

Recent interpretations of *gnas* and *gnas skor* in Tibetan Historiography

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Introduction

Pilgrimage to sites considered sacred has been an intrinsic element in the social and cultural traditions of Tibet.¹ We have no exactly dated written historical sources for this practice in Tibet from before the 13th century but there is architectural evidence which survives of the Buddhist pilgrim's ritual act of circumambulation, or '*khor ba (kora)*', that is probably from the 7th to the beginning of the 10th centuries, the period of the first diffusion of Buddhism there². Although differing interpretations have by now emerged regarding the nature of the popular ritual journey, the consensus among scholars is that this form of religious expression played a pivotal role in the formation of the ethnic identity and cultural unity of Tibetan civilization.

Due to the encompassing nature of religious belief in the social structure, and the predominantly nomadic lifestyle of Tibetans, at every possible opportunity travel was turned into pilgrimage. This practice was widespread not only over the nation but also across the Himalayas in those rugged regions sharing the same language and religion; bordering Tibet proper and ruled by the Dalai Lama's government in Lhasa, these included the areas of India and Nepal inhabited

1 For overviews of Tibetan pilgrimage see Waddell, L.A. *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism* (Cambridge 1895). Bernbaum, E., "Tibetan Pilgrimage" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol.11 (New York 1987), pp.351-3. Ekvall, R.B., *Religious Observances in Tibet. Patterns and Functions* (Chicago 1964). Recent works of interest include *Pilgrimage in Tibet*, McKay Alex, ed. (Richmond 1998), and Dowman, K., *The Sacred Life of Tibet* (London 1997). Jest, C., *Dolpo. Communautés de langue tibétaine du Népal* (Paris 1975) and *La turquoise de vie: un rituel tibétain* (Paris 1985). Ngawang Dagpa, "Les pèlerinages bouddhiques au Tibet" in *Histoire des pèlerinages non-chrétiens* (Paris 1987). Stablein, M., "Textual and Contextual Patterns of Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrimage in India" in *The Tibet Society Bulletin*, vol.12, pp.7-38 (1978).

2 See Katia Buffetrille's article "Reflections on pilgrimages to sacred mountains, lakes and caves" in *Pilgrimage in Tibet* (Richmond 1998).

by Tibetan tribal peoples and the former mountain kingdoms of Bhutan, Ladhak and Sikkim. Although not considered imperative for the individual's spiritual realization, the religious significance of the complex phenomenon of pilgrimage remains paramount for all Tibetans and it is an embedded cultural practice in every rank of Tibetan society.

An important feature of the Tibetan pilgrimage is that it is not and apparently never has been imposed as an obligation in either Buddhist or Bön³ practice. The presence of a monk or indeed any officiating figure on the journey is not thought necessary, and there is no evidence that it was normal for pilgrimage to be undertaken under the specific prescription of a figure of authority. As is the case with many aspects of Tibetan ritual, the goals of a pilgrimage can vary widely, from the simple fulfillment of material wishes to complex soteriological orientations, while the practices that an individual follows on the pilgrimage are often a self-determined combination of diverse acts and rites, and are thus not amenable to rigid classification.

As the Dalai Lama once observed, "A pilgrimage is not a required act. It comes from the heart. Each person knows his or her own motivation. Proper religious practice is not always necessary. To the contrary, if people are so highly developed spiritually that they can practice their religions effectively by staying in one place, even in some unholy place, then a pilgrimage may not be important for them. Such extremely devout and spiritually developed persons are already on the right track without seeking out a pilgrimage path".⁴

As a spiritual exercise, pilgrimage, along with bringing together people from far distant regions of this land, also promoted economic and cultural commerce and thus was an active factor in the exchange of both goods and information. Pilgrims would frequently engage in trade so as to finance their travels, and for the nomads of the vast highlands such journeys were a particularly important opportunity for commerce. The pilgrimage to Lhasa was the highest aspiration for Tibetans of all social classes who did not live in the capital and generated flows of pilgrims creating trade routes across the country. Farmers and herders on pilgrimage would use their cattle as walking merchandise. Pilgrims on long journeys had to barter their way with petty trade and would bring along butter, salt, yak tails, woolen blankets, bundles of tea, silver talents and parcels of gold dust from home. Commercial activities would always accompany the great religious festivals in the form of supra-regional fairs under the protection of the monasteries. The

3 Bön is the ancient pre-Buddhist indigenous religion of Tibet. Samten G. Karmay surveys the Bön religion in "A General Introduction to the History and Doctrines of Bon" *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Tōyō Bunko*, no.3 (1975):171-218

4 See "The Meaning of Pilgrimage" in *My Tibet* by His Holiness, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, a Mountain Light Press Book (University of California 1990), pg. 139.

demand generated by large seasonal clusters of pilgrims in places such Lhasa or Tashilunpo, the monastic seat of the Panchen Lama, and Mount Kailash in western Tibet or the great monastery of Kumbum in Amdo in the north-east, would also bring together crowds of regular merchants. Herb collectors and medicine sellers would ply their trade in medicinal herbs from the Himalayas. Precious stones were also in high demand because of the healing powers they were thought to possess as well as their value as ornaments. Tibetans, if they could afford them, were ready to spend small fortunes on turquoise, coral, agate, amber, pearls, jade and rubies. Trading centers also grew up around even the most remote pilgrimage places such as Tsari in south-eastern Tibet. This aspect of the Tibetan ritual journey has yet to be subjected to an extended empirical analysis or to fuller comparison with its Japanese or Indian counterparts.

Research has shown that Tibetans from all walks of life, farmers and nomads, hermits and herders, merchant householders, wandering *yogins*⁵, humble monks and nuns and elevated *lamas*⁶, motivated by their deep faith and a yearning to gain both worldly and/or spiritual benefits, would strive to participate in these journeys which culminated in acts of worship at landmarks deemed to be imbued with sacred significance within their particular religious tradition.

Historiography

In recent years the study of pilgrimages and holy places in Tibetan Buddhist traditions has inspired a number of scholars who have sought to re-examine and redefine the way in which pilgrimage has been perceived in Tibetan religious thought.

Much has been accomplished through field investigations, such as Toni Huber's study of Tsari and the cult of the Pure Crystal Mountain⁷ which introduces intriguing new perspectives on power and status in an exploration of the complexities of a mountain cult. In his book, Huber argues that the early body of work on the topic lacked theoretical frameworks, but he also suggests that the more recent publications have been characterized by three features which have effectively limited their value, however admirable their rigor. First, Buddhist doctrines and models have set the parameters, with the result that the Tibetan world view, which has emerged through a more complex religious past, has been obscured. Secondly, the more detailed and critical studies have been on smaller scale traditional pilgrimages and local events, while

5 Adepts

6 Highly respected religious elders

7 *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet* (New York/Oxford 1999).

journeys to the major sites, such as Mount Kailash and the Potala, have yet to be reconsidered in a more analytical manner. Huber's third point is that Tibetan pilgrimage studies continue to evolve in comparative isolation. Little or no reference is made to the growing body of work on pilgrimage research on other cultures, which has produced considerable empirical data and introduced theoretical issues and debates.

Victor Turner's work, which first appeared in the 1970s and was based on Christian pilgrimages,⁸ gave rise to a large number of studies testing his thesis that the pilgrimage encouraged a form of what might now be termed 'bonding' between pilgrims which would not have been possible in daily life. Turner employed the concept of 'communitas' to explain this process, and he suggested that attaining this was one of the main goals of the pilgrim. Huber, describing himself as a 'post-Turnerian', claims that his own field work showed that, at least in Tibetan religious culture, the egalitarian aspect of pilgrimage was a weaker and more ephemeral element, and that many of the pilgrimages and mass processions he studied served instead to re-enforce existing social hierarchies and boundaries.⁹

One of the subjects of recent discourse has been the conceptions of nature held. Charles Ramble writes that "Savage nature does not represent an ideal state to the Tibetan mind. It may even be said that part of the aspiration of Tibetan religious ideology is to eliminate wilderness by subjugating it. An image that is sometimes used to express this process is that of cultivation. But this remains only an image, because uncultivated nature too may be seen tame once it has been included within the sphere of Buddhist (or Bön) influence. The paradigm of nature so converted is the *gnas*, the sacred site".¹⁰

Meanwhile, a more rigorous theoretical analysis and translation has been undertaken of such literary sources on pilgrimage as hagiographies (*rnam thar*)¹¹ and in particular the "religious geography" genre of guide-book literature known alternatively as *gnas yig* (*neyig*), *gnas shad* (*neshad*) and *dkar-chag* (*karchag*).¹² These describe those holy sites and their

8 See particularly "Pilgrimages as Social Processes." In *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Columbia University Press (Ithaca, New York 1974).

9 Huber, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

10 Ramble, C., "The Creation of the Bon Mountain of Kongpo" in *Mandala and Landscape*, A.W. Macdonald, ed. (New Delhi 1997), pg. 133.

11 See the article by David Templeman "Internal and External Geography in Spiritual Biography" in *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture* (Dharamsala 1999), pp.187-97.

12 See "Tables of Contents (*dKar chag*)" by Dan Martin in *Tibetan Literature. Studies in Genre* (Ithaca, New York 1996), pp.500-14.

contents which are considered capable of bestowing blessings. The sub-species of distinct texts which consist of realistic descriptions of actual journeys to these sacred places written by pilgrims, known as *lam yig (lamyig)*¹³ or “itineraries” have also been revisited and a new interpretative framework has been applied to pilgrimage or *gnas kor*, literally the “circumambulation of sacred places”.

Wylie¹⁴ defines the latter genre “These texts are intended primarily to describe the geographical location and religious history of pilgrimage places, sacred objects, and the hermitages of former Buddhist holy men. They are devoid of specific information on physical geography per se and are better understood when thought of as guide-books for pilgrims visiting unfamiliar places and things”. A.W. Macdonald¹⁵ remarking on Tibetan pilgrimages and guidebooks, observes that “From a literary point of view, the genre may be minor ... these sources are very important for understanding not just the pilgrim’s but also the average Buddhist’s approach to and attitude towards holy sites”.

Destinations

All over the vast spaces where Tibetan culture prevails, there exists an extensive network of routes to innumerable pilgrimage sites¹⁶. These possess a remarkably complex symbolism with sacred connotations. Designated holy focal points or *gnas chen*, sometimes translated as ‘power places’,¹⁷ these are usually mountains, valleys, lakes and caves. Apart from those just mentioned in nature, shrines, *chod rtens (chorten)*¹⁸, temples, and monasteries were also included. Those cities containing the Three Receptacles *rten gsum (densum)* in the form of holy statues and images (the Receptacle of Buddha’s Body) were other such destinations. Sacred texts, (especially the *bKa’gyur (Kangyur)*¹⁹ the Receptacle of Buddha’s Speech), and stūpas (the Receptacle of

13 See “Itineraries to Shambhala” by John Newman in *Tibetan Literature. Studies in Genre* (Ithaca, New York 1996), pp.485-99.

14 Wylie, T.V., “The Tibetan Tradition of Geography”, *Bulletin of Tibetology*, vol II, no.1 (Sikkim 1965), pp. 17-25.

15 Macdonald, A.W., “Points of View on Halase, a Holy Place in East Nepal”, in *The Tibet Journal*, vol.10, no.3 (Dharamsala 1985), pp.3-13.

16 See Anne-Marie Blondeau’s “Les Pelerinages Tibétains” in *Les Pelerinages* (Paris 1960).

17 See Dowman, K., “A Buddhist Guide to the Power Places of the Kathmandu Valley, *Kailash*”, vol.8, no.3-4 (Kathmandu 1981), pp. 183-291.

18 A *chorten* is a *stūpa* or *caitya*, a symbolic three-dimensional representation of the mind of the Buddha. It sometimes is a reliquary and appears in eight different forms.

19 The Buddhist canon

Buddha's Mind) containing relics²⁰ of Buddhist saints were also to be seen, honored and worshipped. The meditative aspect of Tibetan pilgrimage has been of considerable importance and has been influenced both by the advent of Buddhism in the 7th century, and Tantric interpretations. Consequently, the "sacred geography" mapped out by the environment reflects the complexity of Tibet's religious heritage.

The geographer Wim van Spengen discusses the different understandings of landscape held by Western scholars and Tibetan pilgrims. "What is often, but cannot be, ignored ... is the geographical setting *in* which and *through* which the phenomenon of pilgrimage takes place... the modern scientific mind sees nothing more in a place than a specific location expressed in degrees longitude and latitude, as well as endowed with particular physical qualities. But for the Tibetan pilgrim the locational and physical qualities of a place possess an inherent meaning anchored in its specific geomantic characteristics ... there can be no doubt that 'geomancy, or the art of divination by geographical features, plays a vital role in determining a place of pilgrimage'".²¹

This belief in a "sacred geography" inhabited by spiritual presences is a well-known feature of both Bön and Buddhist Tibetan thought. The forces involved can range from minor local gods to supremely powerful Tantric figures and Buddhas and the *gnas* becomes the "abode", the temporary or permanent residence of a deity. When the concept of *gnas* is applied to the site or focal point of a pilgrimage it becomes "empowered" or "consecrated" in the Tibetan mind, and is then variously conceived of as "holy place", "power place", or "sacred space". The nature of a *gnas* is that it is extraordinary. When a space, site, or object is designated a *gnas*, it is given a high phenomenological value, and the idea behind the practice of ritual is for the pilgrim to create a particular form of relationship with it. Physical contact and mental identification play a part in this. Although it may not be evident to the less spiritually empowered pilgrim, it is generally believed that the deity or spirit of the *gnas* is actually embodied in the physical landscape, or object.

In Tibet, the ritual journey to a mountain, the *gnas ri (neri)*, has probably been the most evocative image of religious practice. In approaching a 'sacred' mountain, Huber identifies a distinction, sometimes referred to as the shamanic/clerical notions of the *gnas ri*. In the first case, pre-literate, stateless peoples assume a quality of sacredness in a site in a process which occurs

20 See the article by Dan Martin "Pearls from Bones: Relics, Chortens, Tertons and the Signs of Sainly Death in Tibet." *Numen*, vol. 41 (1994), pp. 273-324.

21 See "On the Geographical and Material Contextuality of Tibetan Pilgrimage" by Wim van Spengen in *Pilgrimage in Tibet* (Richmond 1998), pp. 35-51.

independently and over time. By contrast, in the second way, meaning is imposed, either by a salvational religion or by the state, and a ‘taming’ of the site takes place. His conclusion regarding Tibetan pilgrimage is that, despite the presence of a religious state apparatus, the latter has never supplanted the former. The savage power of the Tibetan *gnas ri* and the physical hardship to be endured by those set on pilgrimage to those hostile spaces, ensure that the pilgrim there retains a sense of the pre Buddhist perception of local spirits as personalities.²² Katia Buffetrille explains how the mountains which have traditionally attracted pilgrims were seen in popular belief as territorial gods (*yul lha*) long before the process of ‘Buddhacisation’, through the ritual appropriation of existing sacred space, transformed them into sacred mountains for Buddhist pilgrimage.²³

One particularly important spiritual goal for pilgrims was visiting the ancient capital, Lhasa, seat of the highest reincarnation in the land, the Dalai Lama, and the holiest of shrines, the Jokhang, where they could worship and benefit from the blessing of the famous image of Buddha Sākyamuni known as the *Jowo* (Lord). “Many pilgrims from remote areas arrive in Lhasa with butter to sell. A key indication of their earnestness in undertaking the pilgrimage is that once they reach Lhasa they usually abstain from drinking tea or selling their goods until they have gone to the Jokhang, the main cathedral, to receive blessings from the statue of *Jowo Rinpoche*”.²⁴

During the Great Monlam prayer festival following the *Losar*²⁵ celebrations, pilgrims would flock to Lhasa in their thousands, making the rounds of the district’s outstanding temples and monasteries to confer copious offerings. Butter lamps were lit and tea and funds donated to the *sangha*²⁶. Perceval Landon (1869–1927), a reporter for *The Times*, accompanied the Younghusband expedition to Tibet in 1904 and enthralled his readers with his dispatches from Lhasa,

“... the sheer magnificence of the unexpected sight which met our unprepared eyes was to us almost a thing incredible. There is nothing missing from this splendid spectacle – architecture, forest trees, wide green places, rivers, streams and mountains, all lie before one as one looks down from the height upon Lhasa stretching out at our feet... The beauty of Lhasa is doubled by its utter unexpectedness ... there was nothing to promise us this city of gigantic palace and golden roof ... under the fierce sun of that day and the white gauze of the almost

22 Huber, op. cit., pp. 31–32

23 Katia Buffetrille, op. cit., pg.20

24 The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, op. cit., pg.139

25 The Tibetan New Year

26 Monastic community

unclouded sky of Lhasa, it was not easy to find fault with the creed which built the Potala palace and laid out the green spaces at its foot ... a paradise of cool water and green leaves, hidden away among the encircling snows of the highest mountain ranges in the world ... when at last the sight of the farthest goal of all travel burst upon our eyes, it was worthy, full worthy, of all the rumor and glamour and romance with which in the imaginings of man it has been invested for so many years."²⁷

Meaningful statistics are not available, but the accounts of contemporaneous observers suggest that almost all Tibetans, regardless of gender, would undertake this pilgrimage at least once in their lives. An evocative description of such rigorous travel can be found in Alexandra David-Neel's *My Journey to Lhasa* published in 1927 to international acclaim. Disguised as a beggar, she was the first European woman ever to enter Lhasa after an exhausting journey over thousands of miles in 1924.

The entire region of central Tibet was densely dotted with power places and holy complexes containing precious religious objects and ancient artifacts of immeasurable artistic value. The terrible damage inflicted on these religious centres at the time of the Cultural Revolution has been described by Keith Dowman.²⁸ At that time, even the most remote centers of monastic life, such as Tsari, saw monasteries looted and razed. Pilgrimage to Tsari was banned for over twenty years.²⁹ Indeed, the Cultural Revolution affected every region of Tibet, even the distant desolate west, where the artistic treasures of the ancient kingdom of Guge were destroyed.

However, some of the most important sites were spared; others have recently been reconstructed either partially or entirely and can still be visited today. Outstanding examples of those which have survived or have been restored are the extraordinary monastic centers of Samye, the oldest monastery in Tibet founded in the 7th century by Padmasambhava³⁰, Pal Sakya, the imposing seat of the Sakya (*Sa skya*) school, Shalu, remarkable for its scholarly activities and art treasures, Tashilunpo, near the town of Shigatse, and the ancient Gyantse

27 Perceval Landon, 1904, taken from *Lhasa: an Account of the Country and People of Central Tibet and of the Progress of the Mission Sent There by the English Government in the Year 1903-4* (London 1905). See *Tibet, an Enduring Civilization* by Francoise Pommaret (New York 2003), pg. 132.

28 See Dowman, K., *The Power-Places of Central Tibet: The Pilgrim's Guide* (London 1988), and Ferrari, A., *mK'yen brtse's Guide to the Holy Places of Central Tibet* (Rome 1958).

29 Huber, op. cit., pg. 219

30 Also known as Guru Rinpoche, a great tantric master who was the founder of the Nyingmapa order.

Kumbum, the great multi-tiered *chorten*, considered unique in the Buddhist world for its nine levels and painted murals, which have been well preserved.

The most famous natural pilgrimage centre remains Mount Kailash³¹ (*Gans gri Rin poche*) spoken of as the “most precious glacial peak” in far Western Tibet, and Lake Manasarovar (*mTsho Ma-pham*), which lies directly to its south. Kailash, because of its sacred status and its extraordinary geographic configuration, has been associated through the centuries with the mythical Mount Meru of classical Buddhist and Hindu cosmology, believed to be the *axis mundi*, the central pillar of the universe and the centre of the cosmic *mandala*³². In its majestic isolation on the great plateau Kailash is the source of four of Asia’s great rivers: the *Senge Khambab*, ‘river issuing from the lion’s mouth’ – the Indus; the *Tamchok Khambab*, ‘river issuing from the horse’s mouth’ – the Bhramaputra (Tsangpo); the *Lanchen Khambab*, ‘river issuing from the elephant’s mouth’, the Sutlej; the *Mapchu Khambab*, ‘river issuing from the horse’s mouth’, the Karnali³³. Featuring prominently in the ancient artistic, literary and religious traditions of Tibet and India, the Kailash range has many symbolic interpretations and has been a destination for Buddhist, Bönpo, Jain and Hindu pilgrims for two millennia. The mountain is looked upon by devout Hindus as the Heaven or throne of the great god Shiva who dwells there in perpetual meditation with his consort Pārvatī, the daughter of Himalaya; and because of its phallic

31 On Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar see *Gangs Ti se’I dkar c’ag. A Bonpo Story of the Sacred Mountain Tise and the Blue Lake Ma-phan* by Namkhai Norbu and R. Prats (Roma, IsMEO 1989), pp.3-106. “A Tibetan Guide for Pilgrimage to Ti-se (Mount Kailas) and mTsho Ma-pham (Lake Manosravar)” by Toni Huber and Tsepak Rigzin in *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture* (Dharamsala 1999). “On the way to Kailash” by Winand M. Callewaert (chapter 6), “On the Sacredness of Mount Kailasa in the Indian and Tibetan Sources” by A. Loseries-Leick (chapter 8) and “Kailas-Manasarovar in ‘Classical’ Hindu and Colonial Sources” (chapter 9) in *Pilgrimage in Tibet*, McKay, A., ed. (Richmond 1998); *The Sacred Mountain. Travellers and Pilgrims at Mount Kailas in Western Tibet and the Great Universal Symbol of the Sacred Mountain* by John Snelling (London 1990). See also the works by the Italian Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci such as *Santi e Briganti nel Tibet Ignoto* (Milan 1937), *The Religions of Tibet* (London 1980), *Transhimalaya* (London 1973), *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala* (London 1969) and “Il Manasarovar, Lago Sacro del Tibet”, in *Vie Italia e Mondo*, Vol. III, 1936; and *Ascent to the Divine. The Himalaya Kailasa-Manasarovar in Sculpture, Art and Thought* by Varma, Rommel and Sadhana (Switzerland 1985).

32 *Mandala* (*dkyil ’khor*) literally means ‘center and surrounding’. Usually a deity along with its surrounding environment, mandala is a symbolic representation of a tantric deity’s realm of existence, an entire universe visualized as an offering, and also the arrangement of offerings in tantric ritual.

33 According to the *Kangri Kharchak*. ‘the Tibetan *Kailāsa Purāna*’, as quoted by Swami Pranavananda in his *Exploration in Tibet* (Calcutta 1939).

appearance it is also identified by the devotees of Shiva with the *lingam*: the phallic symbol characteristic of Shivaism.

A circumambulation of the mountain, which usually takes three days, is regarded as an act of purification by pilgrims of all creeds as is ritual bathing in the brilliant blue and emerald waters of the lake which is performed to wash away defilements. According to Hindu myth Manasarovar was created by the god Brahmā, the Creator, and is inhabited by a *Nāga*³⁴ king and his retinue, who feed on the fruit of a gigantic jambu tree that grows in its depths. Indeed various legends surround Manasarovar which has been equated with the legendary Anotatta or Anavatapta lake of Buddhist mythology; Queen Māyā, the Buddha's mother, dreamt herself transported there and bathed in the waters prior to the Buddha's birth. Lake Anotatta is said to lie in an earthly paradise which abounds in miraculous medicinal herbs, and likewise Manasarovar is surrounded by curative herbs and radioactive hot springs. Both Anagārika Govinda³⁵ and Ekai Kawaguchi, a Japanese Buddhist priest from Akashi, identified Manasarovar with Anotatta; 'though', writes Kawaguchi, 'the *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*³⁶ said to sit in lotus flowers floating upon its surface are not visible to mortal eyes'³⁷. After serving as Rector of the Monastery of Gohyakurakan in Tokyo, Kawaguchi had embarked upon an epic journey to India and Tibet so as to expand his extensive collection of Buddhist texts in 1897. In August 1900 for the first time he saw Kailash, 'a great snow-clad mountain'. "As far as my knowledge goes, it is the most ideal of the snow peaks of the Himalayas. It inspired me with the profoundest feelings of pure reverence, and I looked upon it as a 'natural mandala', the mansion of a Buddha and Bodhisttvas". He continues, "The real thing in the region is its wonderfully inspiring character ... and a wonderfully holy elevation is to be found there".

Yogins and *yoginis* often dwelled in the caves on the slopes of Kailash and the shores of Manasarovar pursuing their meditative practices in the footsteps of the most renowned and

34 *Nāgas* are powerful, long-lived, half-serpent half-human beings who inhabit bodies of water and often guard great treasures.

35 A fascinating account of these lands can be found in "The Mystic Mandala of Kailas and its Sacred Lakes", in *Maha Bodhi* (Calcutta July 1951) and *The Way of the White Clouds: a Buddhist Pilgrim in Tibet* (London 1966) by the German Buddhist Anagārika Govinda (1898-1985). He and his wife visited the area in 1947-48 and returned with invaluable photographic records of temples, statues and paintings that have since been destroyed.

36 Buddha (*sangs rgyas*): Enlightened or Awakened one, who has completely abandoned all obscurations and perfected every good quality. A bodhisattva is someone who has developed bodhicitta, the aspiration to attain enlightenment in order to benefit all beings. A perfected bodhisattva, after attaining true and complete enlightenment, is known as a buddha

37 See Kawaguchi, E., *Three Years in Tibet* (Adyar 1910).

beloved of medieval Tibetan ascetic hermits, Milarepa (1040–1123), who, according to legend, held and won a powerful contest of magical powers with a Bön adept for possession of the sacred mountain.³⁸

The other two Himalayan peaks associated with Kailash as the three main holy mountain pilgrimage destinations for both lay pilgrims and tantric initiates are Dagpa Shelri, known as ‘Pure Crystal Mountain’, in the Tsari district in south-eastern Tibet and Lapchi, another remote power place of extraordinary natural beauty, in the Tibet–Nepal borderlands. All three mountains were patronised by the Kagyupa (*bKa’ brgyu pa*) and later the Gelugpa (*dGe lugs pa*) orders and are identified with the Tantric cycle of the divinity *Samvara*³⁹ and his consort the *dakini*⁴⁰ known as *Vajra Vārāhī*⁴¹. These three principal sacred sites have been the object of a ‘sacred geography’ controversy among historians.⁴² The fundamental point of disagreement over the “ownership” of the sources of the Tantric status and Buddhist identity of these holy places took place between scholars of the Sakyapa (*Sa skya pa*) school and certain lineages of the Kagyupa (*bKa’ brgyu pa*) school⁴³.

Despite the dangers and hardships posed by bad weather and roads, illnesses, hostile tribes, brigands, wild animals and poisonous snakes and insects in the jungles on the way to Tsari, Dagpa Shelri attracted thousands of pilgrims because of its reputation as a supreme tantric power place.

In Tibetan Buddhist history it was Milarepa who ‘opened the door’ of Lapchi to Buddhism by empowering the site when he subjugated the hostile local territorial gods and goddesses, the *yul lha*, through his meditative powers. Lapchi featured in earlier texts⁴⁴ and A.W. Macdonald has written an in-depth account of the transformational process of the arrival of Buddhism in Lapchi⁴⁵. This cultural enclave and its religious symbolism and activities has also

38 See *The Life of Milarepa: a new translation from the Tibetan*, Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, trans. (New York 1977) and Das, Sarat Chandra, “Dispute between a Buddhist and Bönpo Priest for the Possession of Mt. Kailas”, in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Calcutta, July 1951.

39 the male deity Samvara represents skillful means

40 *dakini* or *mkha’ ‘gro ma*, the enlightened female principle, literally ‘she who goes in the sky’

41 the female deity Varahi represents wisdom

42 See Toni Huber’s “Where exactly are Caritra, Devikota and Himavat? A sacred geography controversy and the development of Tantric Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Tibet” in *Kailash: A Journal of Himalayan Studies*, 1990, 16(3–4), pp.121–64.

43 The *Kagyü*, *Sakya*, and *Gelug* schools date from the 11th century and are called the ‘New’ schools (*Sar ma*) as opposed to the *Nying ma* or ‘Old’ school, which dates from the 8th century.

44 Such as the small *Guidebook to Lapchi* written by Tenzin Chikyi Lodro (1868–1906) in 1901.

45 “Hindu-isation, Buddha-isation, then Lama-isation or: What happened at Lap-phyi?” in *Indo-Tibetan Studies*, Skorupski, T., ed. (The Institute of Buddhist Studies, UK 1990).

been the object of extensive field work by Huber⁴⁶.

Beyond Tibet's borders the supreme pilgrimage was thought to be the long journey to the holy sites associated with the historical Buddha in India and Nepal. For Tibetans from the outer reaches, such journeys could involve years of travel. Making their way on foot across the wind-swept plains and mountain passes in slow-moving yak caravans, stopping to perform devotional obeisance at the myriad sacred places encountered on the road, the pilgrims would welcome physical hardships and difficulties as these were considered a spiritual purification and enhanced the merit gained.

Underlying this activity was the concept that the more difficult the pilgrimage, the greater the merit acquired by the pilgrim. Tibetans often consciously increase the difficulty of their pilgrimages by measuring their journeys with full-body prostrations. Ascetic practices of this sort are also meant to burn away mental defilements and purify the mind for further progress along the path to enlightenment. While quotidian acts of religious devotion may have declined after decades of discouragement under Chinese influence, recent evidence suggests that pilgrimage remains of critical importance in the formulation of identity.

Practices associated with pilgrimage

The Tibetan language contains specific terminology relating to pilgrimage rituals. Apart from the terms for prostration and circumambulation, there are words such as *dapka* (purity), cleansing (*jhang*), sin (*dik*) defilement (*drib*) and empowerment (*chinlab*). 'Jel' is the direct meeting that the pilgrim has with the deity who inhabits the *gnas*. While the *gnas* possesses *chinlab* (enlightenment) power, the pilgrim's body is seen as the repository of 'shadows', 'stains' or 'defilement' (*drib*). The 'sins' carried by a person (regarded as a psychic as well as a physical entity) may be negative, unlucky, and even life-threatening. Pilgrimage is seen as a purification process that takes place both through the physical action involved, travel and prostration, and through contact with the empowered atmosphere of the *gnas*.

The fact that the generic Tibetan term for the concept of pilgrimage is *gnas kor* which means "literally "circling around an abode" or "circumambulation of sacred places", suggests that this is the foremost practice associated with the ritual journey. It is first and foremost a circular

46 "Guidebook to Lapchi" in *Religions of Tibet in Practice* (Princeton) and "A Guide to the La-phyi Mandala. History, Landscape and Ritual in South-Western Tibet" in *Mandala and Landscape* (New Delhi 1997).

journey, or circumambulation, around a *gnas*. Let us consider first of all the word *gnas* which recently has been examined in considerable detail by occidental linguists⁴⁷ and which in the context of pilgrimage conveys a rich plethora of concepts and connotations. Usually translated as “place” or “abode”, in this case when the *gnas* is the focus of a pilgrimage, it can, as was said earlier, be applied to religious images and structures, urban sites, residences of high lamas or reincarnations and natural landscapes. This designation indicates what has become a “sacred place”, and it is implicit that the pilgrim should circumambulate it; that is, one circles a person or object or place considered sacred as a way of paying homage to the *gnas*, since is believed to be empowered and consecrated by a deployment of deities and spirits. Janet Gyatso states that “the image ranges from one of a being who inhabits a certain place ... to the place itself as constituting the spirit of a deity of some sort ... to the perception of the actual contours of the land as being anthropomorphic or animal-like, by virtue of which that place is thought actually to be the being so outlined”.⁴⁸

It is generally agreed that the practice of circumambulation is the main feature of pilgrimage and a way of constructing a relationship with a person or place considered sacred, but there are now some differences of opinion regarding its exact form. The received view has been that pilgrims circumambulate their final destination as well as all the holy sites on the way, in a clockwise direction if they are Buddhist and counter-clockwise if they are followers of Bön. In a recent study, Huber relates that this was not always the case. He points out that at Shar Dugri in Amdo and Kongpo Bonri in southern Tibet Buddhists circumambulate counterclockwise while at Tsari Bönpo move in a counter clockwise direction, and women do a half circuit in both directions. This ancient ritual originated in India where it was known as *pradaksina*. Buddhist pilgrims will normally perform the ritual act of circumambulation in a clockwise direction around all holy images and objects representing the Buddha’s body, speech and mind, buildings, monuments, and other sacred spots in nature which they come across. This circumambulation or *kora*, as it is known in Tibetan, is usually accompanied by recitation of mantra; usually the famous Six Syllable Mantra, *Om Mani Padme Hung*, pertaining to the protector of Tibet, Avalokitesvara, the Buddha of Compassion, is the one recited.

47 See Ekvall’s extensive discussion on the nature of *gnas*-hood in both its phenomenal and noumenal aspects in *Religious Observances in Tibet. Patterns and Functions* (1964), pp. 99–130. Toni Huber expounds on the significance of the term in his article “Putting the *gnas* back into *gnas* -kor” in *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture*, Dharamsala 1999, pp. 77–104.

48 Janet Gyatso, “Down with the Demoness: reflections on a feminine ground in Tibet”, in *Feminine Ground. Essays on Women and Tibet*, J.D. Willis, ed., Snow Lion 1989, pg. 49.

Apart from the ritual of circumambulation, there are two other characteristic religious observances (*chos las*) performed on pilgrimage. Salutation, commonly performed as a prostration is intended to purify the body. Verbalization through the recitation of mantras and prayers purifies the voice and focuses one's concentration on the making of offerings.

Prostrations are employed by devotees who seek to increase their endeavor multifold on their journey by performing full-body prostrations instead of walking and it was, in earlier times, not uncommon to meet pilgrims prostrating all the way from their home to their destination. In the words of the Dalai Lama, "Another way to gain more merit is to make the pilgrimage by prostration instead of ordinary walking. This not only increases hardship, but also closes the entire circle on the ground with contact from the pilgrim's whole body, rather than with just footsteps, which have open spaces between them."⁴⁹

The pilgrim's perception is that the accumulation of merit sought in performing all such demonstrations of faith is the fruit of virtuous activity and thus the greater the sacrifices and physical exertion endured, the greater the reward in terms of spiritual benefit. Essentially, it should be remembered that the *gnas*, as the object of circumambulation, rather than the movement itself, is the dominant notion for the Tibetan pilgrim. The enduring appeal of pilgrimage towards sites of such remarkable complex meanings suggests that the ritual journey of the Tibetan faithful is regarded as a metaphor for the spiritual path.

Pilgrimage, politics and the future

Despite the political repression experienced by Tibetans at the hands of the Chinese authorities in the 1960's and 70's, when the latter tried their outmost to suppress this practice, Tibetans were once again able to express their devotional fervor in the 1980's when the Chinese authorities adopted a more liberal polity and tolerant attitude toward religious practice. The permission for reconstructions represented an acknowledgement of a new degree of religious autonomy. Chinese promises of the benefits of modernity, including state clinics and schools, have largely failed to materialize, but perhaps the recent relaxation of the repressive ordinances on religious freedom is a preferable compensation. However, the adverse educational developments of recent decades have undoubtedly resulted in the neglect of the Tibetan language while interference with the trans-generational endowment of a cultural legacy has weakened the Tibetan historical identity and dismantled the canon of which pilgrimage literature was an important part.

49 The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, op. cit., pg. 140.

In recent years the initiatives of both Tibetans in exile and western non-governmental organisations have played a role in creating the opportunities to regenerate important aspects of Tibetan culture. The series of international conferences on the state of the Tibetan language, organized by the Shang-Shung Institute have prompted greater awareness of the threats to its survival. The publishing house of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala has sought to promote new editions of some of the classics of Tibetan pilgrimage literature as well as new academic works on the subject.

Meanwhile two organizations, A.S.I.A. based in Rome and the Trace Foundation in New York, in addition to their work on irrigation, schools and medical centres, have been involved in the restoration of monasteries and the sponsorship of monastic education. The fact that such initiatives have been approved by the Chinese authorities gives rise to hope that this fundamental religious freedom will remain open to Tibetans and that the culture which has nourished the practice of pilgrimage will continue to overcome the many obstacles that recent history has placed in its path.