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Tibetan liturgy conveyed to a Taiwanese context

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- ***Abstract***

The project intended to provide an overview of the kind of liturgical music being introduced among the increasing numbers of practitioners of the Tibetan branch of Buddhism in Taiwan and to examine those rites from the standpoint of their performative aspects (chant, recitation, instrumental music and dances).

We concentrated in the observation of the functioning of chant, music and dances during the ceremonies and the variability of the various ritual traditions.

We have interpreted the forms of representation that Tibetan Buddhism takes in Taiwan as being somewhere midway between the forces that attract other modern societies to the teachings that Tibetan Buddhism has to offer and to what we could call the "traditional" local forms of Buddhist worship already existing here.

In this process of introduction and propagation of the religion and its various forms of ritual we see that a network of exchanges is being established between local associations and the individual Tibetan lama as well monastic institutions outside Taiwan. We see this process not as a new development but as a prolongation of the traditional pattern of propagation of the Buddhist faith within Tibet itself but this time extended to a global context.

We have assessed the main corpus of chant, music and recitation of the Tibetan liturgy used in Taiwan and concluded that this corpus is not as large as within a purely Tibetan community, it is restricted to certain types of ceremonies and does not encompass the whole spectrum of rites that take place in Tibet for Tibetans. That said we must nuance this statement and say that whatever is done in a Taiwan context is strictly what is done in a purely Tibetan context albeit in a shortened form. The practices are perceived as being "authentic" in spite of the changes effected. There is also the factor of the ritual richness of Tibetan Buddhism which has a strong appeal for the people of Taiwan.

The changes and differences can be attributed to the fact that Buddhism is already a Taiwanese religion makes it easy to be accepted by the mass of the people and gives people a choice in what they take in. We explain the bulk of ritual activity as the social construction of the symbiosis between Tibetan monastic and Taiwanese lay communities and see the the intercultural dialogue and interaction of individuals as the source to the performative acts included in the new form of religion.

- ***Keywords***

Taiwan, Religion, Buddhism, music, minorities, Tibet, rituals, performance, music, liturgy

- ***Generalities, Setting and Aims***

The rapidly increasing connectedness of world societies means that traditional religions face a threat but there is also opportunity. The threat is that of the deleterious effect of contact with modes of thinking and behavior that reject and undermine the basic postulates of the culture of the host country. The opportunity can be found in the large numbers of potential converts who have not previously been accessible. Buddhism, particularly in its Tibetan variety, has proved one of the most successful of traditional religions in adapting to this new global context. Modern Taiwan is no exception to this global context save that it takes a form particularly adapted to its circumstances.

Several reasons may be adduced for this. As far as Buddhism in general is concerned, we can consider for example, the ease with which Buddhist philosophy (Mahayana in particular) can be viewed as being in harmony with contemporary science and the successful image that Buddhism has been able to project as an essentially non-violent, non-hierarchical and ecologically friendly tradition.

As far as Tibetan Buddhism is concerned, we might note the great internal variety of Tibetan religion, which appears to have something for almost every religious and psychological need from healing rituals and prosperity magic to deep meditative experiences and subtle philosophical

argument. Another key issue, however, is undoubtedly the presence and availability of large numbers of teachers of Tibetan style Buddhism in the form of the refugee lamas who left Tibet in 1959 and the following years and which have been trickling out of Tibet through the years following the fluctuations of the PRC policies in Tibet. (Smith, 1996)

It has been suggested that modern Buddhism in advanced societies may be classified into three general categories. These are "Elite Buddhism", characterized by the generally elite groups who constitute its practitioners and finance its importation; "Evangelical Buddhism", where there is an active missionary orientation on the part of Asian Buddhists; and "Ethnic Buddhism", imported as part of their cultural baggage by Asians from Buddhist societies settling in America (Nattier, 1995). In these terms, there is little doubt that Tibetan Buddhism in advanced societies is "Elite Buddhism" rather than "Evangelical Buddhism", a religion driven by the desire to be converted rather than the desire to spread the faith on the part of a particular group.

There are however, few active and expansionist forms of Buddhism within Taiwan which are able to finance a large-scale 'missionary' operations. If with Tibetan Buddhism, the pull comes from the Taiwan side, there is an active willingness to co-operate on the part of Tibetans themselves which is a significant part of the process. Some of these considerations seem to apply to the conditions that obtain in recent times in Taiwan. Buddhism, however, was present in this land from the earliest times but in a different form and that adds another term to the equation.

For Tibetan lamas, the cultivation of their newly-acquired global audience is seen both as a religious duty and as sensible strategy and their activities in most modern societies form only part of a larger pattern. In recent years some of these teachers have developed extensive international networks, including "Dharma centers" not only in Western and Eastern Europe, the USA, Latin America but also among overseas Chinese communities and in societies such as the Mongolian People's Republic, Tuva or Buryatia where Tibetan Buddhism is re-emerging after a long period of suppression.

The characteristic context of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan is that of a national network of religious associations, generally centered around the

teachings of an individual lama. However, most of the ritual activity of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan is restricted for various reasons.

Although all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism are represented in Taiwan with about two hundred registered centers, not all of them have a lama in residence; in only a few centers we find a resident lama as abbot or leader of the center. Often lamas and monks are invited on temporary basis and some of them keep coming back to Taiwan regularly. All of them come either from India or from Nepal since direct travel from mainland China is not easy but a number of them are recent exiles from Tibet who soon after moving to India or Nepal have come to Taiwan.

These visits and links create a kind of interweaving between the networks of different lamas. Some networks are closer to each other, some more distant; thus lamas from the bKa'-brgyud-pa order, the rNying-ma-pa and to some extent Sa-skya-pa traditions group together, as opposed to the dGe-lugs-pa networks. However all are closer to each other than to other forms of Buddhism and people usually participating in Tibetan groups of all denominations might attend a mass empowerment ceremony by an important Lama, for example.

It is within this world context that Tibetan Buddhism has taken root in Taiwan during the last twenty years, slowly at the beginning and nowadays at an increasing pace.

• *Discussion of Results*

Types of ritual being introduced and its performative aspects

- The first stage consisted in the observation and determination of the categories in which rituals were classed; this was essential since performance varies with the liturgical category of a rite.

Most of the rituals performed in Taiwan are empowerments (*dbang*) 灌頂; other forms of gatherings accompanied by music are for meditation 共修. In this cases before and after the actual session the leading lama will perform chanting accompanied by the drum and the cymbals. Two kinds of drums are used, the larger prayer drum and the hand held hourglass drum *damaru*. However these simple prayers are not part of the highly structured liturgy which is the specialized domain of the monk.

Other rituals usually performed are Burnt Offerings 火供, Blessings 加持, ceremonies of welcoming of important personages and the special festivals and ordinary ceremonies that compose the regular ritual calendar of the various schools. (cf. Snellgrove, 1987)

The main divinities worshipped during the rituals are Tara (Tibetan: Dolma) 綠度母, Mañjusri (Tibetan: Jamyang) 文殊菩薩, Phurpa 普巴金剛, Avalokiteswara (Tibetan: Chenrezig) 觀音, Vajrasattva (Tibetan: Dorje Chang) 金剛薩埵. (cf. Beyer, 1973)

These two types of ceremonies require particular knowledge which is the possession and the metier of the monks and must necessarily be performed by a qualified lama. On the other hand there are some types of ceremony in which the devotees participate actively by chanting like in the gatherings for meditation 共修 mentioned above.

- The second important consideration is to take into account the two aspects that presents Tibetan Buddhism. One aspect is Monastic Buddhism where the community of monks or lamas learn not only the doctrine but also practice meditation and the performance of rituals. This is essentially a feature of monastic religion. The other aspect is popular Buddhism as practiced by Tibetans laymen. Here simple rites are performed consisting mostly of prayers, prostrations, the taking of vows for a limited period and empowerments that allow lay practitioners to obtain teachings concerning a particular deity. This has important implications for the way things are developing in Taiwan. If a person in Taiwan decides to join a monastic institution as a monk or a nun will do so in an Chinese Buddhist monastery and not in a Tibetan setting. One of the reasons is that there are not full-fledged Tibetan monastic institutions in Taiwan. On the other hand laymen will follow the teachings of a particular lama in a "Dharma center" or an association where teachings are dispensed.

Those teachings are essentially concerned with the basics of Buddhism in general and include some simple meditation techniques. However what appeals most to Taiwanese devotees of Tibetan Buddhism are rites for prosperity and long life. In fact we should hazard that for many people these rites are but an extension of other forms of Chinese folk religion this time dispensed through the intermediary of a lama. The myth that Tibetan lamas may be more 'effective' in their action and the bearers of a

more powerful tradition seems to obtain at popular level.

The adaptation of rites to local conditions.

We collected a number of printed texts used during the ceremonies. They happened to be the standard texts of the Tibetan liturgy. There were no fundamental changes in the character of the liturgy and their performative acts. It must be remarked that changes may happen in a ritual system as a result of modification of context of performance. Often those changes take place in a social and psychological environment that does not acknowledge them hence our examination of the details of the performative acts. We see here context as an organizing framework that allows the emergence of ritual performance, changes in this context bring changes in performance. (Canzio, 1988)

The main difference in ritual structure noticed consisted in the arrangement of the texts for performance. Whereas in a Tibetan context the ceremonies are performed in their extended versions that can last a few days, in Taiwan usually an abridged version that will take only a few hours is performed. This is in conformity with the wishes of the sponsors few of which are ready to invest more than a full day in a ceremony

In Tibet the relationship between the lay community and the lamas is an integral component in the symbolic construction of a social symbiosis between monks and lay society. The kind of interaction that takes place between laymen and monks in a Tibetan community is of a different kind than what we can find in Taiwan. Here in Taiwan the monks are Tibetan and the laymen Taiwanese. They do not constitute a community in the sense of a close knit network of relationships where language, culture, and other fundamental traits that may go to consolidate the identity of a group are shared. All exchanges and transactions are mostly circumscribed to an exchange of ritual services (and certainly teachings when solicited) for gifts and donations but nevertheless not exclusively limited to that.

However, there appears to be a communication gap between the learned lamas and their Taiwanese sponsors. This gap is bridged by younger Tibetan assistants of the master when they deal with informal transactions. All other transactions with the lamas tend to be of a formal kind: stereotyped greetings Tibetan style, presentation of offerings and simple exchanges. On other occasions the lama is approached for

consultation or divination on personal matters concerning the sponsor. These usually pertain to his private life or business but again this tends to take place as a formal event.

Society and reasons for the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan

The social extraction of the participants is varied. Some are ordinary Taiwanese that may find in Tibetan Buddhism a ritual richness with which they empathize and that may have some relation with popular Taiwanese religion specially the cult of local divinities. Others, mostly middle class people with a good level of education are attracted to Tibetan Buddhism as a world phenomenon in a manner similar to that which we find in Europe and the United States under the influence of New Age ideology.

Given the conditions of the introduction of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan the local devotees are unable to fully participate in the rituals but they learn a number of sung prayers and Tibetan religious tunes and join in. Taiwanese disciples tend to accept the word of the lama and his suggestions without question as regards which rituals to perform, how to participate and forms of behaviour during the ritual.

In Tibet or in a Tibetan situation the layman's rituals will be sustained ritually by a community of monks but in a Taiwan situation rituals tend to be abridged and the number of monks available to play the instruments and chant is often reduced to two or three according to the occasion. Thus the performative quality of the music tends to be limited.

The fact that Buddhism is already a Taiwanese religion makes it easy to be accepted by the mass of the people. There is also the fact of the variety of ritual of Tibetan Buddhism has a strong appeal. That added to the vaunted efficacy of Vajrayana rituals which is the form of Buddhism practiced in Tibet which is supposed to yield spiritual powers in a single life, adds to its a particular attraction.

As a methodological strategy the task of collaboration with all the parties involved was fundamental in this type of research since the very point of this study were the minutiae of performance. This allowed us to see what changed and how and see some of the reasons for these changes. Participants to the religious events (both the performers on the Tibetan side and the devotees on the Taiwanese side) were not clearly able to explain what they did. Tibetans felt they were following a way of

behaviour in full accordance with their beliefs, past experience and expectation for the future for the cultural and religious baggage they were intent of propagating.

On the Taiwanese side, the devotees felt an attraction for the particular event and its expected worldly effects but probably saw the whole event from a point of view that an orthodox Buddhist would frown at since Buddhism is not only rituals and all the paraphernalia of instruments, chant and ritual action; it is also a doctrine and a moral discipline.

We see that certain aspects of the Tibetan Buddhist liturgy shares characteristics with practices that belong to folk Taiwanese religion. This is an added factor to make the introduction of the religion more acceptable since ritual elements and their attached musical performance as well as attitudes in worship survive more easily in the process of the transculturation into Taiwan if there exists a cultural precedent for it.

There is no formal transmission of musical knowledge and all newly acquired information is the result of imitation and participation. Besides there is no verbalization what it is done. Doing something and knowing about what one does are two different orders of knowledge. (c.f. Samuel 1995)

In spite of the great variety of ceremonial practices even within the same lineage we find a large unified ritual system possessing a great stylistic variety. Of this vast liturgy the subset transplanted into Taiwan and chosen by the local sponsors is indispensable but it is also what appears to satisfy clients. Teachings, rituals and performative acts are introduced and accepted only selectively.

• *Conclusion and Prospects*

We were especially concerned with the functioning of music and other forms of performance in this complex field and the determination musical styles in relation to the various performing traditions. Detailed information on the performative aspects of the liturgy (chant, music, dance) and its practitioners elucidated some little known aspects of new forms of behaviour in Taiwan society.

We think we have contributed to filling part of the gap that exists in the specialist literature in the subject. The transculturation of a religion

and the introduction of new practices (including musical practices) is a subject of great present-day interest in the prevailing interconnected world. A great deal has been said about the power of music and about the powers that could be attained through the performance of ritual music if done in earnest. We may feel inclined to disbelieve the magical effectiveness of these practices but activities of this kind have a power of influence people quite beyond of what is normally expected thus contributing to the adoption of performative practices and of their attached forms of behaviour.

In some countries the activities of certain religious groups constitutes a serious political problem; mainland China or Japon are Asian examples that come readily to mind. Musical and ritual practices are seen and felt as being identity icons. How are they handled, bandied and used to attract devotees may say something about modern societies in transition searching for a new identity in changing global context. Other studies will be needed in the field but this could pave the way to further interdisciplinary studies. The conclusions of this study can give the student of contemporary affairs a tool for assessing present trends in society based on documented aspects of the introduction of a tradition that is taking place in a society experiencing rapid change and modernization.

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