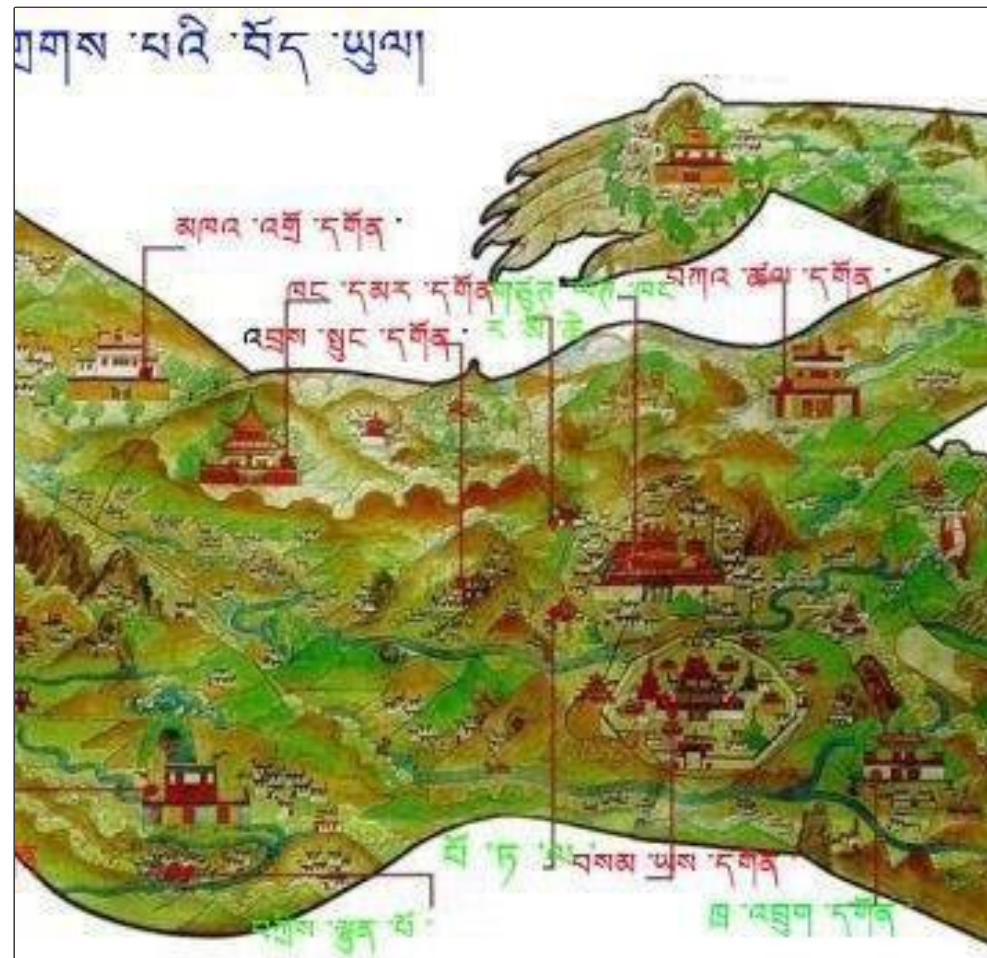




Tibetan Buddhist Ecology and Ritual Practice – some cultural approaches to the ecological crisis

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BUDDHIST ECOLOGY

‘Buddhism contains an implicit ecological thinking that arises from the way in which the environment was, and still is, seen by Tibetan peoples in terms of spiritual forces, local gods and goddesses of the mountains, rivers and lakes. In many ways, what I am talking about here is a specifically Tibetan form of something that is not uniquely Tibetan or Buddhist. It has analogies in many pre-modern societies, notably including the pre-modern societies of Aboriginal Australia, and one can find elements of it in the European context as well. In pre-modern Tibet, then, as in many parts of the world until recent times, nature was not felt to be an inert mass of earth, rock and vegetation. The landscape was alive, and populated by countless gods and spirits of different kinds. These were a source both of danger and threat, but also of possible assistance. This is a model of thinking and feeling about the environment that is still quite real in many parts of Tibet. Illness is frequently caused by offended local gods. Misfortune of many kinds can be set off by polluting the environment in which spirits live.’



[illegible]

demoness (srin mo) supine (gan rkyal du) known/renowned/famous (grags pa) of Tibetan lands (bod yul)

<http://petroleumengineerings.blogspot.com/2010/05/damming-tibet-yarlung-tsangpo.html>

Summary of culturally Indo-Tibetan and Himalayan attitudes to the Natural World

- Sentience involves reincarnation as streams of being spanning numerous lifetimes, therefore, there are no hierarchies of being
- Landscape understood as embodied spiritual presences – spirited agencies inhabit the landscape (including ancestral, protective)
- Spirited agencies include Buddhist, indigenous, combinations of these
- Human health and happiness, on individual and community levels, is inextricably interconnected with and dependent upon building right relationships with the spirited agencies embodied in landscapes
- Presence in Tibetan Landscapes: spirited agency and ritual healing in Rebgong.

<https://core.ac.uk/outputs/444025110/?source=2>



Tibetan Indigenous Relationship with the landscape/environment

‘...people, at any rate in earlier times, felt a strong connection, verging on partial identity, with locality, and they felt that they were in a sense out there in the physical landscape as well as within their material bodies, that they were in a sense projections or children of the powers of the landscape.’

(Samuel 2012: 190-1)



Gyantsé - photo by Valerie et Genla, 2007

Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Ecological thinking...

- Identity in Buddhist regions is intertwined with that of the local and Buddhist deities so each locality can have a particular belonging for those who originate from it
- Ancestors can be deities and rulers historically have been deified
- The landscape is inhabited by spirited agencies
- Sacred places are sought as locations for empowerment and blessing
- The body, on both tantric and medical understandings, has correspondence and interdependent relationship with the environment through the elements of existence: earth, wind, fire, water, air



The Importance of Ritual Practices in Tibetan and Himalayan Regions

- Behavioural and Ritual Practices maintain the right relationships between humans, spirited agencies and embodied landscapes... Quote from the video: ‘... righting the relationship and maintaining the rightness of the relationship so all beings can have health and longevity’ (Dawn Collins, E&S Seminar 2022)
- Examples include everyday household rituals, communal rituals such the *Laru* or the *Shimkor*, and Tantric rituals such as the *Cham*



Leru – Spirit Medium festival in a Tibetan Buddhist village in Rebgong

As can be seen in this video clip, such practices indicate the continuance of indigenous ‘non-Buddhist’ traditions in tandem with Buddhism.

Here the possession is not that of a Buddhist protector deity, but of a mountain deity; a local deity. Yet this practice is performed by Buddhist villages and their local lamas acknowledge the influence of the Mountain deities on mundane levels.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlB5gALmu_g
(5.30 mins)

The *shimkor* ritual in Rebgong

Villagers carry the Tibetan canonical literature (Kanjur and Tenjur) around the fields to bless the crops, the harvest and the whole community



Photo - Dawn Collins, Rebgong, 2009

cham dancer –
Demchok at Hemis

As can be seen from the
dancer's mask, the depiction
here is of a fiercesome,
wrathful deity



'Cham' at Samyé Monastery, Tibet

- https://youtu.be/iXo_bibz6Kk





Mandalic forms represent the natural world and environments in their purest or most natural of forms – as deity abodes

The Elements in Tantric and Medical practices

- Tantric practice understands the human body to correspond to the environment as a reflection, or 'water in water' – all having the same basic elemental composition (earth, fire, water, metal, wind)
- The medical traditions of both India and Tibet recognise ill health as a result of these same elements being in a malfunctioning relationship





All is medicine

ཆང་མ་སྒྲན་རེད་

(tshang ma sman red)



NAGARJUNA AND THE ECOLOGY OF EMPTINESS

‘May I always be an object of
enjoyment

For all sentient beings according to
their wish

And without interference, as are the
earth,

Water, fire, wind, herbs and wild
forests’

•Nagarjuna, *The Precious Garland,
Buddhist Advice for Living and
Liberation*

Summary of Buddhist Ecology and Ritual Practice

– some cultural approaches to the ecological crisis

- Buddhist philosophic frame - name and form as interdependently arising – selflessness of persons – ecology of selves
- All dharmas as insubstantial – Nagarjuna and the Ecology of Emptiness – just being is enough
- Reincarnation and equality of being and becoming – interconnected worlds and lives
- Tantric perspectives – visualisation and the real imagined worlds – mandalic cosmologies
- Tibetan Buddhist Narratives of Land (Srinmo, Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyal)
- Spirited agencies in Tibetan landscapes – mountain deities, *shimkor* and Tantric practices (such as *cham*)
- Towards a Tibetan Buddhist Ecology – respecting animated landscapes – healthy land/crops/community (or natural disasters, earthquakes, floods, fires, epidemics)
- Other realms, sacred spaces and the bayul – Tantric correspondence and medicinal elemental realignments
- Contemporary ritual practices – preparing the ground, requesting the spirits, honouring the space (*cham* circle)
- Applied worldviews – Right relationship with embodied landscapes maintained through ritual
- Can this have meaning for us now, where we live?

Can these ways of thinking and ritual practices have meaning for us now, where we live, in our responses to the ecological crisis?

Case Study: *Water Moves* Project

- This image shows a moment during the offering of a homage with which I entered into each dance at the wellspring sites. This act of meditative surrender was accompanied by a votive and was intended as the opening to a conversation with wellspring beings.
- The score for each dance with and for (un)seen beings at wellspring sites was based in these ways of thinking about the natural world and relationships with and within it

Dance Process at Wells: Score as Ritual

- Offering homage – votive and act of meditative surrender
- Partaking - ingesting the water
- Listening for ‘the field’ to speak, Body and Voice Moving with whatever emerges.



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