

GEOFFREY SAMUEL. *Tantric Revisionings. New Understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005, pp. x+384. ISBN: 81-208-2752-X (HB), Rs 495

Professor Geoffrey Samuel, the author of the well known book *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*, has collected his new and previously published articles relating to Tibetan Buddhism and Indian religions under one cover. This collection consists of four parts.

- 1) *Starting points*. Here he sums up the results of his previous investigations and formulates a list of essential questions concerning a link between Tantric Buddhism and Buddhism philosophy, between Tibetan forms of social organization and Tibetan religious forms, between historical and confessional phenomena within Tibetan context. He also discusses the “shamanic” and “clerical” models of religion in Tibet. Describing the traditional Tibetan society, he finds out that it is a “stateless society” (p. 27) similar to “some of the Islamic societies of Central Asia and North Africa” (p. 27). Moreover, the author argues that “there are also similarities between Tibetan religion and the Sufi and Shi’a forms of Islam in some of these religions” (p. 27).
- 2) In the second—*Historical*—part of the book Professor Samuel presents Tibetan Tantra as a form of Shamanism and discusses connections between Bon, Shamanism and Tibetan religion. Holding his ground, he argues here that different Shamanic traditions have been incorporated into Tantric Buddhism. He introduces the term “Shamanic Buddhism”: “[...] one can consider the

Vajrayāna in Tibet as, among other things, a sophisticated variety of Shamanism” (p. 74). Here he also gives us the definition of Shamanism: “[...] the regulation and transformation of human life and human society through the use (or purported use) of alternate states of consciousness by means of which specialist practitioners are held to communicate with a mode of reality alternative to, and more fundamental than, the world of everyday experience” (p. 74).

- 3) In the third part of the book—*Religion in Contemporary Asia*—author discusses the problems of Vajrayāna and Himalayan folk religion, Tantric rituals, the role of women in Tibetan Buddhism and Indian religions.
- 4) The final part of the book—*Buddhism and Other Western Religions*,—as the reader can guess, is dedicated to the problems of westernization of Tibetan Buddhism and its interaction with Western religious values.

Although the book is a collection of different essays, it makes an impression of accomplished and integral work. The logic of the book is continuous, as the author avows: “In these articles, I have tried to move towards a fuller and more inclusive understanding of these traditions and their social context, from a position which is not committed to any single tradition but is sympathetic to all the people, past and present, who have been connected with them” (p. ix).

The book is undoubtedly of great interest to specialists in the field of Tibetan Studies, Indian religions and Buddhology, however, I have faced several questions which I would like to formulate here.

As we can see from Professor Samuel’s writings, Tibetans had not only Bon and Buddhism but also a mysterious Tibetan religion which is different from both Bon and Buddhism: “[...] it has become even more evident that it is no longer possible to treat the Bon religion of today as some kind of survival of early Tibetan religion, or alternatively to regard it as a mere combination of naive plagiarism of Buddhist texts and practices with Satanic reversals” (p. 130). Continuing to multiply entities, Geoffrey Samuel also introduces Shamanism as a necessary ingredient of all five Tibetan religious traditions. Finally we have another term, namely *Tantric Shamanism* (p. 132). The picture becomes more and more sophisticated. Describing the evolution of Bon, Professor Samuel writes about three phases: the first phase was not Bon, it was a “nameless religion,” and “the second phase corresponds to the religion of the early Tibetan royal court” (p. 131). It is also not completely Bon. And the third phase “represents the subsequent of the Bon religion into the Bon-po as we know them today” (p. 124). So finally, what is Bon and what was this mysterious early Tibetan religion which needs to be reconstructed (p. 132)? Geoffrey Samuel partly answers: “Bon remained a kind of amalgam of early Tibetan religion, Tibetan folk religion, black magic and sorcery, a generic label for all aspects of Tibetan religion that did not fit neatly into Western stereotypes of proper Buddhism” (p. 125). Here we again encounter *early Tibetan religion* and *Tibetan folk religion*. It looks like Professor Samuel introduces some hypothetic entities without proper definitions. This diversity

of religions in Tibet looks strange and confusing: for instance, Early Christianity differs very much from Christianity of St. Thomas Aquinas, but we still designate all these teachings *Christianity* (shall we use term like *European folk religion* instead of *Early Christianity*?)

Besides, in his articles Professor Geoffrey Samuel did not mention the hypothesis of the origin of Bon religion suggested by the Russian scholar Professor Bronislav Kuznetsov in his book *Ancient Iran and Tibet. A History of Bon Religion*.⁷ In this book, the well-known Russian tibetologist introduces the Bon religion as a reformed pre-zoroastrian Mazdaism. Of course, this point of view is quite questionable, but maybe it is more fruitful than labeling anything that doesn't match formal requirements as *Shamanism* or *folk religion*.

Among the articles written by Geoffrey Samuel there are several dedicated to the problem of ritual (*The Effectiveness of Goddesses or, How Ritual Works* and *Women, Goddesses and Auspiciousness in South Asia*). Using anthropological materials from different cults (Kumāri cult in Nepal, White Tārā cult in Tibet, Virgin Mary cult in Roman Catholicism), Professor Samuel describes how *ritual healing* works. In these very valuable articles the author emphasizes the role of different modes of description of the universe: “[...] where rituals suppose a language of interactions with spirits and deities, this ‘spirit-talk’ can be understood as a description of the universe which is different from that we assume in our everyday lives, but which is not necessarily less true” (p. 231). Professor Samuel introduces here a theory of *modal states* “that corresponds both to specific patterning of mind and body of individuals within a given social context, and to patterning of relationships among them” (p. 234). According to Geoffrey Samuel, each individual unconsciously has a personal repertoire of these *modal states* and the possibility to shift between them. Undoubtedly, the analysis of ritual made by Professor Samuel is of a great importance for researches in the field of anthropology and comparative religious studies.