

Book Review



Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora: Cultural Re-Signification in Practice and Institutions

By Ana Cristina O. Lopes. Oxford: Routledge, 2015, xiii + 276 pages, ISBN 978-0-415-71911-7 (hardback), \$125.22

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Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora is a work on globalization dynamics within the context of the global network of Tibetan Buddhism. It is mainly an anthropological effort—a multi-sited ethnography that took the author several years to complete—intertwined with some historical accounts. Its main aim is to analyze the re-signification of Tibetan Buddhist tradition and the institutionalized forms it has taken in the West. Lopes’ main thesis is that the global fragmentation of the Tibetan Buddhist network produces different re-interpretations of Tibetan Buddhism which are far from being uniform (87). The re-signification of Tibetan Buddhist practices is enacted by major religious figures, who re-signify elements already present in the tradition. The progressive “autonomization” of Tibetan masters accentuated the political nature of the transnational religious field of Tibetan Buddhism and “contribute[s] to the creation of Tibetan Buddhist culture on a planetary scale” (239–240).

The author’s chosen structure—based on Walter Benjamin’s montage technique—allows the reader to comprehend the varieties of Tibetan Buddhism in their global context. This narrative choice permits her to “reflect a plurality of viewpoints” (8) without necessarily binding them through logical or theoretical *fil rouge* to the different situations she proposes. Furthermore, Lopes organizes the book into four parts, each named after one of the stages of the Tibetan death-process: “death,” “bardo,” “rebirth,” and “once again death.” The author uses these phases as a metaphor for the process that Tibetan Buddhism had to undergo to thrive in the new diasporic setting.

Part one, “Death,” sets the historical terrain for the rest of the book. It focuses on the years following the Chinese invasion and the Cultural Revolution. In the opening chapter, Lopes analyzes the features of the communist project that led to the creation of “spaces of death” in the Tibetan culture. According to the author, the creation of these spaces was due to the use of violent practices by the Chinese which aimed to “replace [the] Tibetan worldview, with a communist, materialistic worldview” (20). She recalls the initial years of the Chinese occupation through several autobiographies of lamas and political leaders who witnessed the events,

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thus providing a first-hand account of the Chinese strategy used to systematically dismantle Tibetan power structures. A preferred target of the Chinese rulers was religion. In particular, the Chinese were mostly concerned with Buddhist ethics and monastic institutions. Though the historical account covers a broad span of events, Lopes nonetheless succeeds in highlighting the processes that were more relevant to the formation of a “trans-regional” Tibetan identity, in which the affiliation of Tibetan politics with Buddhist religion resulted in Buddhism becoming one of the primary loci of resistance to the Chinese oppression (43).

The second chapter, titled “The power of compassion,” introduces a central character in Lopes’ work: the Fifth Dalai Lama. Lopes provides a detailed description of his political and religious project through an investigation of the construction of his public image and the symbolic apparatus that lay at the foundation of the Ganden Podrang government (56). According to Lopes, his public presence, built upon textual images originating from his writings, has played an important role “in the construction of the personas of all Dalai Lamas” (49). One of the mechanisms employed in the political project initiated by the Fifth Dalai Lama, which relied upon “literary production, performance and aesthetic forms” (56), survived the Cultural Revolution and now plays a crucial role in the diasporic communities, although it has acquired new significances and meanings (47).

Part two, “Bardo,” brings to the fore the formation of the Tibetan Buddhist transnational religious field and the creation of “dialogue zones” that enable the process of re-signification of the religion in the new context of the diaspora (8). Bearing in mind that one of Lopes’ main aims is to unravel the multiplicity of levels in which religion and politics interplay in the Tibetan Buddhism diasporic context, Lopes gives a definition, following Bourdieu (1993), of the meaning of a transnational religious field. She defines such a field as a network of relations between different positions in which the power is distributed among different agents—i.e., institutions or physical personas—and which takes place across different nations. The outcome of this fragmented and segmented field gives rise to “particular ways of conducting politics within the religious sphere” (85). Developing Appadurai’s (1996) idea of sodalities, she further explains the reasons why the Tibetan Buddhist global network can comprise an exceptional sodality (86). In her opinion, we are not witnessing a singular and cohesive global community, rather we are witnessing a myriad of communities which revolve around charismatic and authoritative characters—“*displaced lamas*” (86, emphasis in the text)—connected to one another, thus forming a “multi-cored network” (87).

Lopes then outlines “two formative moments” (88) in the development of a Buddhist transnational religious field. The first was an outward movement that started with the escape of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama from Tibet and the establishment of several Tibetan refugee settlements in India, Bhutan, and Nepal. This new territory allowed the encounter of Tibetan lamas with Westerners and the consequent establishment of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, a process that was the “real ground zero” for the Tibetan diaspora (88). The encounter of Tibetan lamas with Western disciples also supported the introduction of the Tibetan political cause in the West. The second movement, an inward movement, was the reception of the Western ideal of

democracy by the Tibetan exile community. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama has always been one of the most resolute supporters of Western democratic ideas. He, in fact, started a democratic transition that resulted in his resignation from political authority in 2011. For Lopes, this long process of democratization and secularization was an answer to the Chinese's accusation of Tibetans' backwardness and also a strategic move that has enabled the Tibetan government to align with Western democracies (91).

The author applies the notion of contrast culture, developed by Brazilian anthropologist Carneiro de Cunha (1986), to explain the process of reception of Tibetan Buddhism in Western countries as a channel for the integration of Tibetan culture into Western culture (92). The process is one of accentuation and de-emphasis of specific cultural and religious tropes which lay at the core of the formation and expansion of preferred "dialogue zones" in which the Dalai Lama is recognized to be a "privileged agent" (92). The main dialogue zone connects Buddhism with world peace. Buddhist teachings are presented as universal and secular wisdom more than a religious system. This process of secularization of Buddhist ethics allowed the Dalai Lama to use the Gandhian concept of *ahimsa* to transform the fight for Tibetan autonomy into a generalized fight for a more peaceful world (97). Other dialogue zones link Buddhism with Western science, Buddhist academic tradition, and a respect for the environment.

Part three, "Rebirth," has at its heart a multi-sited ethnography conducted mainly in centers for Lama Gangchen's, Segyu Rinpoche's, and Geshe Kelsang Gyatso's organizations; all lamas connected with the practices associated with the *dharmapāla* Dorje Shugden. Two of these lamas are key protagonists in the recent events surrounding the Shugden affair. (This controversial topic is analyzed in further detail in the fourth part of the book and below.) These lamas represent an interesting case-study for the understanding of dynamics of globalization within Tibetan Buddhism. According to the author, the rebirth of Tibetan Buddhism in the diasporic context is due to "complex processes of re-signification in dialogue with [W]estern cultures" (149). One of the ways in which global dynamics work is through a progressive autonomization of the nodes that compose the global network, which is possible because of the fragmentation of Tibetan Buddhism in the diasporic context (124). This autonomization manifests through differentiation in practices; an example is the creation of sacred spaces suitable for the transmission of Buddhist teachings, a process determined differently by each master. Rituals and rules surrounding the figure of the guru and the hierarchy that proceeds after him enable the creation of sacred spaces (154). Lama Gangchen's activities in the West and his reformulation of the Tibetan medical tradition that resulted in so-called self-healing practices are a good example of this. His teaching style is deeply rooted in the Tibetan medical tradition even though he displays a modern and Western approach to teaching (123). His self-healing practices are directly linked to the creation of a magical universe in which healing the body is also healing the environment and vice-versa (177).

Segyu Rinpoche, a Brazilian Lama recognized by the Ninety-eighth Ganden Tripa as the reincarnation of a sixteenth century Tibetan abbot, gives another example of the creation of sacred spaces. The focus here is his "process of identity formation" (130)

and, specifically, the integration of his past religious experiences—the Brazilian Umbanda tradition—with the new Tibetan religious landscape. Due to that past, in order to claim his status as a *tulku*, it was necessary for him to create a more traditional setting and institution (178). He needed to become more traditionalist than other Tibetan lamas, a necessity that is also reflected in the strict *dharma* etiquette that he imposes on his pupils.

Finally, Lopes explains the working principles of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso's organization, the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT). Geshe Kelsang Gyatso's teachings in the West are based on a "systematic study of Buddhist texts" (143) which are effectively put into practice in the practitioner's daily life. One of the biggest shifts of the NKT from a traditional setting is revealed in the transmission of the teachings, as NKT Buddhist teachings can be transmitted both by lay and Western practitioners to whom a similar respect is given to that for fully qualified Tibetan masters, i.e., prostrations at the beginning of the teachings. Geshe Kelsang Gyatso acts both as a transcendental *vajra*-master who spiritually leads the teacher-disciples in their *dharma* activities and as a "holder-of-the-lineage" of Tsongkhapa's teachings (178). It is through this "democratic sense" of "equal opportunities" that sacred space is established within the NKT community (161).

The sixth chapter, "The divine theater of Kalachakra," deals with the process of re-signification of Tibetan rituals in the specific case of the Kalachakra initiation. By endowing this ritual with new meanings, the political and religious project of the Fifth Dalai Lama re-emerges in the diasporic context. The Kalachakra represents, in fact, a strong political stage for the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and is one of the most important events related to the Tibetan Buddhist diaspora (197). Its political aspect is emphasized by the Dalai Lama's trans-sectarian approach. By following the example of the Fifth Dalai Lama, the Kalachakra initiation strengthens the position of the Dalai Lama as leader of Tibetan Buddhism as a whole, a position which the author states is "crucial to the Tibetan cause" (198). Moreover, the mythical narrative of the Kalachakra tantra itself and its connection with the mythological Shambhala realm supports this project, and it enables the Dalai Lama to spread a message of harmony and peace to the world (196).

Part four, "Once again death" explores in depth the controversy surrounding the *dharma* protector Dorje Shugden. Specifically, Lopes focuses on the controversy's political meanings in the current diasporic context and the realignments made by the transnational religious actors of the Tibetan Buddhist diaspora. As the title of the seventh chapter, "Spiritual politics," suggests, the Dorje Shugden controversy is one of the main terrains on which politics and religion interplay in the Tibetan diaspora context. Lopes starts off the chapter with a quick summary of the events surrounding the publication of the *Yellow Book* by Dzeme Rinpoche in 1975. According to her, the contents of this work undermined Gelugpa responses to the Dalai Lama's attempts to institute an annual ceremony connected to Padmasambhava, a resolution that would

have helped him restore the trans-sectarian political project of the Fifth Dalai Lama (215-216).

The author's account emphasizes the different aspects and characteristics of the cult of Dorje Shugden, stressing the multiple forms in which the same protector is approached by different masters (232). These distinct approaches are expressions of "political positions" (234) and symptoms of the "reconfiguration of the absolute and relative role played by each of the actors within the Tibetan Buddhist transnational religious field" (235). Lopes suggests that "the many faces of Dorje Shugden represent...important reflections of the unprecedented activities of each of these lamas in the context of diaspora" (234). She proposes that the conflicts surrounding Dorje Shugden have worked as a regulating mechanism in a system that defines political positions through their transgression or obedience in respect to the Dalai Lama's wishes (234).

To conclude, I consider *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora* to be a dynamic and innovative work in the field of Tibetan Buddhism in a globalized context. Finding a persuasive approach to analyze its multiplicity of forms can be a hard challenge for an anthropologist. To my knowledge, the majority of the anthropological attempts made so far have examined the practices of small communities, without linking their dynamics with the overall phenomenon of the Tibetan diaspora. In Lopes work, instead, we find different levels of interaction: the global dynamics are intertwined with the local, and the present dynamics can be better appreciated in the light of past ones. Lopes gives insightful examples of how old Tibetan power structures and symbols have been reactivated in the context of the diaspora, especially through the actions of the present Dalai Lama. In Lopes' account the figure of the Dalai Lama stands in the Tibetan Buddhist transnational religious field as one of the major factors of cohesiveness and stability. Asserting the relevance of the Dalai Lama in the Tibetan Buddhist diaspora is obvious, due to his unquestionable charm and the countless projects he is involved in. Lopes goes beyond this, pointing out the influence that other masters have in refashioning their traditions and in spreading the Tibetan cause through the fragmented nature of the Tibetan Buddhist transnational religious field. Finally, Lopes' book has the merit of illuminating the Dorje Shugden controversy and some of its main modern actors by underscoring different perspectives from which this affair can be addressed and focusing more on the political effects that certain positions have in the globalized context, rather than trying to unravel the knot of this undeniably difficult topic.

References

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