaries and ideas of boundaries protecting the body's integrity? In the discussion of views of the body in Buddhist societies, the emphasis on doctrinal ideas of impermanence and of the composite character of the body (12) is also not fully convincing as it seems to omit possible cultural notions of continuity and of acquired or inherited dispositions and qualities. Some of these qualities, in the Buryat/Mongol context, appear, albeit only very briefly, in the discussion of male monastic bodies (145–147).

Methodologically, the study stands out as based on a highly diversified multi-sited ethnography. Each of the more ethnographically informed chapters provides elements drawn from a selection of locales, ranging, for instance, from a Tibetan exile monastery in southern India to communities of *chöd* practitioners in Dharamsala in

northern India to echoes from Buryatia itself (chapter 4), from a Buryat valley to discussions on Russian Buddhist websites and even to the author's own memories of her Russian youth in a period of politico-economic transition (chapter 6). This approach is particularly well suited for capturing some of the diversity of contemporary Buryat Buddhist lives and their transnational ramifications. The downside of this spatially extremely fragmented picture is, of course, a relative lack of ethnographic depth. In the end, the empirical base of the study appears to some extent as a succession of brief, unrelated vignettes, often devoid of social context. The analysis remains generally very stimulating, but to some readers the introduction's announcement of an "ethnographic analysis of everyday religion" (6) might appear in retrospect as slightly misleading: one learns a little bit about religious lives in their everyday dimension mainly in chapter 4, but "ethnographic" depth in the classic sense is not the aim of this study.

Finally, in the epilogue, Bernstein notes: "[this study] offer[s] a perspective on how our own knowledge about such regions is construed.... As I observed Buryats laboring to assert themselves as an alternative center of gravity for contemporary Buddhism, I could not help but ask: What would Buryat life look like if it were not located at someone else's periphery—whether Mongolian, Tibetan, Russian, or Inner Asian?" (210). In the end, by consistently adopting a transnational perspective attentive to mobilities and flows of ideas, this book has definitely succeeded in going beyond institutionalized academic orderings of the place of Buryat Buddhism. It has given voice to Buryat actors who see themselves as living somewhere between a Buryat "periphery" and a Tibetan "center," but also to opponents of the Tibeto-centric perspective, who postulate that they inhabit a newly emerging center of Buddhist Eurasia. The *remaining* Buryats (possibly the majority) and the other dimensions of the Buryat Buddhists' religious lives are largely unseen. In that sense, the question of what Buryat life would look like if it were not located at someone else's periphery remains in large part to be answered. But this is not a critique of the book. The choice (fully legitimate in itself and obviously relevant) of this work has been to privilege a transnational lens and the contested views of Buddhist Buryatia's peripherality, and the author has successfully achieved here a truly original contribution. The preceding minor quibbles or comments should not detract from the book's originality and importance, in a context—the anthropology of Buddhism—in which such analytically articulate studies are only starting to emerge.

REFERENCES

- Trainor, Kevin. 1997. *Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravāda Tradition*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.