불교학연구 (*Korea Journal of Buddhist Studies*)
제67호 (2021.6) pp. 1~43
10.21482/jbs.67..202106.1

A Drop of Water Can Pierce Through Stone: Geography and Sacred Space in Contemporary Yushu*

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Summary

This paper uses an ethnographic approach to understand the place of sacred geography in contemporary Tibetan Buddhist practice. Utilizing a theoretical model suggested by a monastic leader from Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, this paper posits sacred space as agential. This agency manifests as the ability to accumulate imprints of sacrality, similarly to how senti

* This paper was presented at the 15th International Association for Tibetan Studies Seminar in Paris, France in 2019. Thank you to Cameron David Warner and Harmandeep Kaur Gill for organizing our session and for the feedback and discussions that arose from the panel. Funding for the research discussed in this paper was provided by the China and Inner Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies, Fulbright IIE and The Robert H.N. Ho Foundation. IRB Study Number 2017B0194.

ent beings accumulate karmic imprints throughout their lives. This paper analyzes two examples of sacred sites in contemporary Yushu, a rural, nomadic, high altitude area of Qinghai Province, and looks at religious labor performed upon these sites - circumambulation, death rituals, murals, inscriptions and offerings. The religious activities that occur in geographic spaces outside the monastery are not exclusive to religious elites, but are also performed by lay communities. This lay population are themselves highly diverse in terms of age, gender, class, literacy and religious training. Within the field of Buddhist Studies, there is a lacuna of data on these lay communities, despite the reality that they make up the majority of contemporary Buddhist practitioners. This paper focuses on both monastic and non-monastic practitioners to highlight the porous nature of the lay / monastic divide and to highlight the importance of the average practitioner. By conceiving of sacred spaces as partially sentient, the theoretical model of sacred space outlined in this paper gives agency to both geographic spaces, as well as the populations who perform religious labor upon the sites. In contemporary Tibetan Buddhism, the ordinary practitioner and the land itself play pivotal roles in propagating and revivifying the sacrality of sacred geography.

Keywords
Circumambulation, Kham, Lived Religion, Sacred geography, Sacred Space, Tibetan Buddhism

I. Introduction

November 15, 2017

I climb over the fence along the side of the road, careful not to snag myself on the barbed-wire. Norlha[1)] demurs, says she will stay by the car. I shrug and run up the cragged rockface picking my path carefully, squinting my eyes against the interminable wind to photograph the large rockface murals, the prayers and mantras painted and carved into the stone, the small altar and

1) All names used in this paper are pseudonyms meant to protect the anonymity of the interlocutors.

offerings of plastic flowers. I take a video of the battery-operated Discman blasting chanted prayers from below Vajrapani (*phyag na rdo rje*). I trot back and forth along the paths created more likely by the wandering of yaks than men, making sure I don't miss any paintings. I look up at the rockface from multiple angles, trying my hardest to see the shape of an arrow that does not reveal itself to me. I run back to the car, dustier and a bit more frozen than before, and we head to Norlha's sister's nomadic settlement another hour up the road. When we arrive, I keep telling members of their family that I want to see the arrow, that I might climb up various paths to get a good view. They keep telling me it's impossible and I offer suggestions for how it might be done. Back in the car, I downshift to a low gear as we descend the mountain over an extremely rocky road, Norlha tells me directly; it's not that climbing the mountain is impossible, it's that I'm a woman and not allowed. I feel embarrassed at my insistence and ask her why we are not allowed. She doesn't know. I ask her if it's because women are impure, because we give birth or menstruate. She doesn't think it has anything to do with that[2]. I ask her how she knows which mountains she can climb, which ones she can circumambulate, which she shouldn't. She says men will yell at you when you are near the ones you shouldn't be. I ask her how she feels about this. Badly, she says and shrugs.

2) On female exclusion from certain sacred spaces, Charlene Makley agrees that it is less about impurity of female bodies, and more about the fact that certain categories of women have "lesser stores of merit" (Makley 2007, 171). Pollution is less about the ability to make dirty and more about the ability to extract power. Makley writes, "the pollution of female bodies in Buddhist *nay* was essentially the congenital capacity to drain the intentioned male power (Tib. *stobs)* to transcend and tame or control" (Makley 2007, 172). This is a sentiment I have heard echoed by a local Tibetan medicine doctor (as well as a view dismissed as ridiculous superstition by a female Tibetan medicine doctor). Other scholars of sacred Buddhist mountains, argue that purity and pollution play more pivotal roles in female exclusion (Carter 2019). For my purposes, I simply want to highlight that female impurity seems not to be the source of female exclusion from specific sacred spaces in this region.

〈Figure 1〉 Piercing Arrow murals. Photo by author

In this paper, I examine the place of sacred geography in contemporary Buddhist practice as it appears in Yushu. I provide examples of two sacred sites important to a small religious community in Bongwa Mayma (*'brong ma smad ma* / *'brong pa smad ma*)[3], a former subsidiary of the Nangchen Kingdom, which corresponds roughly to contemporary Chidö District, Dzadö County, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province (*lci stod zhang rdza stod rdzong yul shul* / *yus hru'u bod rigs rang skyong khul mtsho sngon zhing chen*; 结多乡, 杂多县, 玉树藏族自治州, 青海省). What is sacred space? How is it formed and maintained? How does it affect religious practice or insert itself into daily life? To answer these questions, I deploy a theoretical model suggested to me by a local monastic leader.

3) I retain the local pronunciation in my transliterations of people and place names. In this case, what would be pronounced ‘drong’ in Lhasa dialect is pronounced ‘bong’.

II. A Philosophy of Sacred Space: The Accumulative Power of Bagchag

Gyalsey Trulku (*rgyal sras sprul sku*) is a soft-spoken and unassuming twenty-two-year-old dressed in monk's robes. He was born in a hospital in Dharamsala, recognized as the 15th Gyalsey Trulku of a small Sakya School monastery called Birru Monastery[4] at the age of six, spent ten years in the Tibetan settlement of Bir and moved to Yushu at the age of sixteen to receive a monastic education in Minyak (*mi nyag*), Derge (*sde dge*) and Jyegudo (*skye dgu mdo*, sometimes also spelled *skye rgu mdo*) before taking a position of leadership at Birru Monastery, on the border between Dzadö and Nangchen counties. He is humble about his religious abilities, enjoys playing the guitar and composing music, is learning Tibetan calligraphy and worries constantly about what he perceives as a decline in Buddhism (an evaluation he measures by the current lack of realized lamas who exhibit the ability to fly, transform the physical world or predict the future). Those around Gyalsey Trulku are excited about the prospect of an English teacher for him, of a potential sponsor for the monastery, but Gyalsey Trulku is not interested in having another subject to study nor is he a good fundraiser. Instead, we find ourselves excited to have a conversation partner who can understand our Lhasa-Indian-Tibetan dialect fully and we eat *malaxiangguo* while discussing my research. I tell Gyalsey Trulku of my plans to study female lay practice around his monastery and that I am particularly interested in circumambulation, pilgrimage and sacred space.

When talking about the impact that space and geography have on religious practice, he fluctuates back and forth between two points of view: (1) the belief that

4) The monastery name is pronounced Birru Gon in Yushu, but Dirru at its branch monastery in India. There are many variations of the Tibetan spelling of the monastery's name, including *be'u ri dgon* / *be ri dgon* / *'bri ru dgon* and *bri ru bsam 'grub bde chen chos 'khor gling.*

powerful lamas can create impacts on physical space through their ability to understand the inherent emptiness of physical reality; and (2) the experiential knowledge that places exert physical and emotional changes upon their visitors. On this first point, he mentioned *bagchag* (*bag chags*) or karmic imprint. It is very difficult for us to see objects as something other than what we have been told they are or experienced them to be. He uses the example of a cup on the table, explaining that because we have been told that this is a cup, been taught that cups serve particular functions and experienced the use of the object in specific ways, it would be difficult to convince our mind that it is not a cup. This is the *bagchag* that the objects/our experiences of the objects exert on our minds. He believes that powerful lamas, understanding the nature of perception and the inherent emptiness of all phenomena through their composite nature, created many of the physical marks on the land in order to provide ordinary people with miracles and signs to develop their faith. Faith, he believes, is what gives power to places and objects. In other words, lamas modify geography (by creating handprints and footprints in rock, by changing the shape of mountains, by creating self-emerging images in landscapes) to inspire faith in the populace; the land itself is a passive tool in the hands of a skilled lama.

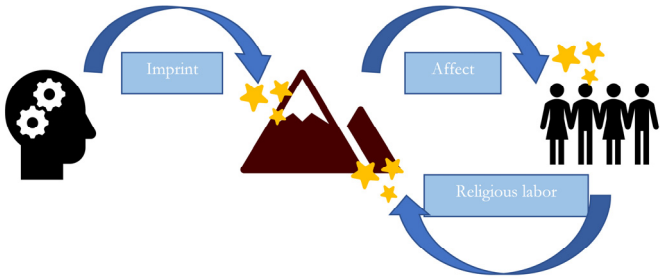
On other hand, he cannot dismiss the intrinsic, this-worldly, phenomenological aspect of sacrality. I ask him whether a dog who unknowingly ate a blessed item meant for consumption (*byin rlabs*) would benefit through it. He says a little bit; that there is some intrinsic power in the sacred speech (*sngags*)[5] of a powerful lama that creates a medicine out of the blessed object. The medicine is most effective if the

5) Although this term can refer to any recitation of sacred speech, in this case, it refers to the process by which a realized practitioner will accumulate mantra recitations and then transfer the power of those recitations upon an object, usually by blowing their breath upon the object, thus rendering it blessed or medicinal. This object can then be taken away from the practitioner, but will retain the power of the mantra recitations for a certain period. These objects can then be used (eaten, drank, touched, etc.) to cure disease and ward off misfortune. For more on the idea of *byin rlabs* and its relationship with faith, see Gerke 2011, 267.

person has faith,[6] but he feels that there is more to sacredness than mere faith, a psychological condition of self-healing. When I ask him what it means when one feels something strange or special in a particular place (a common way that people describe their experiences with sacred space), he mentions that it is related to their experiences in previous lives and the forgotten memories of those places - something akin to déjà vu. Yet beyond that, places themselves are also capable of accumulating imprints, being marked not only by the mind-power of a lama, but also by the religious labor of people. That labor leaves its own marks, like accumulated *bagchag* upon the site itself.

In the end Gyalsey Trulku did not come to a concrete choice, deciding rather to conclude somewhere in the middle: lamas create miracles and sacred sites in order to aid the masses in the development of faith in the dharma (wherein the sites themselves have no intrinsic power and in fact are so consumed by emptiness as to render them subject to physical modification by the mind-power of the lama), but at the same time, spaces themselves have the ability to accumulate imprints that affect how they appear in the physical world and how they are perceived by practitioners. This ability to exert appearance (that which is perceivable by the senses), in turn creates opportunity for karmic accumulation by practitioners who have contact with the spaces (Gyalsey Trulku 2017).

6) Here he told me the oft-cited story of the man who went to India and forgot to bring his mother/grandmother back a tooth of the Buddha, so took a tooth of an ordinary dead person (in other accounts it is a different object: sometimes the tooth of a dead dog, sometimes simply a rock) and presented it to his mother/grandmother as the tooth of the Buddha and she had such faith in the object that she attained enlightenment (in other accounts the random object turns into a tooth or the tooth begins radiating light or producing miraculous pearls). For one version of this story in English, see Patrul Rinpoche 1994, 173 and in Tibetan, see rdza dpal sprul, n.d., 640-43.



〈Figure 2〉 Illustration of Gyalsey Trulku's Theory of Imprinting, by author

III. Relationship with Broader Theories of Sacred Space

Tibet's sacred geography (both constructed and self-arising) was an object of fascination for a number of early scholars of Tibet[7]. Early works focused mainly on translation of Tibetan textual sources: geographic texts (i.e. the *'dzam gling rgyas bshad*) or pilgrimage guides (*gnas bshad, lam yig, gnas yig, dkar chag*), and interest in pilgrimage guides and their translation constitutes a sizable portion of scholarship on Tibetan sacred space and geography[8]. There is significant overlap between the literature on Buddhist sacred space and Tibetan mountain deities[9]. Following the post-colonial turn in Religious Studies more broadly, Tibetan Studies scholarship has called attention to the effects of social and environmental change on the practices of pilgrimage and mountain deity worship in Tibetan regions[10] as well as the

7) See, for example, the work of Das, Ferrari, Tucci, Waddell, and Wylie.

8) See, for example, the work of Boord, Buffetrille, Chan, De Rossi Filibeck, Dowman, Huber, Kapstein, Reinhard, Snellgrove, Snelling, etc. Scholars have also mined religious biographies for information on religious space and pilgrimage. See, for example, Ehrhard 2013, sec. V. Pilgrimages and Sacred Geography.

9) See, for example, the work of Bellezza, Blondeau, Buffetrille, De Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Diemberger, Karmay, Makley, Punzi and Tsering Bum.

10) See, for example, Kapstein 1998; Makley 1999; 2007; 2014; 2018; Tsering Bum 2016; Wenbin 1998.

intersections of pilgrimage and politics[11] and pilgrimage and gender[12]. The role that treasure revealers (*gter ston*) have played and continue to play in the formation of sacred geography in Tibet, and their own complicated relationships with money, power and gender, has been addressed by several scholars[13]. All these works have provided invaluable translations, transcribed interviews and compiled textual, historical material for the study of sacred space in Tibetan regions, but in many ways the field of sacred space studies in relation to the religions of Tibet is still in its infancy.

Gyalsey Trulku's theories can be easily placed in dialogue with other popular conceptions of sacred space. In many ways, Gyalsey Trulku's own ideas map on to the *sui generis* sacred of Eliadean Phenomenology (Eliade 1954) and the *sui generis* social of Durkheimian Social Constructivism (Durkheim 1912)[14], that is the idea that sacred spaces are sacred because they are actually marked by divine powers or that sacred spaces are sacred because people make them so. In many ways, Gyalsey Trulku helms between this phenomenological approach that takes seriously the religious experiences of emotions and miracles that are reported and experienced in sacred places throughout Tibet and the social constructivist approach that models sacred space around human agents.

What seems to be unique and interesting about Gyalsey Trulku's approach is not in how he formulates human agency in relationship to sacred space, but rather how he thinks about geographic places themselves. Beyond his concern with the actions and

11) See, for example, Epstein and Wenbin 1999; McKay 1998b; 1998a; 1999; Ramble 1995; 1997; 1999.

12) See, for example, Diemberger and Hazod 1999; Havnevik 1998; Huber 1994b; Makley 1999.

13) See, for example, Blondeau 1984; Davidson 2005, chap. 6; Ehrhard 1999b; 1999a; Gardner 2006; Germano 1998; Gyatso 1992; Hanna 1994; Karmay 1972.

14) For a great overview of this ongoing conversation, see Ivakhiv 2003. Although these two schools are generally no longer adhered to 'religiously', it is still not uncommon to see examples of their deployment in contemporary scholarship. For an example of a contemporary deployment of Eliadean axis munde, see Kang and Sutton 2016, chap. Four.

emotions of human agents, Gyalsey Trulku recognizes that places, mountains, rock formations, hand-prints in stone and hollowed-out caves do specific kinds of work. Neo-evolutionist approaches to sacred space likewise bring into focus the influence that geography, agriculture, climate, natural disasters, etc. have had upon religious practice and ritual. Walter Burkert, for example, writes, “Ritual activity follows the clues of nature, but works on them with the force of conscious tradition elaborated through unnatural, cultural choices; with exaggeration, repetitiveness, and other complications” (Burkert 1998, 75). For Burkert, geography influences the ways in which sacred spaces are chosen and interpreted but he does not go so far as to suggest that geography has agency. In order to consider this kind of alternative rationality, a larger transition needed to occur within the field. The work of Post-Colonialists, especially Chakrabarty, made an important step to include non-human, religious forces as agential players in the push and pull of power struggles in human civilization (Chakrabarty 2000). These ideas were carried forth by the Lived Religion approach within Religious Studies (Bowman and Valk 2012; Hall 1997; Orsi 2003; 2013; 2016; Primiano 1995), which borrows from Eliade’s phenomenology, privileging the religious experiences, beliefs and ideologies of practitioners themselves, but without assuming a *sui generis* divine. Rather, by naturalizing the ideas that secular society, logic, reason, rationalism and science are ideologies as much influenced by the forces of money, power, desire and greed, as their oft-demonized counterparts of religion, ritual, divination, intuition, etc., a Lived Religion approach allows for alternative modes of rationality and modernity. It centers relationships as key meaning-making nodes, allowing for non-humans to act as agents in these meaning-filled relationships.

IV. A New Paradigm: Accumulated Imprints of Religious Labor

Although Gyalsey Trulku's theories can be put into effective dialogue with many of the current conversations within Religious and Tibetan Studies, I have yet to come across any analysis that centers accumulated imprints as an analytical tool[15]. This accumulation of imprints gives an interesting agency to the land itself. To understand how these imprints operate in Gyalsey Trulku's analysis, I offer a brief discussion of the term *bagchag* as it is traditionally used[16] and then discuss how the traditional philosophical definitions of *bagchag* do and do not fit into Gyalsey Trulku's use.

Bagchag are impressions that can be transferred onto the consciousness, which cause often subconscious tendencies and habits and are carried over between lifetimes. *Bagchag* are also impressions accumulated within one lifetime that cause conscious influence upon behavior or ideas[17]. For these definitions of *bagchag*, a

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15) For more on interlocutors' use of the concept of bagchag, see Fitzgerald 2017. Scholars have discussed the transferrable energy of sacrality upon objects such as amulets and relics in various schools of Buddhism. On Thai Buddhist amulets, relics and Buddha-images and their consecrated powers, see Tambiah 1984, chap. 14.

16) Thank you to Professor Rabsel of University of Indiana Bloomington, Lobsang Lodup of Gyuto Tantric College, Khenpo Ngawang Jigme of Drikung Kagyu Monastery in Tso Pema and Huatse Gyal, for their assistance in developing a deeper understanding of this term.

17) The *tshig mdzod chen mo* gives two definitions: (1) *nang sems kyis phyi yul bzang ngan bar sa sna tshogs la goms pa song ba'i nus pa bag la nyal rnam zhes kyi steng na 'gos yod pa'i cha*/ [The transferable force upon the consciousness which remains in a latent state and through which the inner mind has the power to habitualize the various good, bad and neutral (aspects of) external reality (2) *bya ba bzang ngan gyi shugs rkyen nam shan*/ [the influences or judgements of good and bad activity]. (Zhang 1984, 1805-6). The *dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo* defines bag chags as "*spyir grub mtha' thun mong ba'i gsung tshul byas na/ dper na/ bum 'dzin yid kyi shes pas bum pa rtogs rjes su shes pa kho rang 'gag kyang sems steng du bum pa dran pa'i dran shes skyed pa'i nus pa zhig yod pa de la bag chags zer zhing*/ [Generally, the way of explaining this term within the ordinary philosophical systems is, for example, having recognized a vase using the faculty of the mind [that understands] vaseness, bagchag is what [we] call the ability to conjure the memory or awareness of a vase within the mind, even after the consciousness [of the vase] itself has ceased]. *sems tsam pa'i lugs su/ bag chags bgo byed rnam shes tshogs bdun po gang rung gis bgo gzhi kun gzhi rnam shes kyi steng du/ phyis bgo byed kyi chos de 'gag kang de'i rigs 'dra'am 'bras bu skyed nus pa'i lag rjes kyi rgyun de la chags zhes brjod pa yin*/ [Within the Mind-Only School, bagchag is said to be that continual impression of a thing which, even after the thing or its idea has ceased, its

consciousness or storehouse of consciousness (*rnam zhes* or *kun gshi*) is necessary. From a philosophical position, only sentient beings with consciousness are capable of accumulating *bagchag* because the *bagchag* must have a place upon which it can be imprinted and carried forth after the bodily form disintegrates. Nevertheless, the term *bagchag* is used colloquially in a manner that suggests sentient beings, inanimate objects and concepts or categories can all be imprinted with *bagchag*. It is possible, for example to use the term *bagchag* to express influences upon non-sentient, abstract concepts like music or clothing. (e.g., - American music has influenced Tibetan music), as well as to explain the root cause of innate abilities and predispositions (e.g., - He is so good with languages because of the *bagchag* he accumulated in previous lives).

When I brought this new theoretical model to one of Lungkar Monastery's abbots, Khenpo Ngawang Jigme (*mkhan po ngag dbang 'jigs med*), he insisted that *bagchag* cannot be imprinted upon places, but told me that enlightened beings can imprint places with a certain power (*nus pa*) [18], which is transferrable (*'go ba*). According to Khenpo Ngawang Jigme, enlightened beings can imprint a location with a specific power (*nus pa*) that can be transferred to those who come into contact with that location, whether or not they are conscious of the sacrality of the site[19]. Simple

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memory or effects can be called upon because it has been left as an impression in the storehouse of consciousness by any one of the seven forms of consciousness constituted by the senses]." (dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las 2004, smad cha [2]:1380).

18) He described this power in terms of the Six Liberations (*grol ba drug*), which describe the ways of achieving realizations by seeing the lama and other aids for meditation (*mthong grol*), hearing the teachings (*thos grol*), wearing protective amulets and blessed threads or specific deity mandalas (*brtags grol*), remembering the teachings (*dran grol*), eating blessed materials (*myong grol*) and encountering sacred places and objects (*reg grol*). Lama Tenzin Nyima Rinpoche also refers to the Four Liberations in his pilgrimage guide to the Lungkar Monastery area, implying that the great enlightened figures of the past create sacred sites as aids to the enlightenment of everyday people. (lho bstan 'dzin nyi ma 1990). It is the power of touching (aka coming into contact with) that concerns our discussion.

19) He refers here to the story of a pig who unknowingly walks around a stupa in her lifetime and is reborn as a Buddhist in a higher realm. Another version of the story is that a fly rides on the back of a pig and receives the same benefit.

contact with the imprinted site causes unconscious accumulation of merit. He says that although *bagchag* cannot technically be transferred onto an object, the transferal of power onto an object by an enlightened being is quite similar to the manner in which *bagchag* is transferred onto the consciousness (Khenpo Ngawang Jigme 2019). When I brought this correction to Gyalsey Trulku, he was intrigued, but argued that *nus pa* cannot be transferred from one being to another, but can only be cultivated by an individual. He argued instead that an accomplished being can bestow a blessing (*byin rlabs*) upon an another being, the power of that blessing is facilitated by the connection of loving compassion (*byams pa dang snying rje*) between the lama and student.

The power of the senses perceives an object, it is cognized via the consciousnesses of the senses and imprinted upon the consciousness (or storehouse of consciousness). This imprint can be consciously recalled later or manifest itself in the form of a disposition. In a similar fashion, the enlightened being does work upon a sacred space, imprinting it with a power. This power can be consciously extracted later by a faithful practitioner or manifest itself in the form of blessing upon an unconscious visitor. What is even more fascinating is what happens to the imprinted power when faithful practitioners engage with it. Practitioners do not take away the power when they encounter it, but in fact strengthen it by engaging in religious labor upon the site. Therefore, circumambulation, mantra recitation, meditation, acts of generosity, etc. at the sacred site, add further imprints or strengthen the power of the initial imprint and make the sacred site grow in sacrality. To accommodate the colloquial and philosophical definitions of the term *bagchag*, I will henceforth use the English term imprint to describe Gyalsey Trulku's theory.

V. Sacred Sites of Bongwa Mayma

Thinking through this lens of imprinting, I will now analyze two sacred sites in Bongwa Mayma. I approach the topic of sacred space and geography from an ethnographic perspective[20], therefore, the sources used in this paper include formal and informal interviews with pilgrims and locals with direct relationships to the sacred sites in question, as well as an analysis of certain texts that I deem ethnographic adjacent: those texts mentioned to me during interviews, present in the homes of my interlocuters, text from posters, paintings, maps, etc. in the vicinity of the sacred sites themselves[21]. Of the two sites discussed in this paper, one is a fairly well-known pilgrimage site, a sacred mountain which is related to the 25 great sacred sites of Kham[22]. The second is Piercing Arrow, mentioned above, a relatively obscure sacred

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20) I am most influenced by the pioneering ethnographic work of Robert Ekvall, as well as the more contemporary work of Charlene Makley, Katia Buffetrille and Toni Huber. For a Tibetan language ethnographic approach to sacred geography see scholar lcam rig sras's work of oral history on local deities of Amdo (lcam rig sras 2014). Alternatively, contemporary Tibetan scholarship on pilgrimage sites tends to lean toward the exposition of ancient textual materials upholding the sacred lineages of sacred sites, see lho bstan 'dzin nyi ma 2012b; tshe ring dpal 'byor 1995.

21) For an excellent overview of sources of Tibetan pilgrimage in Tibetan and European languages, see the published MA thesis of Andreas Brunder 2008.

22) Terton Chokgyur Lingpa (1829-1870) revealed a terma of Guru Rinpoche which explicated 25 (in reality more than 25) great pilgrimage sites in Kham (karma rgyal mtshan 2005, 1-17; mchog gyur gling pa 2012). Jamgon Kongtrul (*kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho*) composed a commentary on the terma giving more detailed descriptions of the 25 sites (karma rgyal mtshan 2005, 18-28; kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho 2012). In 2012, Lama Tenzin Nyima Rinpoche edited a volume in a 25-volume collection of writings of scholars from Yushu. This text begins with the terma itself and Kongtrul's commentary and includes pilgrimage guides for many sites in Yushu. Lama Tenzin Nyima composed a pilgrimage guide for Lhakhang Mukmo for inclusion in this collection (lho bstan 'dzin nyi ma 2012b). Although it is not explicitly listed as one of the twenty-five great sacred sites of Kham in the terma Chokgyur Lingpa discovered and attributed to Guru Rinpoche, Lama Tenzin Nyima is one of the contemporary guardians of this history and he includes Lhakhang Mukmo in this collection (see, for example, lho bstan 'dzin nyi ma 2012a, 169). When asked about this issue, Lama Tenzin Nyima stated that Lhakhang Mukmo is, in fact, not one of the sites discussed in the terma, but I believe its inclusion in the volume was meant to signal a relationship with this important text (Lama Tenzin Nyima Rinpoche 2020). For more on this terma and the 25 sacred sites of Kham, see the PhD dissertation of Alexander Gardner 2006 and Ngawang Zangpo's work on Jamgon Kongtrul (Ngawang Zangpo 2001, 95-107, Appendix 225-228).

site related to the mythology of the local lords. Below I describe how these sites came to be imprinted with their various layers of sacrality and then go on to discuss how religious labor by practitioners enacts an amplification of that imprinted power.

VI. On Imprinting: Lhakhang Mukmo

In December of 2016, I visit Lungkar Monastery (*lung dkar dgon*) for the first time. I arrive in the dark, but in the morning, pull the curtains back from the windows to reveal a magnificent view of Lhakhang Mukmo (*lci rgyal lha khang smug mo/ gnas mchog rdo rje mchong rdzong/*), a flat-topped mountain jutting imposingly out of the landscape. The monastery's caretaker tells me it's a sacred mountain (*gnas*). I ask him how you can tell which mountains are sacred and which are just regular mountains. He laughs heartily and says I'll have to ask a more advanced lama. He'll repeat this joke of mine a number of times over the next few days, chuckling every time. I'm not sure if it's so funny because the question itself is ridiculous or because he doesn't have an answer.

In a land with no maps, no road names, no place markers, the shape of the geography itself serves as landmarks. I had to learn a new vocabulary when I came here; each side of a mountain has a specific name, each bank of a river is named, the term *lung pa*, often translated to mean place, hometown or land, here means literally valley. Each valley is a fatherland in and of itself. Distinguishing a valley from a small divot or dip in the mountainous landscape was a skill I had to learn. Distance is still measured here in days-by-horseback or days-by-pack-yaks, although the roads to Dzadö and Nangchen are quite good and most sons know how to drive. Lhakhang Mukmo serves as a marker of home. Turning a bend in the road from Dzadö or Birru Monastery or Nangchen, you catch site of the geographic shape of the mountain in the

distance and know the journey has come to an end. Young men love posting videos to WeChat while driving of the mountain, declaring, “I’m back 回来了” or “Home; *pha yul*”. Other mountains are bigger, more dangerous to traverse, richer in resources, but Lhakhang Mukmo is sacred.

〈Figure 3〉 View of Lhakhang Mukmo from Lungkar Monastery.
Photo by author, May 23, 2018

What was it that marked Lhakhang Mukmo as a sacred space? There are multiple layers of imprints upon this sacred mountain. I begin with the narratives provided to me by nuns of the Dzalung Gon (*rdza dgon bsam gtan dar rgyas gling*/ *rdza lung dge dgon*), a nunnery on the slopes of Lhakhang Mukmo. The nunnery was first built in 1893[23], destroyed in 1958 and reconstruction began in 1992 through the efforts of Nuns Tenzin Wangmo and Ngawang Choetso (’brong pa rgyal po 2003, 1:357-58; lho bstan ’dzin nyi ma 2012c, 627-30). The nuns of this monastery have the closest and most consistent relationship with the mountain and know its moods and shades

23) A history of nunneries and monasteries in *rdza stod* claims the nunnery was built in 1824 by Nuden Dorje, but Nuden Dorje was not born until 1849 (srid gros rdza stod rdzong rig gnas lo rgyus au yon lhan khang 1999, 234). Another history of Nangchen claims the nunnery was built in 1828, administered independently by nuns for 67 years until its administration was taken over by Nuden Dorje (mkhan po karma bstan srung and mkhan po tshul khrims rnam dag 2001, 62).

most intimately. Circumambulating the mountain with two nuns, they tell me the site is a sacred mountain of Guru Rinpoche and one of his emanations, the 4th Lho Bongtrul, Orgyan Nuden Dorje (1849 - 1902) (*lho 'brong sprul o rgyan nus ldan rdo rje;* henceforth Nuden Dorje). According to the nuns, Nuden Dorje was flying one day and saw the mountain. "This is the place for a nunnery," he declared, and so it was. The nuns begin with Nuden Dorje, because it was Nuden Dorje who opened the sacred site, identifying it and producing detailed descriptions of its sacred features. Nuns currently living in the nunnery trace their family lineage to this man of the land and there are still those alive today who can confirm the miraculous features written about in the pilgrimage guides.

In a separate interview with a Dzalung Nunnery nun, Chopel begins the story of how the mountain came to be sacred with the current Lho Bongtrul Lama Tenzin Nyima Rinpoche[24] (Henceforth referred to as Lama Tenzin Nyima). She recalls how he was requested by various deities to open the mountain, but demurred at first because of his shy nature. When the deities insisted, he agreed. Using bits and pieces of destroyed and lost scriptures, he pieced together as much information as possible on the mountain, educated the community on its importance and performed a ceremony officially opening the mountain as a sacred site. The monastic community circumambulated the mountain on this occasion and it was henceforth sacred space (Chophel 2019).

Today, there are at least four extant accounts of the sacred features of Lhakhang

24) The 7th incarnation of the Lho Bongtrul manifested as four different individuals. The body emanation was Nyandrak Namgyal (b. 1976) *lho rje drung dkon mchog lhun grub snyan grags rnam rgyal dpal bsang po*, who later moved to America and gave up the title. The speech emanation is Dongag Tenzin Rinpoche (b. 1979) *dkon mchog mdo sngags bstan 'dzin*, who lives in Xining with his wife and children. The heart emanation is Lama Tenzin Nyima Rinpoche (b. 1965) *lho bstan 'dzin nyi ma*, who remains in residence at Lungkar Monastery in Yushu, and finally, the knowledge emanation (yon tan gyi sprul pa - sometimes referred to as the quality emanation) Karma Ratna Trulku (b. 1980) *o rgyan rang byung 'gro 'dul bde chen rdo rje* was recognized in 1999 and lives in his father, Ongtrul Rinpoche's monastery in Tso Pema, Himachal Pradesh with his wife and children.

Mukmo, all produced by the current Lama Tenzin Nyima[25]. According to Lama Tenzin Nyima, Nuden Dorje himself produced a pilgrimage guide for the mountain, the only part of which remained after the Cultural Revolution was the colophon page. Using remaining volumes of Nuden Dorje's collected works (*gsung 'bum*)[26], as well as ethnographic interviews with elders and his own knowledge of the land, Lama Tenzin Nyima has reconstructed an account of how Lhakhang Mukmo came to be sacred, how it was identified by Nuden Dorje and what contemporary pilgrims will find when they visit the site.

〈Figure 4〉 View of Lhakhang Mukmo. Photo by author

According to these texts, there are a number of figures throughout Buddhist history who have marked the mountain as sacred[27]. The first (historically, although not

25) For variations of the pilgrimage guide, see Lama Tenzin Nyima's extensive history of contemporary Dzadö (lho bstan 'dzin nyi ma 2012a, 210-12), Lama Tenzin Nyima's history of Lungkar Monastery (lho bstan 'dzin nyi ma 2003, 98-106), Lama Tenzin Nyima's contribution to the 25 volume collection of experts of Yushu ('bro sbyin pa 2012, 3:46-67) and a poster produced by Lama Tenzin Nyima explicating the sacred sites around Lungkar Monastery (lho bstan 'dzin nyi ma 1990). Gyalpo Rinpoche also mentions the opening of the sacred site in his political history of Bongwa Mayma ('brong pa rgyal po 2003, 1:289).

26) Lhakhang Mukmo is also mentioned briefly in gyag dgra khra sbog 2016, 217; lho rje drung nus ldan rdo rje 2005; srid gros rdza stod rdzong rig gnas lo rgyus au yon lhan khang 1999, 270-71.

27) Although the 2nd Lho Bongtrul Tingdzin Sangpo (*lho grub chen ting 'dzin bzang po*) and Drubwang

necessarily mythologically), was the great translator and scholar Vairotsana (*be ro lo tsa ba*) and his student Yudra Nyingpo (*g.yu sgra snying po*), who visited Lhakhang Mukmo while on their return from exile in Tsawarong back to Central Tibet. Lhakhang Mukmo was marked as a tributary of the mountain Godavari or Godawari (*la phyi*) in present-day Nepal[28] when Milarepa, while in retreat on the mountain,

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Tsoknyi (*grub dbang tshogs gnyis padma dri med 'od zer*), as well as others had noted the relationship between Lapchi and Lhakhang Mukmo, it was not until Nuden Dorje formally opened the sacred site and began publicly describing the mountain as a mandala palace of Chakrasamvara that Lhakhang Mukmo became widely known as a sacred mountain.

28) Godavari, is itself the speech aspect of the Three Holy Places of Tibet (three aspects of Chakrasamvara), as well as one of the Twenty-Four Great Sacred Places, specifically part of the celestial body (*mkha' spyod*) and the left ear of Vajrayogini. For more on Godavari, see De Rossi Filibeck 1988; Huber 1989; 1994a; 1997a; 1997b; la phyi'i rdor 'dzin don 'grub dpal ldan 2008; Macdonald 1990. For more on the celestial, earthly and underworldly classifications of sacred spaces, see Nakza Drolma 2019, 174. I have heard many variant accounts of how this set of 24 sites came into existence, one of which is that the sites were at one time ruled by a non-Buddhist or not-properly-Buddhist deity. These places were occupied by demons until a Heruka (in oral accounts Hayagriva, in some written accounts Chakrasamvara himself (Huber 1994a, 42) decided that the demons must be tamed and the lands subdued. He and his consort generated Chakrasamvara mandalas at each of the sites, successfully transforming them into Buddhist pilgrimage sites (see Davidson 2005, 40-41) for literary references to this myth). Khenmo Sherab Sangmo describes the tale slightly differently: one specific demoness, through extreme anger and hatred, drained the life out of her mother while still in the womb, consuming her from the inside out, growing wings and flying throughout the world wreaking havoc. To tame this demon, Hayagriva and his consort performed rituals, which resulted in the demoness converting to Buddhism, confessing her sins, repenting and then making offerings of her own body (divided into 24 parts) to pacify the sacred mountains and bring them under the control of Hayagriva, who in turn transformed the sites into Chakrasamvara mandalas with his consort. These sites, uncoincidentally, were previously dedicated to Shiva and today both devotees of Shiva and Chakrasamvara utilize the sites in various degrees of harmony. Sherab Sangmo mentions that it is best not to tell Hindus that their sites have been conquered by Buddhist deities, because they don't enjoy hearing this history and it might anger them (Khenmo Sherab Sangmo). On the first day of Losar, I visited Dechen Choekhor Monastery (*bde chen chos 'khor dgon pa*) in Kullu, Manali and happened to be sitting in the office when a local girl asked the monk taking donations a question. "Is it appropriate to pay homage to both Chakrasamvara and Shiva when making a pilgrimage to the peak of Kullu Ta (Bijli Mahadev)?" The monk replied that it is always appropriate to be respectful and even appropriate to make offerings in the temple, but Buddhists cannot take refuge in Shiva. I jump at the opportunity and ask the monk who opened the sacred site (who recognized it as a sacred mandala to Chakrasamvara). He is confused by my question and tells me to read the Chakrasambara Tantra and that there's probably a list of the twenty-four sites in the text. I try to clarify and say yes there is a list of 24 sites, but who was it that recognized the specific mountain in contemporary Kullu, Manali as one of the sacred mountains listed in the tantra. He says he doesn't know (February 2, 2019). I am informed a few months later that Amdo Gendun Choephel recognized the mountain during his travels in Manali. Gendun Choephel does mention Kullu Ta as one of the 24 great pilgrimage sites mentioned in the Mahayoga

tossed blessed items into the wind, which descended and imprinted upon the mountain. Between 1868 and 1893, Nuden Dorje experienced a number of prophetic visions in which figures such as Guru Rinpoche, Tara, Machik Labdron, Mahakala, Dharma Protectress Achi, as well as a local sacred space protectress described to Nuden Dorje how to open the sacred site, where to construct the nunnery, which rituals to perform upon the mountain, etc. and compelled him to do so. He officially opened the sacred site in 1870, at which time he experienced a meditational vision of the pantheon of Chakrasamvara laid out upon the land. That day, flowers blossomed in the middle of winter, rainbows filled the sky and music could be heard emanating out from the mountain. When I tell Khenpo Ngawang Jigme about these descriptions, he breaths a long sigh and smiles, says his father, whose herds roamed free on the lower slopes of the mountain, used to tell him stories of beautiful music coming from nowhere. From this point forward, Lhakhang Mukmo was known as a sacred mountain.

VII. On Imprinting: Piercing Arrow

The site I describe unknowingly invading at the beginning of this paper, called Piercing Arrow (*mda' zug*), is the location where an arrow of the local chieftain's ancestor pierced through the mountain and left a mark in the rock. Some say it left the shape of an arrow, others a large hole where the arrow entered the stone. The form of the arrow can no longer be seen, but everyone knows it used to be there. Today, the site is one of hundreds of small-scale sacred sites scattered like colorful flowers amongst the harsh landscape of Bongwa Mayma. Its written history is limited to a few

Tantras, but he states that Buton (*bu ston rin chen grub*; 1290-1364) along with others had already identified the site (dge 'dun chos 'phel 1984, 17, 33).

passing mentions in the origin stories of the Bong (*'brong*) clan that once ruled the land[29]. The site today is marked with a large mural of Vajrapani, below which sits a small shelf, holding up plastic flowers and a battery-powered speaker reciting mantras. To the right of the rock painting is a carving of Vajrapani's mantra OM BENZA PANI HUM and two dedication verses[30].

The story of the imprinting of Piercing Arrow is the origin story of the Bong clan that has ruled Bongwa Mayma for centuries. The Bongpa trace their lineage to the six races created by the union of Chenresi (*pha sprel rgan byang chub sems pa*) and Raksasi (*srin mo*); the four larger races (*dmu tsha sga*/ *a spo ldong*/ *se khyung dbra*/ and *a lcags 'bru*) and the two smaller races (*dba'* and *sda*). From the Achak Dru (*a lcags 'bru*) arose the Mukpo Dong clan (*che brgyud smug po ldong*). In this lineage was a man named Choepen Nagpo (*ldong chos 'phan nag po*), who is the great-grandfather of the Bong clan[31]. He had four wives, the last of which, Drisa Lhamo Dzangdzema (*'bri bza' lha mo mdzangs mdzes ma*), was unable to produce any male children. To remedy this, Choepen Nagpo performed prayers, after which Brahmā[32] appeared to him and his wife in a number of prophetic dreams. Brahmā

29) See, for example, 'brong pa rgyal po 2003, 1:175-76; lho bstan 'dzin nyi ma 2012a, 321; srid gros rdza stod rdzong rig gnas lo rgyus au yon lhan khang 1999, 56-58.

30) *rdo rje slob dpon zhabs rten [sic] bzhed pa 'grub/ dge 'dun sde 'phel bshad sgrub bstan pa dar/ 'khor slob sbyin bdag mnga' thang 'byor ba rgyas/ bstan pa lun [sic] ring gnas pa'i bkra shis par [sic] shog* It was pointed out to me that this is a verse written by Ju Mipham Rinpoche, which reads: *rdo rje slob dpon zhabs brtan bzhed pa 'grub// dge 'dun sde 'phel bshad sgrub bstan pa dar// 'khor slob sbyin bdag mnga' thang 'byor ba rgyas// bstan pa yun ring gnas pa'i bkra shis shog//* [May the Vajra Master have a long life and [his] intentions be accomplished / May the monastic community increase, the teachings and practices of the dharma spread / May the retinue, students and sponsors gain wealth and power / May [we] be so lucky that the dharma remains for a long time]. The second verse is a long-life prayer to His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, which reads *gangs ri ra ba'i bskor ba'i zhing khams su// phen dang bde ba ma lus 'byung ba'i gnas// spyan ras gzigs dbang bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho yi// zhabs pad srid mtha'i bar du brtan gyur cig//* [In the land encircled by snow mountains / The source of all happiness and benefit, / May Lord Avalokiteshvara, Tenzin Gyatso / Remain until samsara ends.]

31) This is also the ancestor of the Gesar of Ling narratives, see 'brong pa rgyal po 2003, 1:157.

32) According to Khenpo Ngawang Jigme, this is not the creator of the universe Brahmā of Indian cosmology, but a smaller-scale deity from the First Dhyana (*bsam gtan dang po'i lha*).

instructed him to go to Machen Pomra Mountain and perform an incense offering there. Choepen Nagpo goes to perform the ritual and spends the night at the location he was shown in the dreams. After falling asleep, he was awoken by what appeared to be a dragon encircling him, but the dragon flew away. When he falls back asleep he is visited by Brahmā, who admonishes him for his lack of courage and tells him the dragon was a daughter of Magyal. If he had made her his consort, the lineage would have been strong warriors, but his lack of merit did not allow that to happen. Brahmā instructs Choepen Nakpo that whatever else appears, he needs to summon his courage, seize it and impregnate it. Brahmā disappears and Choepen Nakpo awakens to find a ferocious tigress. He seizes her and she transforms into a beautiful woman. They spend the night together and at dawn she tells him that she is the middle daughter of Machen Pomra and that her name is Nyanmo Yiongma (*gnyan mo yi 'ong ma*). She tells him to come back to this place after nine or ten months and his wish will be fulfilled. After nine months, they return and the fog lifts off the mountainside to reveal a completely white, wild female yak (*'brong ;* aka a bong) licking the dew off a baby boy. She flees up Magyal Mountain as they approach and the two parents return to their home joyfully with their new child. The son of the wild yak is named Bong Je Silkar (*'brong rje zil dkar*). He goes on to have seven children, six boys and a girl. His eldest son, Chechen Thogthog Gyal (*che chen thog thog rgyal*) lived during the reign of Trisong Detsen in the final parts of the 8th and beginning of the 9th century. Chechen is the man who goes on to conquer the land that the Bong clan ruled up until the middle of the 20th century (’brong pa rgyal po 2003, 1:162-72; lho bstan ’dzin nyi ma 2012c, 313-23).

On his way from visiting Samye Monastery in Central Tibet, Chechen entered a place populated by demons. Maybe inspired by the activities of Trisong Detsen, Guru Rinpoche and Shantarakshita, he sees an opportunity to tame the land ruled by a demon named Devil Ritsi (*bdud po ru tshu* or *bdud po ri rtsi*), so he climbs high onto

a cliff and shoots one thousand arrows, calling out the names of the dharma protectors, and declaring that wherever his arrows fall, his ancestors will rule. The site of the arrows later comes to be known as "Arrow Pierced into the Cliffs of the Chi River" (*lci'i brag la mda' zug*). After shooting his arrows, he meets a demon riding a black horse and shoots at him with his arrow, but missing, the arrow goes into the rock. The demon runs away up the mountain and he chases him. While chasing him, the demon conjures a large naga out of the Ngom River (renamed the lci River after the land is conquered), which Chechen kills by striking its head. Once he has the demon cornered, the dharma protectors help him by blocking the road, but before he is able to shoot the deadly arrow, the demon storms him and they began to battle with their swords, during which the sword of Chechen erupts into flames. The demon then surrenders and gives the power of the land to Chechen, but he requests that Chechen give him Ritsi Mountain to live and therefore he becomes transformed into a local guardian ('brong pa rgyal po 2003, 1:172-77; lho bstan 'dzin nyi ma 2012a, 320-23). The land today is still scarred by this epic battle, the imprints of hooves, feet, spears, etc. identifiable in the rocks surrounding the river.

Local stories about this initial imprinting as sacred space vary. Sometimes the hero of this tale is Gesar of Ling, as opposed to the local leader. Sometimes the demon is not a supernatural force, but rather a Bon leader who was not taking good care of his subjects. The site itself cannot be circumambulated because it is located upon a steep cliff face on the embankment of a river and, as I learn, the cliff should not be climbed, especially by women, in fear of angering the gods. Here it is still unclear to me which gods guard the site: is it the ancestral guardian deity of the Bong clan? Is it Vajrapani or Milarepa, whose murals loom large over the riverside? Is it the conquered demon-turned-guardian who comes from his neighboring region to jealously guard the site of his loss? Or are there new deities, with new interests in protecting the sacrality of this cliff face?

Through the preceding sections, I have sought to explain how two rural sites in Yushu became marked as sacred. It is both the physical interaction of the sites by important religious figures, as well as meditational realities imprinted upon the lands that gives them initial imprinting as sacred. In the sections below, I now examine some of the processes by which the sites continually accrue layers of sacrality through the religious labor of lay populations.

VIII. On the Religious Labor of Layering: Circumambulation

After a sacred space is marked as such, what is it that gives it credibility and allows it to maintain its elevated status as sacred? One such activity is circumambulation, the encircling of a sacred place, especially a monastery, stupa, mani stone pile or mountain. Scholars have discussed at length the various philosophical and social reasons for circumambulation of sacred spaces. These reasons range from creation of social opportunities to meet with friends and exchange news and ideas (Makley 2007, 137), to appealing to the anger and jealousy of local deities with rites of propitiation. Makley focuses mainly on the public nature of circumambulation and the opportunity it gives practitioners to perform a "public display of levels of bodily commitment to a personal Buddhist time frame of desired gains in relation to past deeds, through publicized seriation or through displays of relative bodily or oral work" (Makley 2007, 156). Makley also states that women circumambulators perceived their action as an avenue of "self-improvement" which carried real efficacy (Makley 2007, 174). In this sense, circumambulation can be easily understood as part of a large set of Buddhist purification practices (such as prostration, recitation of mantras (especially that of Vajrasattva), mandala and torma offerings, etc.), which are meant to remove obscurations and obstacles to practice, while developing virtuous qualities and

accumulating merit. In many explanations of such practices, these purification rituals and rites are seen as preliminary or subsidiary practices to the main practices of creation-generation meditations and yogas. Circumambulation, from a philosophical perspective, builds merit, removes obscurations and improves virtue. Circumambulation, from a social perspective, gives lay populations (especially women) the opportunity to interact with sacred spaces, physically engage with the teachings, meet one another in a virtuous environment that will not lead to shame for their family, and demonstrate their faith and piety in a public location.

Scholars have also noted the idea that circumambulation it a method of absorbing blessing from a sacred site. Makley describes circumambulation as a way for lay populations to bring "the body into sustained and close contact with a central abode, providing the means for any faithful subject to absorb some of the very physical benefits of its power" (Makley 2007, 155). In this case, not only is there a social or performative act of religious labor playing out, but there is also a net gain on the part of the pilgrim in terms of their stores of merit, luck, good health etc. It might be true that, from the ontological point of view of the pilgrim, positive work is being performed and good karma is accumulated or works to balance out negative karmic debts from the past. But what happens to the spaces themselves? How does this religious labor affect the sacrality of the sites themselves?

I circumambulate Lhakhang Mukmo for the first time on December 10, 2017. Trinley Sangmo is studying to be a Tibetan medicine doctor. She walks beside me, pointing out and naming various flowers, fungi and shrubs used in Tibetan medicine. What are they called? What are they mixed with? What do they cure? She finds scat from wild sheep while crouching down to pee and calls me over to share in the excitement. There is still snow in some parts and we delight in falling down, sliding about and sharing in a sense of mild danger together. We talk about cousins of the nuns who came back from India, how they coped with the culture shock, how they are

still coping. We pay a lot of attention to the land, to its oddities, its dangers, its beauty.

We continue on the circumambulation route and come across an area of step-like stones where 19-year-old boy Monlam Tashi believes we will find the hoof prints of the horse of Gesar. Tenzin Choetso, a nun, knows more, is quieter. The nuns point to perfectly circular indentations in the stone, “A hoofprint,” they tell me. “Who’s hoofprint?” I ask. “A horse’s,” they shriek with laughter. Was it a hoofprint from Gesar’s famous horse or from the horse of Chechen, the Bong ancestor? Who knows? Both. Neither. Lama Tenzin Nyima is a proper historian and spends endless energy trying to find the right answers to these questions, but the women just laugh, offer a small gem or coin to whatever force was greater than them, great enough to make an imprint in stone like melted butter. The women remind me again of the Tibetan proverb that a simple drop of water can pierce through stone.

Monlam Tashi drags me over to a natural spring, which seems to appear from nowhere out of the mountainside and the nuns tell me Nuden Dorje himself, noticing the nunnery did not have a convenient source of water, struck the ground and water issued forth. We kneel on the ground and drink the water directly from the small spring and the young boy tells me it tastes sweet. The nuns point out the shape of a red conch shell on the face of the mountain visible from Lungkar Monastery. Although we don’t hike up to the conch shell, from our path, we can see a reddish kind of grass or fungus growing like fine hairs and filling the divots in the land. Footprints and hoofprints of Gesar of Ling or the Bong ancestors can be seen on a section of the mountain distinguished by stair-like flat slabs of slate, where pilgrims deposit precious gems, stones, coins and offerings. Nearby is a cave, which is now empty, its owner too old to withstand the damp, and which sometimes houses a sleeping bear. The shape of this imposing mountain marks the skyscape, while its many remarkable geological features invite human interaction and continual religious labor.

The process of circumambulation can of course be about the ontological accrual of

merit and it is also a social activity, but in many cases, it is also an activity that is deeply entangled with attention to geographic space. The act of noticing (the shapes of stones, the color of flowers, the dangers of the path, the direction of other sites) occupies a large portion of time during the circumambulation process. Routes are often difficult, crossing large mountain passes and perching precariously along the side of steep slopes. There is a heightened sense of attention, a consciousness that the land is special and should be approached, not with reverence, but with attention. I am reminded of JZ Smith's idea that, "A sacred place is a place of clarification (a focusing lens) where men and gods are held to be transparent to one another. It is a place where, as in all forms of communication, static and noise (i.e., the accidental) are decreased so that the exchange of information can be increased" (Smith 1980, 114). We should cultivate attention to the land so that we might see what it was that Nuden Dorje or Guru Rinpoche or the local protectress saw in the land that made them mark the land in the first place.

IX. On the Religious Labor of Layering: Death

But it is not only the supernatural powers of deities and lamas that mark a land and make it sacred. It is also the tragedies and victories of men that mark the land. A flat, grassy pasture on the southern slope of the mountain is marked by a tent of prayer flags. It signifies the place where the body of the 6th Bongtrul Rinpoche was taken, under cover of night, after he was shot and died during an armed conflict with Chinese forces[33]. The monks who bore his body and placed it upon the land put their own lives at risk to give a proper burial to their lama. The ground there is covered in green

33) For a moving account of the life of the 6th Bongtrul, see mkhan po karma bstan srung and mkhan po tshul khrims rnam dag 2001, 333-44.

grass and verdant flowers, the wind blows ferociously there just as it does over every other rock and field, belying the tears shed here, the bodies that decomposed here, the rituals performed here even at risk of death. On the backside of the mountain, on a sunny slope, lies a cemetery, a place where bodies deemed unfit for sky burial are

〈Figure 5〉 Amulet marking a grave in graveyard on the backside of Lhakhang Mukmo. The lama photographed is the 7th Bongtrul Lama Tenzin Nyima, Photo by author

〈Figure 6〉 Stacked stones in the shape of houses meant to provide protection for dead 'souls' on Lhakhang Mukmo. Photo by author

placed under the earth. The nuns tell me cemeteries should be in sunny, beautiful places, in case the spirits of the dead (many of them non-Buddhists or those who died in unconventional ways) might have to linger here before their next rebirth. The

graves are marked with small mani stones and amulets that had been worn by the dead. The eastern pass of the mountain is scored with hundreds of small houses built of stone and meant to give refuge to ‘souls’ on a journey toward their next lives. This land is scarred by death even as it is overlaid with narratives of abundant life.


〈Figure 7 & 8〉 Red grass or fungus growing on Lhakhang Mukmo. Photo by author

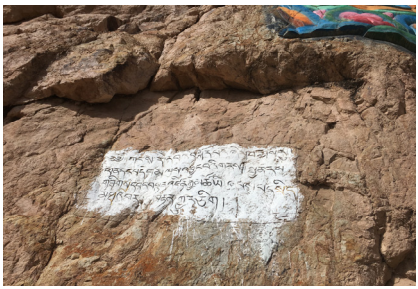
〈Figure 9〉 Inside the retreat cave approaching Dzalung Nunnery on Lhakhang Mukmo. Photo by author

〈Figure 10〉 Hoofprints and offerings, Lhakhang Mukmo. Photo by author

X. On the Religious Labor of Layering: Murals, Inscriptions and Gems

The sacred spaces of Yushu are marked by murals, inscriptions, prayer flags, mani stones, cairns, offerings of money, flowers, food, drinks, religious texts, amulets, relics, medicine, etc. Driving or walking through any stretch of land, it is impossible not to see the layers of sacred space marking, of religious labor, upon the land. The layering is not necessarily about congruity. Murals don't need to match, the offerings don't need to align with any sense of propriety, inscriptions can be spelled poorly. It seems not to be important to remember exactly why a place came to be sacred, who opened it or which lama meditated in which cave. Instead, it is the continuous contact, the perpetual remarking of the sites that keep them holy. A sacred site without visitors, even if its history is well-known, loses its power of affect. And even if no one can remember whose mandala sits on the mountain's peak or in which century Vairocana lived, the feeling evoked by these sacred sites is enough to magnetize practitioners toward their centers even as their participation increases the force of that magnetic pull.

〈Figure 11〉 Mural of Milarepa, Piercing Arrow. Photo by author

〈Figure 12 & 13〉 Dedication verses, Piercing Arrow. Photo by author

XI. Geographical Agency: Suggestions of Stone

Completing the circumambulation of Lhakhang Mukmo, we return to the nunnery as the sun begins to set, and I cook dinner for the nuns. One nun is tucked away in retreat, but the others poke their heads into her room and tease her. They giggle every time her drum and bells resound, mimicking a serious yogini with tightly shut eyes and making their hand into the shape of the drum. The sacred isn't always sacrosanct. A nun asks her sister to shave her head, sitting on a chair in the kitchen and holding a mirror while her sister and fellow nun stands over her, using electric clippers to trim her hair. I salt the food. The sun is beginning to sink below the mountain-line, making the already red clay of the landscape look like molten lava. We are tired and there are still more meals to be cooked, prayers to be recited, water and fuel to be fetched before the night will come to an end. Trinley Sangmo gets a call from her superior at the monastic hospital and I need to drive her home. The sun pierces our eyes as we cross the small mountain pass leaving the nunnery and I ask the nuns about the difference between a mountain and a *gnas*. It still isn't the right question. Like asking why a human is a human instead of a frog. When Gyalsey Trulku talks about the mountains accumulating *bagchag* it doesn't seem strange to imagine that the

mountains have a consciousness. They heave with life, fighting amongst themselves, under the ground through their serpentine demonesses, in the skies with their flying lamas and meditational deities, on their peaks with haughty and easily angered protectors who have complicated ideas about women. These mountains fight through the distribution of water and salt and herbs and wild animals, and through the human vessels who jealously guard their territory from infringing forces. The mountain *gnas* fight in their sheer insistence to remain in the face of so much weather, so much erosion and wind, so much turmoil on their fields. They fight by refusing to forget, allowing dead lamas of the past to push their handprints and hoofprints and cane-prints into their momentarily supple stone. They allow layers of markings upon them, markings that tell history, markings that defy easy explanations, markings that encourage more markings by more forces in the never-ending jostling for dominance in the skyline. And most importantly, these layers of markings upon the land exert themselves on the practitioners on their hillsides, whose sustained attention to the land gives it life.

〈Figure 14〉 Trinley Sangmo on Lhakhang Mukmo. Photo by author

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한 방울의 물이 돌을 뚫을 수 있다
－위수 지역의 지리와 성지(聖地)

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본고는 현대 티벳불교 수행에 있어서 종교 경관의 공간을 이해하기 위해 민속학적 접근을 사용한다. 본고는 티벳자치구에 위치한 위수 지역의 사원장에게서 제안 받은 이론적 모델을 활용하여, 종교 공간을 매개적인 것으로서 상정한다. 중생이 여러 생을 거쳐 업보를 쌓게 되는 과정과도 유사하게, 이러한 매개체로서의 종교 공간은 신성함의 흔적들을 축적할 수 있는 능력을 지닌 것으로 현현한다. 본고는 칭하이성의 높은 고도에 위치해 있어 전원적이며 유목민적 풍습을 보존하고 있는 현(現) 위수의 영지(靈地)들 가운데 두 곳을 분석하고, 순행(巡行), 장례 의례, 벽화, 비문, 공물과 같이 이 지역에서 행해지는 종교적 행위를 살펴본다. 사원 밖 지리학적 공간에서 일어나는 종교적 행위들은 종교 엘리트들에게만 독점적인 것이 아니라 신도 공동체들에 의해서도 행해진다. 이 신도들의 나이와 성, 계급, 문맹률, 종교 교육 정도는 매우 다양하다. 이러한 신도들이 현대의 불교 수행자 대부분을 이루고 있음에도 불구하고, 불교학 분야에서 이들에 관한 연구 데이터는 부족한 실정이다. 이에 본 연구는 신도와 출가 수행자로 양분할 때의 허점과 일반 수행자가 지니는 중요성을 강조하기 위해 사원의 출가 수행자와 재가 수행자라는 두 부류 모두에 초점을 맞춘다. 본고에서 개략적으로 다루는 종교 공간에 관한 이론적 모델은 종교 공간을 일부분 유정한 존재로 여김으로써 지리학적 공간은 물론 그곳에서 종교적 행위를 행하는 주민들에게도 모두 대리권을 제공한다. 현대 티벳불교에서 이러한 일반 수행자들과 지역 자체가 종교 경관의 신성화를 전파시키고 부활시키는 데 중추적인 역할을 하고 있는 것이다.

주제어

생활 종교, 순행(巡行), 종교 경관, 종교 공간, 캄 (지역), 티벳불교.

2020년 07월 28일 투고
2021년 03월 15일 심사완료
2021년 06월 20일 게재확정