Review

Reviewed Work(s): Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka by Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere

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A theoretical chapter establishes a typology of trading patterns and the conditions under which indigenous small-scale trade can develop. The following chapter summarizes the literature on Nepal's geography and history with special attention to Nepal-Tibet relations. Most of the book is devoted to case studies of the five groups, taking them in terms of physical setting, general social organization, and economy. Discussions of trade within each community are divided into periods before and after Tibetan border closings affected links to the north. In the Manangi case, the before and after periods are based on the 1965 granting of special trade privileges by Nepal's King Mahendra.

The author's starting point is that long-distance trade is not an exclusively large-scale phenomenon, but that it exists in the form of petty trade, which can be further divided into that which is organized for subsistence and that which is organized for profit. Given that such locally organized and indigenous trade may be the dominant form in Nepal, the author contends that the process of trade itself is best understood in terms of the transactions occurring between actors grounded in specific sociocultural formations rather than as exchanges between political states. Having made that point, however, the analysis is phrased at a level of abstraction that still fails to bring in concrete instances of trading behavior. The units of analysis are the trading ethnic groups rather than individuals engaged in trading behavior.

The book is addressed to a set of questions that derive from the grounding of trade relations within localized contexts. Why do certain groups take up trade? What is the role of ethnicity, religion, agropastoral subsistence, or local environment in the decision? How does success at trade relate to the establishment of political hierarchies within these groups? And finally, how do state relations interact with these hierarchies and trading behavior? The answers to these questions are sought in comparison of the five communities, all existing in similar ecological circumstances.

The value of this book is in the summaries of Nepal's history and the trade patterns within each of the five case study groups. This compilation of material is a useful introduction to trans-Himalayan links. Unfortunately, the value is most realized for readers who have no familiarity with the literature on the Nepalese Himalaya, since area specialists will have already read most of the source material. The material compiled for current black-market trade by the Manangi is the exception, providing a very nice summary for all readers.

In spite of visits to the field and explicit attention to what gets called "the micro-perspective," the author relies heavily on the work of others. This contributes to the sense of abstraction one gets in a work that hopes to draw our attention to the local contexts of long-distance trade. A more satisfying strategy would have been to condense all the comparative material into a brief chapter and to focus on ethnographically based analysis of the dimensions of trade within a single group such as the Manangi for whom unusual transformations have occurred along all the dimensions of ethnicity, hierarchy, and state-local relations of interest.


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The island of Ceylon is probably one of the best-studied countries in the world. A dedicated tribe of anthropologists from Seligman and Wirz, to Hocart and Leach, and dozens of others have pondered the mysteries of the Sinhala and the Tamils. If one needed two ideal guides to the recent thoughts of the Sinhala one could not do better than Obeyesekere and Gombrich. Their ambitious work attempts to analyze what has been happening to Sinhala religious experience in the last 20 years.

What has been happening? A tragedy of major proportions has been unfolding. Everyone had been predicting that the population explosion would lead to mischief. Mischief of monstrous proportions in the form of civil war has been visited upon the island. Suicide rates as well have increased for both peoples.

The book does not deal with these matters directly, but it makes for absorbing reading. Some parts are so fast-paced that they read like a mystery story. The authors argue that the religious condition is marked by two important developments: one, the development of "protestant Buddhism," and two, the burgeoning interest in spirit cults, possession, trances, gods, goddesses, all kinds of demons. Miracles, magic, astrology, and the occult sciences are on the rise because "people want a lot of things and no longer see rational or practical ways of getting them" (p. 100). The sections dealing with spirit cults and possession
are extraordinarily clairvoyant: there are precise, evocative, detailed chapters on the god/demon Huniyam, who deals with sorcery, on Kali, and—most important—on Skanda/Kataragama. The authors call these cults and rituals dedicated to the lower pantheon the "religion of the oppressed" common to the ordinary people of South Asia, as opposed to the great classical religions of "self-control and decorum" (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism) of the subcontinent. This may turn out to be a point of considerable importance.

There are some significant omissions. For a book on change, the most critical—the repercussions of the civil war between the Tamils and the Sinhala—are insufficiently discussed. On Buddhism, the political dimension is missing. The important work of Urmila Phadnis is not even mentioned. Bechert, writing in 1966, is the only authority mentioned, but his work is not examined. What is noteworthy about the Buddhism passages in the book is the essentially nonpolitical approach that is adopted, when, in fact, it is the deep involvement of the Buddhist clergy in the radical politics of Sri Lanka that is so striking. The large institutions of the established clergy—their problems with caste, sect, community, party, and politics—are largely ignored.

Among the gods, the most dramatic case is Kataragama. The authors do an extremely good job of describing how the Sinhala have laid claim to the shrine and worship of the great Hindu deity, Skanda. Again, the rise of interest in this Hindu deity cannot be separated from the poisonous political atmosphere. The theme of sexual frustration which the authors stress seems quite secondary to the political frustrations involved.

These points do not detract from this learned, fast-paced, well-written, and exciting book. It indicates the direction for further research to elucidate the social, political, and economic dimensions of the extraordinary and dramatic matters described here. The work will be of immense value to all scholars of religion, both for the contrast with the past and for its rich modern detail. Such a work was badly needed. There is little doubt that it will remain indispensable for further work on religion in South Asia.

The central theme of this highly imaginative and extended (A.D. 1112–1986) local history of Xiang Lake and its community in Zhejiang Province is the recurrent conflict over the preservation of the lake. The high drama, the political wrangles, and the blood feuds between those who would preserve the lake and its practical and symbolic value for the community, on the one hand, and those who would reclaim the lake for private or commercial purposes, on the other, is played out against a rich cultural backdrop of literati traditions, lineage politics, and wider ecological and historical developments. As such the book serves well to introduce readers to major topics in traditional Chinese society.

Schoppa seeks to immerse us in the universe of his historical actors, specifically of the literati. He makes skillful use of poetry, especially in a remarkable chapter on the Ming-Qing transition, in which poems about the lake frame the changing mood of those living through the trauma of the Qing conquest. He also presents us with a striking innovation: each chapter is prefaced by a "view" of the lake from one of its celebrated sites—a time-honored literati tradition. Although this occasionally becomes a little precious—it is an aesthetic that does not work easily in a contemporary idiom—the strategy often succeeds in creating an ambience that dramatizes the events that follow in the chapter.

One of the great strengths of the book is the way Schoppa does history. He is extraordinarily scrupulous with the sources and constantly engages them, but rarely in a dry or intrusive way. He plays the detective as he evaluates the sources, and the sympathetic interlocutor as he lets the voices speak. And he is very alert to the powerful ways in which the sources pre-select materials for inclusion as history, not only in texts, but in the shrines on the lake to the several contested heroes. At the outset he tells us that the sources are partial toward the preservers but not the reclaimers of the lake, and that this perspective "becomes our view as well, though not uncritically" (p. xiii). However, I am still uncomfortable with the stark moral terms in which Schoppa often depicts the contest between preservers and reclaimers. Doubtless, the terms reflect not only the bias in his sources, but also our own contemporary concern with the environment. On the other hand, we should be grateful for having among us a historian so willing to expose and engage his own presuppositions.

Anthropologists may be a little disappointed to find a somewhat old-fashioned, essentialist view of culture in this otherwise sensitive book ("Silence before and acquiescence