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Introduction

This book describes a complex Tibetan festival in light of its performance and texts. It also looks at the works of art used in the festival and at the festival itself as a work of art.

The Mani Rimdu festival is performed in the Sherpa and Tibetan monasteries of Solu-Khumbu District in the Everest region of Nepal. These institutions, like nearly all the monasteries in Nepal outside of the Kathmandu Valley, belong to the Nyingma order of Tibetan Buddhism.

Among all the ethnic groups of Nepal, the Sherpas are perhaps the best known, on account of their exploits as mountaineers. Nepal, however is not their original home. The first Sherpas came from Khams, the eastern province of Tibet, around 1533.¹ Western scholars agree that the Sherpa's religious beliefs are, in the words of Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, the pioneer of Sherpa ethnography, "basically those of Tibetan Buddhism."² In Mani Rimdu, it would be difficult to make any distinction of belief and practice according to ethnic lines. Indeed, the festival at Chiwong is performed by Sherpas and Tibetans working in partnership.

Despite the Sherpas' long tradition of Buddhist faith, large monasteries are a recent innovation in Solu-Khumbu. Whatever antiquity local tradition ascribes to them, the largest monasteries in the region—those which perform Mani Rimdu—were all built within the last seventy-five years.³

Although often casually identified as a "Sherpa festival," Mani Rimdu began at Rongphu Monastery in Tibet. This institution on the north face of Everest was an influential force in the efflorescence of Sherpa monastic culture earlier in this century.

Like much of Rongphu practice, most of the rituals that comprise Mani Rimdu find their source at Mindroling Monastery, the great Nyingma center

of central Tibet. In a way, Rongphu served as a substation in the transmission of the Mindroling lineage, collecting and reassembling its traditions and then sending them over the Nangpala pass to the monasteries of Solu-Khumbu just a few days journey south.

In present day Solu-Khumbu, Mani Rimdu is performed at three Sherpa monasteries: Chiwong, Thami, and Tengpoche, and in a somewhat different form at Thubten Chöling, a monastery founded by refugees from Rongphu. Participants at each of the Sherpa monasteries often maintain that their version of festival is identical to the others', although if pressed, they will admit to certain differences. These variations often shed light on the processes by which Tibetan rituals are formed and we will examine them as they arise.

Mani Rimdu belongs to a genus of Tibetan rituals known as *ril sgrub* (pill practices) [pronounced ril-drup]. The name Mani Rimdu is the Sherpa pronunciation of the Tibetan term *mani ril sgrub* (the practice of *mani* pills). The species of *mani*-pill rituals, which are dedicated to the god Avalokiteśvara, is not unique to the Everest region. A short *mani*-pill text, simply called "*Mani Rimdu Ritual*" (*Mani ril sgrub gi cho ga*), was collected in China by W. W. Rockhill in the 1880s. A *mani ril sgrub* was performed at "Shih-fang-t'ang, to the west of Hsi-huang-ssu, outside the north wall of the city" of Beijing.⁴ Today, the Dalai Lama himself performs a *mani ril sgrub*. Our Mani Rimdu, although a variety of the larger species, has its own texts and traditions.

To give an idea of the scope of the festival, a few statistics are in order. Mani Rimdu lasts up to eighteen days, although in some monasteries and some years it may be a few days shorter. In that time, several hundred hours are devoted to ritual practice. Eliminating the considerable repetition involved, over fifty hours of unique ritual are performed. The core of thirty-odd liturgical texts total over two hundred folios. There is, in addition, a considerable amount of material committed to memory: commonly used mantras, invocations and exhortations, daily prayers and so on. Four commentaries on the ritual of the main deity are known. The commentaries range in length from eleven to two hundred twenty-six folios.

In interpreting this Himalayan mass of data, I have always sought to first understand how the participants in the festival themselves perceive it. This has been amplified with reference to the indigenous commentaries and then with reference to other authorities and traditions, Tibetan and foreign.

As to be expected with such a long and complex event, Mani Rimdu covers much cultural ground. Many of the subjects we shall discuss are already known to Western scholarship in one form or another and to one extent or another. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, for example, has written at length on the cult of the protector deities and on Tibetan sacred dance; Stephan Beyer, on the structure of tantric ritual. For more than four decades, the late Rolf Alfred Stein argued persuasively on the influence of the "nameless religion" on Tibetan Buddhist praxis.

That contemporary Tibetan Buddhism and in particular the practices of the Nyingma sect were influenced by indigenous beliefs and practices which in turn bear striking similarities to shamanic cults across northern and central Asia, seems both obvious and is by now well documented, at least from a structural viewpoint if not an historical one. Both Nebesky-Wojkowitz and Stein devote a whole chapter to the subject, and Helmut Hoffmann, Mircea Eliade, and Robert B. Ekvall treat it at length. Recently, Geoffrey Samuel dedicated an entire book to this thesis.⁵

In Mani Rimdu, we will see several such parallels, but for all its traces of pre-Buddhist belief and practice, Mani Rimdu is preeminently a Buddhist celebration. In its visionary dramaturgy, we can see the core principles of the Buddhist religion worked out. As with all tantric practice, indeed all of Mahāyāna Buddhism, its inner goal is to incarnate wisdom and compassion on earth.

The main rituals of Mani Rimdu belong to the most profound system of Tibetan meditation, the *anuttarayoga* class of tantra. In terms of philosophical view, they are said to embody the view of *rdzogs chen*, the Great Perfection or Great Fulfillment system.

In this book, topics specific to the tantras arise on nearly every page. I have tried to deal with them in as straightforward a manner as possible, without attempting a general disquisition on the subject. Those interested in exploring Tibetan tantra can refer to a growing body of sound scholarship on this profound and fascinating subject.⁶

With the Great Fulfillment system, we face special difficulties. Given its secrecy among the Tibetans of the Nyingma sect who are its chief exponents, it may never be wholly open to public view. This book could not even begin to fill such a tremendous void. Happily, among my sources were Buddhist yogis fully versed in the Great Fulfillment system. Whenever the material veered in that direction or towards the equally difficult subject of the yoga of channels and winds, I endeavored to eke out enough information to make the translation clear even in the absence of a full exegesis.

If the individual parts of Mani Rimdu do not reveal any startlingly new realms of investigation, its very breadth gives us a certain advantage. In it, we can see principles that other scholars have remarked in a general context function in the particular.

This breadth also affords the opportunity to consider previously isolated cultural elements in juxtaposition, interacting in the living context of a contemporary cultural performance. We can, for example, compare the tongue of the magic dagger to the tongue of the gods; the central pole of the dance court to the central pole of the offering cake to the spine of a yogi; the weight of a cobblestone to the weight of Mount Meru.

The importance of these correspondences transcends the superficial fascination of coincidence or the delights of etiological speculation. By examining them, we are able to see recurrent elements in outwardly different

events, and having understood their structure, predict unknown features of incompletely explained rituals. Even in a cultural system as self-conscious and as vocal as Tibetan Buddhism, structure speaks where the tradition itself remains silent.

As Mircea Eliade remarked:

We compare or contrast two expressions of a symbol not in order to reduce them to a single, pre-existent expression, but in order to discover the process whereby a structure is likely to assume enriched meanings.⁷

Within the breadth of the Mani Rimdu festival, some structures occur again and again like *leitmotiven* in a Wagner opera. Thus, we will return several times to such themes as movement through a tube, the descent of light, the rainbow cord, the world tree, and the cosmic sheep.⁸ Each new context will suggest new aspects of the symbol, enriching its connections and meaning.

The purpose of the work before you is primarily descriptive. If in addition to the analyses sketched above, there is a thesis here, it is a rather simple one. The job of a monk is largely ritual and meditation, and ritual and meditation have satisfactions of their own.

These emotional and if you will, aesthetic satisfactions cannot be over-emphasized, nor does one have to be a Buddhist or meditator oneself to appreciate them. No one who has sat in the dark recesses of the chapel as Mani Rimdu is performed can be insensible to the mood the rituals create. No one who has sat with the monks during a break in the session and seen their faces, still enrobed in the quietude of meditation, could doubt that the effect of ritual on those who perform it is profound.

A part of the affective dimension of the ritual lies in the liturgy itself, and can be appreciated without the sonorous music and the rhythm of the chants. Buddhism has ever described itself as a method of overcoming suffering and finding a transcendent happiness and peace. Tantric rituals, these small worlds within which a meditator acts as if he has already reached his goal, bring their own share of joy, even if it is only a fleeting shadow of a greater joy to come.

To perform an elaborate ritual complex such as Mani Rimdu is to participate in the creation of an elaborate work of art, and the joy of a professional meditator practicing his art can be understood, at least in part, if we consider the satisfactions of more familiar arts. Like a symphony or opera, a major ritual has its movements and motives, its structures and parallels, its changes of theme and emotion.

As with the *leitmotiven* of Wagner or variations on a theme by Bach, the repetition with variation of a symbol structure itself has a function. Structural

parallels that students of religion find of intellectual interest have aesthetic impact and emotional resonance for those who participate in the ritual.

The socioeconomic benefits of being a monk are obvious and have been noted often enough. Joy, hard to prove and impossible to quantify, sometimes eludes ethnographers. In a sense, however, to suggest, as has often been done, that the major advantage to being a monk is economic or social is as vulgar as it would be to suggest that Vladimir Horowitz was only in it for the money. The virtuoso meditator like the virtuoso musician is the one who participates the most fully in his art, the one for whom there is the least “difference between the dancer and the dance.”

If the performance of a ritual is an art, it is also a craft. Torma must be carefully sculpted of barley-flour dough and butter, a sand *mandala* drawn neatly and with precision. The liturgy should be clear, well-ordered and crisply performed. Like other craftsmen, the ritualist is proud of his professional skills.

Once, after I had been a regular visitor to the monastery for several years, the manager of Thubten Chöling invited me to photograph the Lord of the Dance rituals performed at his monastery. When I objected that in the darkness of the chapel, I would have to use a lamp whose bright flash might disturb the monks at their prayers, he replied, “No, you come tonight. You bring your lamp and take pictures. We want people in foreign lands to know that the monks of Thubten Chöling do things right.”

The true medium of the arts of meditation and ritual is the human heart. The final counsel of the rituals of Mani Rimdu is that we regard the Earth as paradise and all those that inhabit it as gods. As Trulshik Rinpoche once wrote in a poem addressed to a group of visitors from the Kharta region of Tibet:

If your mind is pure, everyone’s a Buddha.
If your mind is impure, everyone’s ordinary.
We all wander *samsāra* by the power of impurity.
Learn to purify your perceptions, People of Kharta!⁹

This is not an insight unique to tantra or even to Buddhism. The Gospel of Luke states that:

The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, lo here! or lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you. (17:20–21)

A similar impulse was given tongue in a shamanic context by the Native American mystic Black Elk. Having traveled in a vision to the world-tree at the center of the universe, he remarked, “but anywhere is the center of the world.”¹⁰

For Eliade, this is a fundamental principle of human religiosity:

This means that everywhere in the cosmos archaic man recognizes a source of the magico-religious sacred, that any fragment of the cosmos can give rise to a hierophany, in accordance with the dialectic of the sacred.¹¹

The archaic, of course, should not be confused with the ancient. It is alive and well. Hierophanies, at least small ones, are not that hard to find:

. . . you look at the clock and it is only five minutes from eternity; you count the objects on the mantelpiece because the sound of the numbers is a totally new sound in your mouth, because everything new and old, or touched and forgotten, is a fire and a mesmerism. Now every door of the cage is open and whichever way you walk is a straight line toward infinity.¹²

As Joseph Campbell observed in the introduction to the *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*, “the first function of mythology is to waken and maintain in the individual a sense of wonder and participation in the mystery of this finally inscrutable universe.”¹³

It is this sense of wonder, perhaps, that distinguishes the human race. In it, as odd a couple as an American novelist and a Tibetan mystic can meet. As the Great Perfection yogis say, *rig pa*, the awareness of a Buddha, is an everyday sort of mind. It can be found everywhere.