CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Re-imagining Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage culture in India
Authors	Kalmar, Brigitta
Publication date	2017
Original Citation	Kalmar, B. 2017. 'Re-imagining Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrimage Culture in India', Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions 5, pp. 40 - 68.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://jisasr.org/current-issue-volume-5-2017/
Rights	©2017, The Author(s).
Download date	2026-11-15 17:43:13
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/4432

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Brigitta KALMAR

Re-imagining Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrimage Culture in India

ABSTRACT: This article explores how Tibetans have defined India, the birthplace of Buddhism, as a space for themselves and hence created, re-created and reinvented their ancient pilgrimage destinations and rituals there since the middle of 20th century. I begin this paper by introducing the historical development of pilgrimage in the Buddhist tradition and mapping the sacred Buddhist geography of India. In the second part, I explore the development of pilgrimage traditions in Tibetan Buddhism and the network of sacred sites used by pilgrims. In the third part, I introduce some of the Tibetan inventions and reinventions of the pilgrimage tradition over an extensive period of time, between the 12th and the mid-20th century. Finally, partly based on my fieldwork findings, I examine how the Tibetan diasporic community in India has maintained and reinvented its pilgrimage culture and what possible changes have occurred subsequently.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, pilgrimage, Tibetan, India, Tibetan Buddhism

Brigitta KALMAR holds a JD in Law from University of Szeged, Hungary, an MA in Human Rights from University of Ulster, UK and an MA in Contemporary Religions from UCC, Ireland. Her research interests include contemporary Buddhism in India and Nepal, women and Buddhism in the 21st century, gender equality and pilgrimage studies.

Introduction

Pilgrimage is an ancient universal human activity and one of the most common phenomena found in all major religious traditions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam all have developed complex pilgrimage cultures, with a range of sites and unique traditions. Despite modernity and secularization, pilgrimage has still remained extremely popular for religious practitioners, and has been transforming along with the 21st century`s social, economic and technological developments. Interestingly, despite its enduring prominence, until relatively recently, the study of pilgrimage has not attracted much scholarly work.

The academic study of pilgrimage is a relatively new field of enquiry, which only emerged during the 1960`s and 1970`s, initially focusing on the Christian and Islamic pilgrimage traditions. The first works were produced by historians and subsequently social scientists. Social anthropologists especially began to contribute to this new emerging field in which the works of anthropologist Victor Turner played a key part (see Turner 1974 & Turner & Turner 1978). Turner found similarities among pilgrimage practices of historical religions and developed a rich theoretical vocabulary, including *structural, anti-structural*, *liminoid* and *communitas,* which could be employed for further research in the study of religions. While many scholars were influenced by Turner`s work, his theories were also widely criticised,[1] some finding them too restricting and limiting for an extremely complex phenomenon. As Reader argues, many of Turner's critiques then "moved toward limiting and restricting the field of pilgrimage studies at a time when we feel that it ought to be broadened" (Reader 1993, 13). He adds however that "one of the attractive things about pilgrimage is that it straddles so many disciplines, including history, theology, folklore, social geography and anthropology, and hence offers vast scope for inter-disciplinary studies" (Reader 1993, 14). Indeed, contemporary research on pilgrimage has expanded considerably since the early 1990s, some of the works successfully managing to cross disciplines such as anthrophony, ethnography, sociology, history, religious studies, gender, tourism and migration studies.

With the gradual opening of the Tibetan region to tourism in the 1980's, travelling to Tibet and doing fieldwork became possible for Western scholars interested in the subject matter.[2] As a result, a new generation of researchers from various disciplines has begun to explore the Tibetan

[1] See for example Brian Paffelberger (1979), Barbara Aziz (1987) and Eade and Sallnow (1991), in Reader 1993, 14.
[2] For example Guiseppe Tucci and Robert Ekwall.

pilgrimage culture and places, producing a number of studies.[3] Interestingly, all of these works completely neglected the Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage places and culture of India – Tibet's immediate neighbour and the birthplace of Buddhism – which, as Huber noted, concerning the development of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage culture, has been extremely important to the Tibetans themselves for a very long time (Huber 2008, 7). He further argues that research on the Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage culture of India should have attracted more of a scholarly interest, given the fact that for the very first time in history a permanent Tibetan society, along with its religious leaders, has been residing in India for over 50 years due to major political changes in Tibet's other important neighbour, China.

The history of Sino-Tibetan relations is a long and complex one. The earliest records show Tibet's first contact with China in the 7th century AD[4] during the reign of Tibet`s king Songsten Gampo (c. 629-49 AD), who married the Chinese princess Wencheng, forming a diplomatic and powerful alliance between the two nations. In modern history, the relationship has rather been shaped by a series of dramatic political events. The 1911 Chinese Revolution against the Manchu Empire resulted in the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912 which had also ruled over Tibet. In what became known as the Tibetan Uprising of 1911-1913, Tibet declared its *de facto* independence from China, despite China's refusal to recognize it as a separate country. These strained relations then resulted in occasional out-bursts of conflict along the border frontiers of Tibet in the years that followed.

Subsequently the turning point in Tibetan history came in 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party came into power and officially proclaimed the People's Republic of China on October 1st 1949, followed by the annexation of Tibet. Fighting continued to occur throughout the region resulting in a massive popular uprising in Lhasa in 1959, calling for independence and self-determination, resulting in the 14th Dalai Lama and his entourage fleeing Tibet into Northern India. He was granted political asylum by Jawaharlal Nehru in Dharamsala (state of Himachal Pradesh), where he founded the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. About 85,000 Tibetans, along with most of the religious elite followed him to India, creating a small but significant diaspora community in exile. Due to the sensitive political climate in China, visiting the traditional pilgrimage places of the Tibetan plateau has become complicated for most Tibetans living in India, therefore they have been forced to re-imagine and re-create their ancient practice of pilgrimage in modern India.

[3] See for example Buffetrille (2000), Blondeau and Steinkellner (1996), Blondeau (1998), Gutschow (2003), Huber (1999), Macdonald (1997), McKay (1998) in Huber 2008, 7.

[4] While there are a few resources on Tibet`s history before the reign of King Songsten Gampo, their nature is scattered and often contradictory. See McKay 2003, 20.

Two fieldwork studies were conducted during the summer of 2014 and winter 2015. During the first stay I visited three of the four most important Buddhist sites in India - Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar - to observe Tibetan presence and pilgrimage rituals. During the second fieldwork I participated in the 32nd Kagyu Monlam festival, one of the largest Tibetan prayer festivals in present day India, and observed pilgrimage activities in and around Bodhgaya's holy sites. Altogether I conducted 10 unstructured interviews, involving both genders and various age groups.

In Part I. of this article, *Early Buddhism and pilgrimage*, I begin by introducing the historical development of pilgrimage in the Buddhist tradition and mapping the sacred Buddhist geography of India. In Part II., *Pilgrimage in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition*, I explore the development of pilgrimage traditions in Tibetan Buddhism and the network of sacred sites used by pilgrims. In the third part, I introduce some of the Tibetan inventions and reinventions of the pilgrimage tradition over a long period of time, between the 12th and the mid-20th century. In the final part, *Exile in India,* partly based on my fieldwork findings, I examine how the Tibetan diasporic community in India has maintained and reinvented its pilgrimage culture and what possible changes have occurred subsequently.

Part I. Early Buddhism and pilgrimage

Pilgrimage was not a practice that the Buddha explicitly taught or prescribed for his followers. However, soon after his passing in 486 BC[5], pilgrimage to sites associated with the Buddha's important life events became a common practice among his disciples. The validation for starting such a practice stemmed from a single reference within its source text, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* or Buddha's Last Days, in which the Buddha, close to the end of his life, spoke these few words to his attendant and closest disciple, Ananda:

> Ananda, there are four places the sight of which should arouse emotion in the faithful. What are they? "Here the Tathagata was born" is the first. "Here the Tathagata attained supreme enlightenment" is the second. "Here the Tathagata set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma" is the third. "Here the Tathagata attained the Nibanna element without remainder" is the fourth. And, Ananda, the faithful monks and nuns, male and female lay-followers will visit those places. And any who die while making the pilgrimage to

[5] The conventional dates for Buddha`s life are 566 – 486 BC but the exact dates are uncertain.

> these Shrines with a devout heart will, at the breaking-up of the body after death, be reborn in a heavenly world (Zangpo 2001, 22).

These abovementioned four key events of the Buddha`s life occurred at the present sites of Lumbini in Nepal (the place he was born), Bodhgaya (where he attained Enlightenment), Deer Park at Sarnath (where he delivered his fist teachings), and Kushinagar, (where he passed away); all three are situated in north-central India. These sites are often referred to as the Four Great Holy Places or the sites of the "Four Great Miracles" (Falk 1977, 282).

After the Buddha passed away, as per his instruction, his body was cremated. His tangible remains (ashes, teeth, fragments of his skull, bits of bone and flesh, blood remains and so on) became venerated as relics by his followers and were enshrined in large memorial monuments called *stupas* at the four sites of which were regularly visited (Falk 1977, 282). The practice of venerating the relics of holy persons and making pilgrimage to the places that enshrine them is not unique to Buddhism. Pilgrims of various religions[6] believe that the relics of their saints form a bridge between the earthly realm and the divine, therefore they can be channels for healing, for answering prayers or gaining religious merit. According to some, the most sacred relics are the bodily remains of saints or holy persons, thus their tombs are popular sites of pilgrimage (Martin 1994, 273).

In early Buddhism it was believed that both Buddha's relics and the stupas were in actual fact living entities, so much so, that relics were considered as actual human beings with legal rights (Schopen 1987, 206-9). For the pilgrims by contacting them (physically visiting them and doing certain activities in their presence) meant a direct and transformative encounter with the Buddha himself, which could act as a catalyst in one's spiritual awakening and in reaching enlightenment.

The early veneration of the Buddha's traces was a rather unstructured activity. It largely consisted of certain types of bodily prostrations and offerings, such as incense, flowers, vegetarian food, precious cloths and perfumes. The practice of circumambulation or *pradakshina* (meaning "keeping the centre to one's right") had a special importance due to its assumed transformative power, during which

[6] For example, the body of the Catholic Saint James the Apostle in Santiago de Compostela in Spain and the tomb of 14th century Sufi master Mu'in-ud-din Chisti in Ajmer in India have drawn millions of pilgrims throughout the centuries. In Hinduism however in contrast to Buddhism, the cult of relics has been relatively non-existent according to mainstream scholarship, arguing that the very notion of relics is incompatible with Hinduism due to the Brahmanical "abhorrence of everything connected with death" (Bakker 2007, 42 cited in Fleming 2015, 455). Only a few scholars claimed that the practices of burial and veneration of mortal remains may have been marginally part of the Brahmanical tradition in pre-Buddhist India, but only as a regional (in northern India and Nepal) and an exceptional practice (as submersion of cremated remains into bodies of water was favoured at the holy sites) (Fleming 2015, 455).

pilgrims circumambulated around the holy site clockwise at least one or three times (Falk 1977, 287). In India's devotional traditions, walking around something or someone is also a way of showing honour to the teacher or a holy place (Eck 2012, 57).

As the Buddhist relic cult developed, not only were Buddha`s physical remains and stupas venerated but everything that came in contact with the Buddha himself: his begging bowl, his robe, leaves from the Bodhi tree (under which he reached enlightenment), his hand and footprints, even his toe nails which were collected by his disciples during his lifetime (Davidson & Gitlitz 2002, 517). Likewise, not only were the four sites associated with Buddha's most important life events visited by pilgrims but other places as well which the Buddha himself also visited during his lifetime. In the process of expanding the network of pilgrimage sites the Mauryan ruler Ashoka**,** who lived about 200 years after Buddha`s death, played a crucial role.

After becoming Emperor of India[7], he became a follower of Buddhist teachings and he took it as his mission to spread the Buddhist Dharma throughout his kingdom. He visited the four main sites as the Buddha suggested and also an additional twenty-eight, all of which, it was told, that the Buddha personally visited in his lifetime. Out of these thirty-two holy places, eight gradually became particularly important for pilgrims. These places are known today as the Eight Places of Pilgrimage or Eight Great Places of Pilgrimage (San 2001, 15), which consist of the Four Great Holy Places and additional four sites[8] of other important events of the Buddha's life.

In summary, in early Buddhism, two types of pilgrimage practice arose both related to relic worship. The first and probably more important one appeared based on the Buddha's last words, and involved worship of the Buddha's actual corporal relics and the funeral monuments enshrining them. The second, which was later developed by Emperor Ashoka, encompassed the veneration of other objects and places which allegedly came into direct contact with the Buddha during his life. As Buddhism developed and spread outside of India, remains, objects and places connected to subsequent teachers also became objects of worship resulting

[7] Until the British colonization, the largest united empire on the Indian subcontinent was created by Ashoka.

[8] The four additional sites: Savatthi or Sravasti (where the Buddha ascended to Heaven to teach his mother who passed away soon after Buddha`s birth and where he spent 25 rainy seasons with his Sangha), Sankasia or Samkasya (where the Buddha descended from Heaven after preaching to his mother and the devas for three months), Rajagaha or Rajgir (where the Buddha tamed the drunken elephant and also spent several years meditating and teaching) and Vesali or Vaishali (where miraculously a band of monkeys dug a pond for the Buddha's use and also women were accepted to the Buddhist Sangha for the first time, including Buddha`s foster mother, Mahaprajapati Gautami), (San 2001, 15).

in a great expansion of Buddhist pilgrimage sites, an important process for Buddhist practitioners that continues today.

Part II. Pilgrimage in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition

Buddhism introduced in Tibet

From the very beginning, Buddhism was a missionary religion. The Buddha visited many places on the Indian subcontinent spreading his Dharma and explicitly told his disciples to follow his example. During Ashoka's reign in the 3rd century BC, Buddhism already crossed India's borders and gradually spread throughout East Asia. On India's soil, Buddhism had thrived since its establishment, often supported by royal patrons. It especially flourished between the 7th and 12th century AD, during which the Buddha-Dharma was taught in large universities, like at the famous Nalanda University, where it is believed to have housed over 10,000 students. However, around the 12th – 13th centuries, Nalanda and the other major living Buddhist hubs including the major pilgrimage places were attacked and completely destroyed by invader Muslim Turks. Monks and nuns were killed, survivors left the country or went into hiding; thus around 1,500 years after its birth and continuous presence, Buddhism on its birth land nearly became extinct and only survived in some pockets of India.

While Buddhism declined on Indian soil, it continued to flourish elsewhere in two major forms: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism.[9] Due to its geographical inaccessibility and lack of trade routes, it was only in the 7th century AD, during the rule of Tibet's unifier king Songsten Gampo, when Buddhism was introduced to Tibet as the official court and state religion.[10] According to the legend, Songsten Gampo's two Buddhist wives

[9] As the Buddha did not appoint any successor, he left his teachings to be upheld and interpreted by his followers. In the absence of a leading authority, various traditions and sub-schools sprang up shortly after his death. Many of these schools and sub-schools have since died out, with the exception of two traditions: the traditionalist Hinayana Buddhism (also referred to as the Lesser Vehicle, later represented by its only surviving school, the Theravada Buddhist school), which puts emphases on renunciation, and strictly follows the Buddha`s original teachings and ethical codes. The other is the revolutionary Mahayana Buddhism (or the Great Vehicle), which focused on compassion and introduced the notion of the *bodhisattva*, a saint like figure, who vows to help all sentient beings to reach Enlightenment. The former mostly reached Southeast Asian countries (such as Ceylon/Sri Lanka, Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos), while Mahayana Buddhism spread in the Northeast (such as China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, Nepal, Tibet and Mongolia) (Keown 2013, 20).

[10] Given the countries that surrounded Tibet, most probably Buddhism reached Tibet earlier than the 7th century AD but found no fertile soil due to lack of general interest, patronage and written language which was essential for the preservation and promulgation of the religion (McKay 2003, 27).

- a Chinese princess and a Nepalese princess - were the inspirational forces behind the conversion. Consequently in 642 AD, the king sent a Tibetan to India to look for written Buddhist texts and also built Lhasa's most famous temple, the Jokhang and thus the slow conversion of Tibetan society to Buddhism began through royal patronage.

In those early days, Buddhism was probably practiced only by the royal courts and a few noble families, learning very basic principles of Buddhism. There were no Buddhist texts translated into Tibetan (they were provided from India and Nepal) and no priests to teach. And Buddhism did not drive out the old, pre-Buddhist religion of Bön.[11] The kings continued to worship Bön holy mountains, were buried in a non-Buddhist ceremony and still consulted oracles (Richardson 2003, 299-300). It was during the reign of Trisong Detsen (742-802), when Bön practices were supressed and the influence of Buddhism grew immensely. He established Tibet's first monastery, Samyé in around 779 AD, sponsored the Tibetan translation of Buddhist texts and invited the famous Mahayana scholar Śāntarakṣita and mystic tantric master Padmasambhava from India.

The rise of Buddhism continued under subsequent kings until the fall of the Tibetan Empire in 842. It is said that the last emperor, Lang Darma (r. 838-842), being a devoted Bön practitioner, withdrew royal patronage of Buddhism (according to some accounts, he also persecuted Buddhists until his assassination in 842 by a Buddhist monk). After his death, Tibet was broken up into small kingdoms and remained without a central power for four hundred years. Despite its early success, Buddhism went into decline and Bön began to flourish again. Monastic Buddhism disappeared from Central-Tibet and only the esoteric form of Mahayana Buddhism, Tantra (or Vajrayana) was practiced. It was only in the mid-10th century that the second–wave infusion of Buddhist teachings from India took place in Tibet, this time without Bön opposition. This wave gave rise to a number of new Tibetan Buddhist schools and sub-lineages, and also gave birth to some of greatest monasteries of Tibet.

---

[11] Bön is said to be the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet and it has often been characterized as 'shamanistic' or 'animistic'. Its classification and exact origin are uncertain. Some scholars such as David Snellgrove argue that it was a form of Buddhism, which was introduced from Iranian regions of inner Asia to the west of Tibet and flourished especially in the old Zhangzhung kingdom. Others, like Namkhai Norbu believe that Bön was rather an authentic, indigenous tradition to Tibet (McKay 2003, 36). Nevertheless, the present, known and organised form of Bön religion with its monastic institutions, tantric ritual, scriptures and philosophical systems did not exist before the 7th century AD, but was rather the product of the interaction with Buddhism. Contemporary scholarship even doubts that the term *bön* was used as the name of the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet (Kapstein 2000, 12-13). There are some fundamental similarities between the two religions, most importantly the belief of law of karma (law of moral causality) and the quest for enlightenment. Although Buddhism sought to suppress and regulate it, it was never able to dispense with it and even today many Tibetans are devoted followers of Bön.

Buddhism is often called a guest religion as it is able to adapt to its host culture (Zangpo 2001, 8); and so it did in Tibet. As Tantra gradually fused with Bön practices, it embraced its principal deities, the use of oracles, the use of prayer flags,[12] funeral rites, its art of healing and system of *tulkus* (incarnated lamas) (Davidson & Gitlitz 2002, 73). It also absorbed and converted some of its holy pilgrimage sites such as Mount Kailash, a process that Katia Buffetrille calls `Buddhicisation` of sacred places and which will be explained in detail in Part II.

The notion of Pilgrimage in Tibetan Buddhism

Pilgrimage is not only the core element of religious practice in the Tibetan cultural world but it is also a significant cultural phenomenon with social, political and economic elements. Despite the historical changes, pilgrimage still remains a universal feature of the diverse Tibetan society, and through examining Tibetan pilgrimage practices, we can gain great insight into Tibetan history, culture and identity (McKay 1998, 1). Pilgrimage practices played a crucial part in pre-Buddhist societies as well as in the Indian Tantra adopted by Tibetans. It has been undoubtedly one of the most popular Buddhist practices for the Tibetans, equally attracting both lay persons and monastic Tantric practitioners.

Just as the Buddha declared in the *Gautamīya Śāstra*, "all mountains, all rivers, holy lakes, *tirthas*[13] (places of pilgrimage), the abodes of seers, cow-pens, and temples of gods are sin-destroying localities" (Bharati 1963, 137), so Tibetans visit the Buddhist holy sites in the hope that the pilgrimage can purify their negative karma (negative deeds committed previously) and can obtain merit necessary for achieving Buddhahood. As a rule, the pilgrim must walk to the holy place but the journey can also be performed by doing full body length prostrations, in which case pilgrimage can take even several years.

Pilgrimage in Tibet has rather been collectively performed than individually; members of the same family, settlement or monastery would go on pilgrimage together and would not mix with other pilgrimage groups. The sort of *communitas* that Turner observed in other pilgrimage groups have not been present in the Tibetan world, not even today as observed by Buffertrille, suggesting that the different social classes of Tibetan society exist even during pilgrimage practices (Buffertrille 2003, 2). For example, certain pilgrimage routes have been closed for women

[12] Colourful flags with payers/mantras printed on them.

[13] The Sanskrit word *tirtha* literally means "fords" or "crossings," which comes from a verbal root meaning "to cross over." In ancient times in India, the *tīrtha* was literally a place to cross the river. However, spiritually speaking, as explained in ancient Hindu texts of the Vedas, Upanishads and Mahābhārata as well, the *tīrtha* is a place of spiritual crossing, a word of transcendence, a destination of pilgrims, where divine powers are close to the worshipper and one's prayers and spiritual practices are amplified (Eck 2012, 19-20).

pilgrims such as most routes around Mount Tsari (Zangpo 2001, 113) or the inner circumambulation route around Labrang Monastery (Makley 2003, 611). The reason behind this discriminatory practice is that Tibetan Buddhists in general consider the female body as a lower rebirth (in Tibetan: *skye dman*), which is inherently and karmically impure, able to pollute the sacred places and has "the capacity to drain the male power" (Makley 2003, 610).

Once the pilgrim reaches the sacred place, she/he performs certain rituals and practices. Although every individual's pilgrimage is unique and it can depend on the level of the practitioner, there are general patterns of activity that can be observed. In Tibetan, pilgrim is called a *gnas skor ba* (in English: the one who goes around the sacred place), indicating the most important rite a pilgrim must perform which is circumambulation (in Tibetan: *kora*). Pilgrims perform *kora* or *koras* around the sacred space (monastery, hill, lake, meditation cave, place of miracle, stupa etc.) either by walking or full body prostrations. Besides *kora*, pilgrims generally recite mantras and prayers, do prostrations, offer substances (for example water, butter for lamps, incense) and the more advanced practitioners do meditational practices. However, for an advanced Tantric practitioner pilgrimage has a deeper meaning. In Tantra[14] the practice of pilgrimage is situated at the level of the phase of completion which requires the advanced practitioner to travel to and contact external sacred grounds and employ certain higher level tantric practices, such as meditation (Zangpo 2001, 56).

Tibetan sacred geography

One of the most well-known features of Tibetan culture has been in the belief that the physical environment is occupied by a host of indigenous and Buddhist deities and spirit forces. These beings are said to possess a range of powers and to reside at specific locations, pervading the entire landscape. According to both the pre-Buddhist religion and the various forms of Tibetan Tantra, humans are capable of interacting with these beings through various practices and methods (Huber 1999, 78-79).

In pre-Buddhist Tibet, prominent features of landscapes, such as lakes and mountains were worshipped as sacred as they were believed to

[14] According to Buddhist tantric teachings, the human body is made up of hundreds of thousands of meridians or channels, through which energies circulate, carrying "the vital essence" of enlightenment, acting like a bridge to the consciousness and the ever present Buddha-nature. It is believed that tantric practices using the body's energies through the channels can quickly lead the practitioner to enlightenment. And as the body corresponds to outer environments, travelling to outer sacred places and contacting their sacredness or enlightened nature can provide a powerful catalyst for inner improvement, towards Buddhahood, which is the ultimate goal of every Buddhist practitioner (Zangpo 2001, 61 – 63).

be abodes of powerful territorial gods (*yul lha)* of the land. Especially mountains were considered sacred due to their important function as sources of water, feeding the valley's river with life force (Kapstein 2006, 44). The most well-known of such sacred sites in Tibet is undoubtedly Mount Kailash, venerated as holy by followers of Bön, Hinduism, Jainism, Hinayana and Vajrayana Buddhism.

During the first diffusion of Buddhism of Tibet (7th-9th century), there was no record of Buddhist pilgrimage practices. The earliest sources mentioning pilgrimage practices are only from the second diffusion period (end of 10th to 11th century), but the exact starting point of the tradition of pilgrimage to sacred landscapes cannot be dated.

With the eventual adoption of Indian Buddhist Tantra, a new cosmic view and the use of mandala[15] became the model behind shaping the spatial organization of Tibet's architectural and cultural landscape. Many pre-Buddhist sacred sites were transformed to Buddhist holy places, in what Buffertrille calls a "process of Buddhicisation" (Buffertrille 1998, 20), during which pre-existing indigenous deities were converted or subjugated to Buddhist deities, and Buddhist practices were imposed on the territorial god. In the case of mountains such as Mount Kailash, the original *yul lha* was appropriated as now the protective deity of the sacred place within the Buddhist understanding, and thus the indigenous sacred place became *gnas ri*, a sacred Buddhist place. The process consists of the appropriation of space (by installing the mandala and incorporating the *yul lha* in it), constructing of religious buildings (such as a stupa), and opening up circumambulation paths for the pilgrims. The transformation of 'savage nature' into *gnas* (a sacred site or power-place) by eliminating the wilderness through subjugation is an ideal aspiration in the Tibetan Buddhist mind (Ramble 1997, 133).

In Buddhism, a site typically becomes sacred through the actions of a holy person or a wondrous event. Due to their association with the Buddha or other holy figures, certain ordinary locations became converted to sacred spaces, just as the eight sites associated with Buddha`s important life events became the Eight Great Places of Pilgrimage. Similarly in Tibet, once an accomplished master died, places in association with him or her soon became pilgrimage grounds. For example, the monasteries of Lhasa and places associated with Guru Rinpoche[16] have been very popular destinations for pilgrims. Furthermore, as Tibetans also adopted the cult of

[15] Mandala is the Buddhist cosmic model of the Universe explained in the Buddhist text Abhidharmakośakārikā dating from the 4-5th century AD. It is represented in either 2D (on paintings for example) or 3D (as the design of temples and stupas). Tibetans use the mandala in their religious activates (such as meditation or during ceremonies) and also as a tool to systematically structure Tibetan architecture and landscape (Xu 2010, 184-185).

[16] It is believed by Tibetans that an 8th century Indian master called Padmasambhava or Guru Rinpoche (in English: precious guru) played a crucial role in bringing Buddhism to Tibet and he is worshipped as the Second Buddha.

relics from India, therefore physical remains of highly realized Tibetan Buddhist masters have been venerated as relics as well. Relics are usually placed into *chortens* (Tibetan counterpart to *stupa*) which also became popular destinations for pilgrims (Martin 1994, 275).

Interestingly, Tibetan sacred geography has never been limited solely to the Tibetan plateau. With the second diffusion of Buddhism, Tibetans adopted the Indocentric Buddhist world cosmology and geography, which placed the *Vajrasana* (the exact spot where Buddha reached enlightenment in Bodhgaya, India) in the centre of the world. Thus India became the holiest of all places for Tibetans, a superior land which not only produced the Buddha and his knowledge, but according to numerous Tibetan narratives, India is the place where all future Buddhas are going to originate and reach enlightenment (Huber 2008, 78).

Although the earliest Tibetan pilgrims (that we know of) departing to India between the late 10th and mid-13th century were aware of the main Buddhist pilgrimage places in India, (including the Eight Great Places of Pilgrimage), there is no record that any of these pilgrims visited more than three of the eight places of the Buddha. As the flourishing Tantra of late Buddhist India became dominant in Tibet so did its sacred geography. Consequently, the attention of Tibetan pilgrims was rather focused upon places specifically associated with the Indian Tantric sites, also known as *pitha*[17] (centre of pilgrimage) (Bharati 1963, 147), which completely ignored the traditional pilgrimage sites of India.

Indian Tantric texts most commonly (but not exclusively) speak of a network of twenty-four *pithas*, a list of external sites of specialized pilgrimage located on subcontinental India, and of internal sites within the practitioner body which correspond to the external *pithas* during tantric practices (Huber 2008, 87). Although the network of *pithas* was exclusively based on the Indian subcontinent, due to circumstances, *pithas* soon appeared in Tibet which was just the beginning of a forthcoming and many centuries-long Tibetan invention process of sacred sites within and outside of the Tibetan plateau.

Part III. India and the Tibetan sacred sites: inventions, reinventions, rediscoveries, transfers, replications and colonization from the 12th century to the mid-20th century

[17] In the Indian religious context, the term *pitha* has a number of different and overlapping meanings. Usually *pithas* mean significant shrines and pilgrimage destinations (power places) in goddess-focused Hindu traditions (such in the Shaiva tradition) or in other words power seats of the Goddess (Eck 2012, 279). According to Indian Buddhist Tantra, these places are both external sites on the Indian sub-continent and internal locations within the human body, where male and female practitioners could come together and engage in sacred rites either physically or internally.

Appearance of Indian pithas in Tibet

After the invasion of India in the 12-13th centuries, Muslims established permanent roots there and thus the Holy Land became a hostile territory to visit within the Tibetan understanding. Consequently, Tibetans not only no longer had a connection to the Indian Tantric masters but they were also forced to develop their own textual scholarship and sacred sites. Soon a number of *pithas* appeared on the Tibetan plateau. The first *pitha* related to the Holy Land which was claimed to exist in Tibet was in the late 12th and early 13th centuries by various branches of the Kagyu school, one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist lineages. In the following centuries two other main schools, the Gelug and Nyingma also made similar claims, only the Sakya order argued against any Indian *pitha* existing in Tibet (Huber 2008, 113).

The identification of Tibetan territorial places in association with India was not only a smart way of continuing pilgrimage practices for the common and higher level Tantric practitioners but also a clever strategy for sectarian expansions. During the 13th century, which was one of the most creative and dynamic periods of major sectarian developments, many Tibetan agents systematically adopted forms of Indian Buddhism into their own local system. It was during this time for example, when three sacred mountain sites[18] came under Drigung[19] control to establish their own retreat sites. By claiming that these mountains had been visited by the Buddha in person in the past, they identified the sites as part of the legitimate Indian Tantric *pitha* system and thus legitimized the school, the sacredness of the sites and their sectarian control (Huber 2008, 113).

In the following centuries Tibetan agents cleverly learned how to use effectively India's high Buddhist status in Tibet to validate their further inventions and innovations. Simultaneously, something even more remarkable took place in this innovative process: Tibetan agents began to invent and reinvent sacred places outside of Tibet.

Reinventing the Holy Land in the Holy Land

Since the 16th century, another Tibetan invention process took place, but in India. In order to have physical access to the Holy Land and its sacred sites again, Tibetans reinvented certain Indian sites in those parts of India which were still accessible to visit. Huber in his extensive research provides excellent examples of such Tibetan reinventions of sacred places in India, of which one of the most remarkable is the creation of the replica Kushinagar. While creation of replica holy lands has been a popular phenomenon in Buddhism, Tibetans never engaged in such an activity. For example, despite the lack of access to India, they have never made local replicas of any of the

[18] Tsari, Labchi, and Kang Tisé.

[19] One of the sub-lineages of the Kagyu school.

Buddha's main sites, unlike Thai and Burmese Buddhists who directly re-created the entire religious topography of Bodhgaya on their home territory. Instead, Tibetans created a Buddhist holy land replica directly in India itself by "rediscovering" the lost sacred site of Kushinagar at an entirely different location (Huber 2008, 126).

The historical site of Kushinagar, the place where Buddha passed away, was completely lost and buried beneath the northern Indian soil for the most part of the last millennium. Due to excavation works in the 20th century it is know now that it was originally situated in the Middle Ganges region of India, presently in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Nevertheless, when Tibetans "found" the lost site of Kushinagar, they did it about 500 kilometres to the East of its original location in the valley of Assam, at a place called Hajo. The circumstances of this (re)discovery are uncertain, and many Tibetan traditions had claims on it. For example, according to the Kagyu school, the Buddha appeared in a vision to the Second Karmapa Lama, Karma Paksi (1204-83) and told him that since the holy sites of India are inaccessible to pilgrims from Tibet, the Assamese site was equivalent with the original Kushinagar (Huber 2008, 129).

Regardless of the uncertainty of its origin, for Tibetans the site at Hajo was the real site of Buddha's *paranirvana* (final passing and no rebirth) and it had become the most popular pilgrimage destination for Tibetan pilgrims between the 16th century and mid-20th century (Huber 2008, 128). For the devoted Tibetans, India the Holy Land was lost since the 13th century due to the demise of Buddhism and ongoing Muslim rule. Also, India was otherwise deemed to be a dangerous place to visit, not only due to the presumed hostile Muslims (and Hindus), but due to other dangers as well, such as being robbed, attacked, killed, as well as the sufferings from extreme heat and tropical illnesses. The "discovery" of the long lost holy Kushinagar at a location which was easily and conveniently accessible from Tibet meant a direct access to the Holy Land again, after hundreds of years. Tibetan pilgrims began to flock to Hajo and slowly Tibetanized the place. By the late 19th century the site at Hajo developed into a specifically Tibetan landscape, covered with *mani* stones[20] and Tibetan prayer flags (Huber 2008, 142).

Guru Rinpoche in Punjab

In the development of Tibetan sacred geography and pilgrimage culture, the life and deeds of the 8th century Indian Buddhist master Padmasambava or Guru Rinpoche (in English: Precious Guru) played a significant role. According to Tibetan narratives, Padmasambava with his miraculous

[20] Larger stones of which the well-known Tibetan mantra, the Om Mani Padme Hum is carved into.

powers subdued the demons and gods of Tibet and hence enabled the establishment of the Buddha-Dharma. Therefore he became a type of "Second Buddha" for Tibetans. Eventually he was developed into and worshiped as a Tantric deity and the places he supposedly visited became important pilgrimage places. A vast range of holy sites (such as caves, lakes and rocks) in relation to his life events were discovered and worshipped across the Tibetan plateau and was later extended throughout the adjacent high Himalayan ranges, such as the Kingdom of Bhutan.

As part of the Tibetan invention process of sacred sites, some Guru Rinpoche sites began to appear in India as well. By the 19th century, Tibetans identified a whole new range of holy sites in the Punjab, in North India, all dedicated to Guru Rinpoche. The area was not unfamiliar for Tibetan pilgrims as they had regularly visited Punjab since the 13th century due to one famous Indian Tantric *pitha* called Jalandhara (Huber 2008, 238). Punjab is the historic home and permanent residence for the Sikh community of India. Their most important holy site, the Golden Temple in Amritsar has been visited by Sikh and Hindu pilgrims in great numbers. However, in the late 18th century some Tibetan pilgrims also appeared at the Sikh temple and worshiped a pond located in its centre as according to some Tibetan folklore, Guru Rinpoche was born in that exact pond despite common knowledge that he was born in Zahor (Uddiyana in the Swat Valley) (Bharati 1963, 156).

Early 20th century India and its impact on Tibetan pilgrimage rituals

The first half of the 20th century brought a huge transformation to India; changes that eventually brought about the revival of Buddhism and the development of a new type of Tibetan pilgrimage ritual. The rise of monumental archaeology as a distinctive feature of British colonialism completely transformed the understanding of Indian Buddhist topography.

Many holy sites that have been neglected and laid in ruins for at least seven hundred years were identified, excavated and began to be restored to their original glory. The Mahabodi Temple at Bodhgaya which was built at the exact spot where the Buddha reached enlightenment was found in semi-ruins. Its origin was long forgotten and was worshipped by Hindus as a holy site dedicated to the Hindu deities. The stupas at Sarnath were in ruins, many of the bricks had been taken away by locals to use in construction work. The sites at Kushinagar, Lumbini and Nalanda were completely buried under the soil. The excavation and restoration process of these and other important sites of the Buddha had a profound cultural significance: the resurrected ancient sites became available again for possible religious purposes.

The new resurrected material form of Buddhism helped the modern Buddhist revivalist movement which began simultaneously at the end of

the 19th century in Ceylon. The Mahabodhi Society (founded by Ceylonese Buddhist monk Anagarika Dharmapala and his associates in 1891) gradually developed into a missionary organization, promoting a rather idealized view of Buddhism to the world as a religion of modernity, science, tolerance, equality and reason, with the newly rediscovered holy sites in India. The missionary activities of the Mahabodhi Society were wide-ranging: it published books and journals, constructed temples, fought to take control over the Mahabodi Temple in Bodhgaya and most importantly began to organize pilgrimage tours for international tourists and possible donors to the resurrected main holy places of the Buddha (Huber 2008, 293). In order to maintain a strong Buddhist revival movement, Dharmapala and his team mostly focused on developing new Buddhist pilgrimage and ritual culture at the main sites. To attract pilgrims and practitioners, the Mahabodhi Society built pilgrim's rest houses, promoted the use of the modern Indian railway system and advertised its pilgrimage tours as a "safe, friendly, and convenient" form of ritual in India (Huber 2008, 304).

One of the greatest innovations of the society was the establishment of a grand annual relic festival in Sarnath in 1931. During the festival, the Buddha's relics, which were also excavated along with the sites, for the first time were presented and circumambulated among the public, and the program quickly attracted thousands of Buddhist pilgrims from all around the world, including Tibet. The relic festival had another important significance: it was the first modern organized Buddhist pilgrimage ritual which united all types of Buddhist regardless of sectarian differences, as pilgrimage practice has been universally accepted among all Buddhist sects; thus the Buddha's sites became a shared and uniting religious ground (Huber 2008, 295).

What effect did these profound early 20th century changes in India have on Tibetan visitors to the Holy Land of India? Did they go to the newly excavated sites or did they continue to visit their established locations, the 24 pithas and their invented sites? Was their pilgrimage process and style of worship affected by modernity?

As far as the pilgrimage sites are concerned, a few changes took place during the first half of the 20th century. First, after the Archaeological Survey of India excavated the actual site of Kushinagar between 1904 and 1912, it became clear to the leading Tibetan clerics that the long cherished site in Assam was a mistake. The first Tibetan visit to the real site of Kushinagar was in fact a very important one, done by the 13th Dalai Lama and his party in 1911. During the first half of the 20th century knowledge of the discovery of the real site gradually spread among Tibetans, Tibetan writers of pilgrimage guidebooks also alerted pilgrims and by the 1950s, the Hajo Kushinagar declined as a major pilgrimage destination (Huber 2008, 154).

From the accounts of ordinary Tibetan pilgrims visiting India we know that while they continued to visit their holy places that they had been visiting for hundreds of years, they too began to visit one or two of the recently excavated Eight Places of Pilgrimage, usually Bodh Gaya and/or Sarnath. Also, many pilgrims took part in the annual relic festival at Sarnath, moreover some monks even performed the unique *cham* dance (public Tantric ritual dance)[21] during the festival which had never been performed outside of Tibet before (Huber 2008, 301). Only the religious elite (the 6th Panchen Lama and 13th Dalai Lama) made pilgrimage to more than two of the eight sites during their official visits to India (Huber 2008, 268).

In terms of ritual practices a few changes were apparent as well. Tibetans still performed *koras* around the sacred places, did prostrations, put up flags, offered flowers, gold, prayers and so on, collected substances at the holy places and carefully transported them back to Tibet (Huber 2008, 312). But they abandoned the tradition of walking to the holy places. Instead they rather used the modern train system which was faster but as it posed certain obstacles for Tibetans (overcrowded trains, loud arguments over seats and so on), it easily substituted walking as an important karma-cleansing activity (Huber 2008, 310). Also, while in Tibet the pilgrimage season fell during the summer months, in India pilgrims went on pilgrimages between November to February due to extreme weather conditions (the rainy season and extreme heat). Consequently, Tibetan attitudes towards India improved too during the first half of the 20th century. The narrative of the previously extremely dangerous Holy Land began to change as Tibetans experienced modern and safe India for the first time and started to develop a much more positive attitude towards it (Huber 2008, 314).

The events and changes of the first half of the 20th century began to alter significantly the knowledge of the holy sites in India and its related pilgrimage culture for Tibetans. These changes were leading up to an even bigger revolution, when India became home for many Tibetans in the second half of the 20th century.

Part IV. Exile in India

The unexpected re-connection with the Holy Land

[21] During Tibetan Buddhist festivals, public ritual dance or *cham* is often performed for the lay audience. *Cham* is a popular social event in Tibetan societies, often attracting large crowds during festivals, like the Tibetan New Year. During the circumambulatory dance, monks wear colourful costumes and masks, mainly representing the protectors of religion. According to early Tibetan literature, *cham* originates in Indian Tantric dances and its main esoteric purpose is the expulsion of "evil forces", by which all participants and the local environment is purified and ground is turned into a ritual space (Shrempf 1999, 200).

The second half of the 20th century brought dramatic changes for Tibetans. During the 1950`s Chinese Communism expanded into Tibetan society, soon resulting in an inevitable and drastic clash between atheist Communist efforts and the deeply religious Tibetan Buddhist culture. In 1959, the young 14th Dalai Lama fled to India. In the following few years his example was followed by about 100,000 of his countrymen, women and children, creating a small but significant Tibetan diaspora population scattered in the neighbouring countries of India, Nepal and Bhutan. With the help of the United Nations and other international donors, most of the refugees, approximately 85,000, settled in India in 52 settlements in 10 states (Singh 2010, 197). The Holy Land showed a brand new face for those Tibetans: it became a home away from home, the land of exile.

The young 14th Dalai Lama, as head of the Gelug school and chief spiritual leader of Tibet, was welcomed by the Indian government on his arrival in India. Other members of the religious elite also left for India, such as the 16th Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu, the 41st Sakya Trizin, head of the Sakya order and Dudjom Rinpoche, head of the Nyingma order. The Dalai Lama established his new headquarters and the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, in Himachal Pradesh and since then he has become the symbol and representative of Tibetan identity to the world.

In the following decades, two different Tibetan communities developed: a small but significant refugee community in exile and a larger one living within the borders of China. Since the political climate remained sensitive in China, from the 1990's free movement between India and the Tibetan plateau has been limited. For most Tibetans living in China, pilgrimage to the Holy Land has become rarely accessible again, just as most Tibetan refugees in India no longer have easy access to the holy places in Tibet. Therefore it is no surprise that Tibetan activities at the Buddha's main sites in exile have become more intense than ever before in Tibetan history. Contrary to the past, Tibetans of all class and spiritual levels regularly began to visit the Eight Great Places of Pilgrimage and other traditionally important Buddhist sites, like Ellora and Taxila. However, this was not only due to the obvious spatial accessibility but also to conscious Tibetan colonization efforts (Huber 2008, 337-38).

Prior to exile, Tibetans identified themselves through their regional and sectarian affiliations. For example, the term 'Tibetan' (in Tibetan: *Bod-pa*) was only used for the non-nomadic people of Central Tibet (Ü-Tsang) (Yeh 2007, 650). There was the political Tibet, Ü-Tsang, under the control of the Dalai Lama, and the ethnographic Tibet, which was extended to Kham and Amdo, under different authorities. While there was certain cultural and religious commonalities (language, pilgrimage, food and so on) forming a Tibetan identity, there was no such thing as a united Tibetan nation and nation-state. However, soon after the Dalai Lama settled in India, with the

threat of cultural extermination, Tibetans were forced to re-imagine themselves as united as they had never been before, hence the united Tibetan national identity was born primarily representing itself to the outside world through its Buddhist culture (Anand 2000, 274-78).

The Tibetan leadership also realized that sacred places and Buddhist architecture such as stupas not only serve religious purposes but can also "function as places for establishing social networks, enacting Tibetan identities, [and] fostering cultural empowerments" (Houston&Wright 2003, 226). Being a relatively small and scattered diaspora community in exile, Tibetans quickly learnt how to use India's "Holy Land" status and Buddha's sacred sites in order to establish and maintain their new Tibetan society. For Tibetans, pilgrimage to the holy places was no longer only a religious activity. Just as the Mahabodhi Society consciously used Buddha`s holy sites and the practice of pilgrimage (combined with spiritual tourism) to succeed in their Buddhist revival movement, so did the Tibetans in exile; they made conscious strategies to preserve Tibetan identity and culture, particularly its Buddhist heritage. As a result, the "Tibetan cause", preserving Tibetan Buddhist culture in exile, was able to attract considerable international support, mostly due to the activities of the religious elite such as the 14th Dalai Lama and the explicit colonization and use of the famous Buddhist spaces of India (Huber 2008, 347).

In the next part of this paper, partially based on my fieldwork findings, I will demonstrate how the geography of the Buddha and the practice of pilgrimage in India have been utilized as a tool by Tibetan refugees to establish and maintain their societies in exile and in doing so, what impact it has had on the Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage culture.

Re-inventing Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage traditions in India

Tibetan refugees, as permanent residents of India, gradually began to colonize and Tibetanize the sacred Buddhist sites of India. They did it primarily by adding their permanent structures to the landscape of the holy sites (building monasteries, hotels, guest houses, stupas and so on) and by organizing regular large scale gatherings at the sites. At the same time, due to the new environment, modernity and globalisation, certain pilgrimage rituals have been altered as well.

Permanent structures are physical manifestations of a particular community which not only express a common identity (Kong 2001, 223) but can act as a physical and symbolical separation from others, which is clearly the aim of the Tibetans in exile as they have been strongly resisting assimilation into the host society of India since the very beginning (Anand 2000, 276). Prior to the Diaspora, Buddha's sites were familiar and desirable for Tibetans for more than a millennia but once in exile, these sites became the only territory on the vast Indian subcontinent that they could relate to

historically and develop a positive and long-lasting relationship with. Hence Tibetan refugees quickly recognized and began to treat the network of Buddha's geography as "their own", expressing their modern Tibetan exile identity and their goals (Huber 2008, 349).

During my first fieldwork visit to Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar, I found that Tibetans were not only visibly present at the holy sites but that they actually Tibetanized the places. Tibetans of various sects have built numerous monasteries, guest houses, hotels, stupas, and have placed Tibetan flags and *mani* stones. I found that Tibetan presence is the most dominant in Bodhgaya, the holiest place in Buddhist cosmology. In Bodhgaya, since the second half of the 20th century many Buddhist sects have established their temples. I found one Taiwanese, one Japanese, one Burmese, one Bhutanese, one Chinese, one Thai temple, one Sri Lankan and one Vietnamese temple. On the other hand I saw six Tibetan Monasteries and another two Tibetan Buddhist Centres[22] with attached guest houses and hotels, including the very popular Hotel Mahayana. The large and well-designed hotel belongs to the Gelug school of the Dalai Lama and it is so popular among the pilgrims that all rooms are already booked for the main festival seasons until 2018.

In terms of Buddhist architecture, two structures are most noticeable in the town: the symbol of Bodhgaya, the ancient 55 meter tall Mahabodhi Temple which marks the exact place where the Buddha reached enlightenment, and a 25 meter tall Great Buddha statue built by Japanese Buddhists in 1989. Tibetans have also planned to establish a similarly significant and permanent mark on the Buddhist landscape of Bodh Gaya. An international Buddhist organization, FPMT,[23] founded by Gelugpa monks, recently planned to build the world's tallest statue of Maitreya, the future Buddha (152 meter tall) in Kushinagar. According to the plans, hundreds of bodily relics of the Buddha, of his previous incarnations and of various Tibetan Buddhist masters will be placed in the statue, making it one of the most special modern Buddhist pilgrimage places. This use of relics as a means of sacralising places is not only an important theme in present-day Tibetan Buddhism but also in contemporary Japanese Buddhism, as Reader presented in his research (Reader 2005, 19).

[22] Sechen Monastery, Mahayana Monastery, Tergar Monastery, Karma Tharjey Chokhorling Monastery, Gendhen Pelgyeling Monastery, Phowa Centre and Root Institute.

[23] The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) was founded in 1975 by Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche and it is currently under the spiritual guidance of Lama Zopa Rinpoche. FPMT is connected with 130 Dharma centres in 29 countries. In addition to Dharma centres and the Maitreya Project, the organization sponsors health clinics and hospices, a prison program, monasteries and nunneries, and a revitalization of Buddhism in Mongolia.

However, in 2012, due to planning restrictions, the FPMT board decided to shift the project from Kushinagar to Bodh Gaya and construct a smaller version there. The new version is a planned 45 meter statue, but once completed, will almost reach the height of the Mahabodhi Temple. At my visit, I found the construction at its initial level, but I noticed that given the location of the site and the planned height of the statue, once finished, it will certainly dominate the town.

Organizing regular large-scale annual gatherings at the holy sites has become another way for Tibetans in exile to make their presence permanent and to continue Tibetan Buddhist rituals and customs, including the practice of pilgrimage. Following the example of the Mahabodhi Society, Tibetans also began to organize their large-scale annual gatherings at the main Buddhist sites. One of the most well-known events is the Kalachakra teachings organized by the Dalai Lama. In 1985, the Dalai Lama began to give annual public initiations of a very high level Buddhist teaching, the Kalachakra Tantra in Bodhgaya. While in Tibet the Kalachakra Tantra was accessible to Tibetans of certain sects, in exile the teachings were opened up to literally anybody who made the pilgrimage to India and decided to participate in the usually week-long teaching. As a further innovation, the teaching was combined with the ancient annual Gelug Prayer Festival (Monlam Chenmo) and was renamed to "Prayer for World Peace." The first such event attracted more than 250,000 people, Tibetan Buddhist of all sects from throughout the lands of exile, plus many international practitioners from all around the world. The festival was unique as it not only brought the diverse Tibetan community of monks, nuns and lay practitioners together who do not meet otherwise due to the decentralized Tibetan settlements, but also brought them into contact with the diverse international Buddhist community whom they never engaged with prior to exile. What is more, while the heads of different sects in Tibet were often competing for power during Tibet's history, in exile they became more united than ever. During the first Kalachakra teaching, the leading lamas of the other main three Buddhist sects were also present, stressing a united, peaceful Tibetan national identity to the world (Huber 2008, 363).

Additionally, a new type of relationship developed with the Dalai Lama. In the past in Tibet, the Dalai Lama was inaccessible for common Tibetans due to the strict religious hierarchy. Average people could only see him from a far distance during certain religious gatherings, meeting him personally or getting a physical blessing (touch by hand) from him was impossible for lay Tibetans.[24] In India the relationship became much more close and intimate. It is now common to see the Dalai Lama during public

[24] In the beginning of the 20th century in Tibet, Bell observed that blessings from the 13th Dalai Lama by hands were only accessible for Tibetans of the highest rank, both lay and ecclesiastical. Common Tibetans were blessed only by a tassel, never with a hand (Bell 1928, 162).

gatherings going up to ordinary Tibetan (and non-Tibetan) people, shaking their hands, and giving them blessings.

Following the example of the re-establishment of Gelug Monlam Festival by the Dalai Lama, the other three main schools also developed their own new annual prayer festivals from the 1980's, also dedicated to world peace and organized in Bodhgaya at the holy Bodhi Tree. These festivals attract an increasing number of pilgrims, in which the construction of the Gaya International Airport played a catalyst, making it possible to directly bring pilgrims from Bangkok, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma and Bhutan (Geary 2208, 13). Since their re-establishment in exile, the Monlam festivals have undergone several innovations, some of them are very recent and very pioneering.

During my second fieldwork I went to Bodhgaya and participated in the 32nd Kagyu Monlam prayer festival. The first Karma Kagyu praying festival was organized by Kalu Rinpoche[25] in 1983 and by 1993 it was officially renamed to "Kagyu Monlam Chenmo." Since then it has been organized annually in Bodhgaya attracting large numbers of monks, nuns and lay practitioners from all around the world. Due to the Karmapa controversy (the election of two different 17th Karmapas by the main disciples of the 16th Karmapa), the sect split into two main groups, both claiming to have the right incarnation and legitimate Karmapa, and both organizing their own Kagyu Monlam. The Kagyu Monlam I participated in was organized by Urgyen Trinley Dorje,[26] "one of the 17th Karmapas" and his followers.

In India, due to the new weather conditions the season for pilgrimage and annual ritual gatherings has changed for Tibetans from summer to winter. While in Tibet the season for pilgrimage and public ritual gatherings were organized around Saga Dawa, the holiest period in the Tibetan Buddhist calendar, in India these events are scheduled around another important event, the Tibetan New Year, which usually falls in February (depending on the moon calendar), reinforcing the new winter pilgrimage culture for exiled Tibetans.

The 32nd Kagyu Monlam was also organized in winter, between the 29th of December 2014 and 4th of January 2015. According to the organizers, about 12,000 people participated in the festival; 5,000 monastics and 7,000 lay practitioners from over 50 countries. To be able to host this amount of people, a special pavilion was set up for the event on the outskirts of the town, near Tergar Monastery which belongs to the Karmapa's order. Four hundred volunteers in twenty teams provided the infrastructure for the festival including cleaning, serving tea, preparing food, arranging seating,

[25] Kalu Rinpoche (1905-1989) was a prominent lama in the Karma Kagyu lineage.
[26] Urgyen Trinley Dorje was recognized as the Karmapa by both leading Tibetan lamas and the Chinese Government.

registering attendees and members, security and so on. There were small groups of technicians for the webcast, photographers, videographers and the official translators.

During the 32nd Kagyu Monlam, for the first time lay participants outnumbered monks and nuns. Out of the 11,690 registered people, 4,600 were monks and nuns, 3,400 laypeople from across the Himalayan region and India, and 3,690 were foreigners. I met Tibetans from different parts of India, coming from both South and North. As I observed, only a few of them, especially the elderly generation wore traditional Tibetan dresses, and the majority, especially the younger generations wore "Western" clothes, like jeans and jumpers.

Every day a strict program consisting of 3 or 4 sessions was followed, from 6 am to 5 pm. The program mostly entailed reading Tibetan and Sanskrit prayers out loud from the official Kagyu Monlam Book which was available in 8 languages. There were also teaching sessions on an essential Sakya Buddhist text by a nineteen year old Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrul, also of the Kagyu sect. He had received an empowerment to teach on this topic personally from the head of the Sakya lineage, Sakya Trizin, especially for this occasion. This fact was announced to the audience at the beginning of the festival, again, stressing the united Tibetan Buddhist exiled community message to the world. There were long-life prayers dedicated not only for the 17th Karmapa but also for the other three lineage holders, namely the Dalai Lama, Sakya Trizin and Taklung Tsetrul Rinpoche.

While the Monlam was not explicitly organized for "World Peace", the theme was implicitly present. Many prayers were dedicated for the well-being of all beings in the world and at the very end of the festival the participants offered all merits that were accumulated through practice for world peace and for all sentient beings.

It seems that Tibetans have completely abandoned the tradition of walking to the holy sites in India. There is no Tibetan pilgrim that I know of who has walked or prostrated to Bodhgaya. The reasons for this change are obvious given the circumstances of present day India. First of all, the distances are enormous. Secondly, there are roads everywhere and given the dense population of the country, traffic and pollution is always extremely heavy, and therefore walking would be a very noisy and dangerous enterprise, while prostrating is definitely lethal. Thirdly, public security has worsened in the past decades, especially in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where the most important sites are located including Bodhgaya; walking would be too risky. Therefore Tibetan pilgrims use modern modes of transport while on pilgrimage. Most of them take the bus or train, while the wealthier ones travel by airplane or private jeep.

I witnessed that during the festival, pilgrims not only shared the sacred ground at the temples and religious experiences in the pavilion during the praying sessions, but also throughout the breaks as well; when

eating together, waiting for the free medical check-up or having a private audience with the Karmapa. After befriending each other, some of them even formed a random group and went on a pilgrimage together to nearby holy places after the festival had finished. I observed no separation among the pilgrims regardless of nationality, social background, gender, age, and ethnicity. I rather experienced a formulation of *communitas* that Victor Turner defines as a "spontaneously generated relationship between levelled and equal total and individuated human beings, stripped of structural attributes" (Turner V. 1974, 202), sharing common experiences of the sacred through activities.

For example, I went on a day pilgrimage to the excavated site of Nalanda University (situated about 93 km from Bodhgaya) with a group of Europeans, Indians and Tibetans from India (monks, nuns and lay people). We spontaneously came together, prayed and did *koras* at the sacred site. There was no sign of separation among the pilgrims based on our different social status such as gender, country or place of origin, age, ethnicity, occupation and so on, which according to Buffertrille, still exists in contemporary Tibet (Buffertrille 2003, 2). We were happy to share our *collective joy* with each other, recalling the same feeling that Edith Turner experienced in pilgrimage groups forming *communitas* that she observed (Turner 2012, 3).

I observed similar behaviour at the Tergar Monastery among Tibetans and non-Tibetans who were waiting for a private audience with the Karmapa. In the past, not only the Dalai Lama but all religious heads were rather inaccessible for the general public. In today`s India the situation is easier; anybody who registers in advanced and provides the required papers (copies of passport and visa) can have a private audience with him. During the Kagyu Monlam those who were scheduled for the same day, gathered at the monastery and waited for hours before their papers were checked and put into groups for the audience. During the wait and the actual audience (which usually lasts for 10-20 minutes) pilgrims talked with each other, made friends, and shared their feelings and joy with each other.

None of my Tibetan interviewees have ever gone on a pilgrimage in Tibet. Also, none of them have ever heard of the Indian Tantric *pitha* sites. Two of them heard about the Guru Rinpoche pond in the Golden Temple in Amritsar but according to them, it is now common knowledge that the site is false. However, there is a new Guru Rinpoche site called Tso Pema, a holy lake in Himachal Pradesh in North India which has become a popular pilgrimage destination both for Tibetans and Western tourists in recent decades.[27] Half of the interviewees had been to the four major sites and two of them visited some Buddhist sites in South India (Ellora and Ajanta) too,

[27] According to the legend, Tso Pema was created by Guru Rinpoche using his supernatural powers to convince a king about the power of the Buddhist teachings.

while all visited Dharamsala, the seat and main temple of the Dalai Lama multiple times which has been very popular among the Western pilgrims and tourists as well.

While certain pilgrimage sites are still forbidden to female pilgrims in Tibet, in India it seems that the exclusion of female pilgrims from sacred spaces is not present. None of my interviewees ever heard about any such site in India. Bodhgaya is certainly not banned for women. I observed female and male lay pilgrims seemingly in equal numbers, while monks appeared to barely outnumber nuns. When I asked my interviewees about the reason for the lack of this discriminative rule, they could not provide me with an adequate answer. Although nuns in many respects are still discriminated against in Tibetan Buddhism,[28] during the past few years some positive changes have taken place due to globalization and pressures for reform especially from Western practitioners and donors. A few lamas who have begun to raise awareness and take steps towards gender equality, and the 17th Karmapa Urgyen Trinley Dorje is a leading figure in this revolution. Last year he introduced a separate Monlam Festival for nuns and instituted the first annual debate gathering for them as well. Most importantly, during the 32nd Kagyu Monlam it was announced that he is going to grant full ordination to nuns for the first time in Tibetan history.

Conclusion

Since their conversion to Buddhism, India always has been a holy land for Tibetans. It provided not only the Buddha's teachings but a network of sacred pilgrimage sites which some of the Tibetans visited and used for their spiritual practice. When the holy sites of India became lost or inaccessible for Tibetan pilgrims, Tibetan agents made sure that the connection was not gone to the Holy Land and they simply transferred the sites to the Tibetan plateau or reinvented them elsewhere within India.

In the second half of the 20th century India has become more than a Holy Land, it is now a home to more than 85,000 Tibetan refugees. In this familiar but still new and modern environment, the small but significant diasporic Tibetan community led by the 14th Dalai Lama and other important lamas, such as the 17th Karmapa Urgyen Trinley Dorje, have successfully re-created and maintained their new, reinvented and united Tibetan society. The Tibetan cause of preserving Tibetan culture has also attracted significant international attention and support.

[28] Nuns in general have been excluded from the male dominated *tulku* system, they do not receive the same education and funding, they barely have been able to receive titles such as *lama* or *geshe* (similar to a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy) and unlike monks, they have been not permitted to take up full ordination.

Tibetans in India were not only able to continue their important practice of pilgrimage to the holy Buddhist sites which were either unknown or lost to them for centuries, but also they were able to utilize them to maintain and strengthen their cultural identity. They have successfully colonized the newly restored ancient sites of the Buddha, by building hundreds of permanent monasteries, guest houses, institutes and other structures. In the Tibetan place-making process one of the newest projects is the construction of the Maitreya Statue in Bodhgaya which, once completed, will not only attract pilgrims in great numbers but certainly will dominate the already Tibetanized landscape.

The new environment, modernity and the internationalization of Tibetan Buddhism have also altered the traditional Tibetan pilgrimage rituals. Tibetans recreated and reinvented large scale gatherings like the Kalachakra Teachings or the Kagyu Monlam prayer festival. Additionally, they abandoned certain practices, such as walking to the holy places and developed new ones, such as observing a less strict hierarchical relationship between the religious elite and common Tibetans, creating a more united Tibetan society, mixing with the international Buddhist community for the first time in Tibetan history, as well as creating a more gender equal society.

"All conditioned things are impermanent" taught the Buddha, suggesting that everything is subject to change, nothing ever remains fixed. Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage culture is no exception to this basic principle. In its long existence since the 7th century, it has been through huge changes, continuously inventing and reinventing itself. What can be seen with the Tibetan community in India since exile, is the latest step in their centuries-long re-imagining of their traditional pilgrimage culture, a process that continues today.

References

Anand D. (2000). Re(imagining) Nationalism: Identity and Representation in the Tibetan Diaspora of South Asia. *Contemporary South Asia*. 9 (3). pp. 271-287.

Barnes G. L. (1995). An Introduction to Buddhist Archaeology. *World Archaeology*. 27 (2). pp. 165-182.

Bentor Y. (1995). On the Origins of the Tibetan Practice of Depositing Relics and Dharanis in Stupas and Images. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. 115 (2). pp. 248-261.

Bharati A. (1963). Pilgrimage in the Indian Tradition. *History of Religions*. 3 (1). pp. 135-167.

Buddharakkhita A. (trans.) (1996). *The Dhammapada: The Buddha`s Path to Freedom.* Buddhist Publication Society, Sri Lanka.

Buffetrille K. (1998). Reflections on Pilgrimages to Sacred Mountains, Lakes and Caves. In *Pilgrimage in Tibet*, ed. McKay, pp. 18-33. London & New York, Routledge.

Buffetrille K. (2003). The Evolution of a Tibetan Pilgrimage: The Pilgrimage to A myes rMa chen Mountain in the 21st Century. *21st Century Tibet Issue*. *Symposium on Contemporary Tibetan Studies.* Taipeh, Taiwan.

Davidson K.L. & Gitlitz D.M. (2002). *Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland. An Encyclopaedia.* Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO.

Dhammika S. (2008). *Middle Land, Middle Way. A Pilgrim`s Guide to the Buddha`s India*. Sri Lanka, Buddhist Publication Society.

Eck L.D. (2012). *India: A Sacred Geography.* New York, Harmony Books.

Falk N. (1977). To Gaze on the Sacred Traces. In *History of Religions.* 16 (4). pp. 281-293.

Fleming J.B. (2014). Relics, *Liṅgas*, and Other Auspicious Material Remains in South Asian Religions. In *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*. 10 (4).

Geary D. (2008). Destination Enlightenment: Branding Buddhism and Spiritual Tourism in Bodhgaya, Bihar. *Anthropology Today*. 24 (3). pp. 11-14.

Goldstein M.C. & Kapstein M.T. (eds.) (1998). *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*. London, University of California Press.

Houston S. & Wright R. (2003). Making and Remaking Tibetan Diasporic Identities. *Social & Cultural Geography*. 4 (2). pp. 217-232.

Huber T. (1999). Putting the *gnas* Back into *gnas-skor*: Rethinking Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrimage Practice. In *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture*, ed. T. Huber, pp. 77–104. Dharamsala, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

Huber T. (2008). *The Holy Land Reborn. Pilgrimage and Tibetan Reinvention of Buddhist India.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Huber T. & Rigzin T. (1999). A Tibetan Guide for Pilgrimge to Ti-se (Mount Kailas) and mTsho Ma-pham (Lake Manasarovar). In *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture,* ed. T. Huber, pp.125-153. Dharamsala, India, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

Kapstein T. M. (2000). *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism.* Oxford & New York, University Press.

Kapstein T. M. (2006). *The Tibetans.* Oxford, Blackwell Publishing.

Kapstein T. M. (2014). *Tibetan Buddhism. A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press.

Keown D. (2013). *Buddhism. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press.

Kong L. (2001). Mapping `New` geographies of Religion: Politics and Poetics in Modernity. *Progress in Human Geography*. 25 (2). pp. 211-233.

Ramble C. (1997). The Creation of the Bon Montain of Kongpo. In MacDonald A.W. ed. *Mandala and Landscape*. New Delhi, South Asia Books.

MacKay A. (1998) *Pilgrimage in Tibet.* Richmond, Curzon Press (Kindle Edition).

MacKay A. (ed.) (2003). *The History of Tibet, Volume 1: The Early Period: to c. AD 850: The Yarlung Dynasty.* London, Routledge Curzon.

Madsen S.T. (1994). Globalization, Demystification and Schism in Tibetan Buddhism. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 29 (30). pp. 1926-1928.

Makley E. C. (2003). Gendered Boundaries in Motion: Space and Identity on the Sino-Tibetan Frontier. *American Ethnologist*. 30 (4). pp. 597-619.

Martin D. (1994). Pearls from Bones: Relics, Chortens, Tertons and the Signs of Saintly Death in Tibet. *Numen*. 41 (3). pp. 273-324.

Mitra S. (ed.) (2009). *Walking with the Buddha. Buddhist Pilgrimages in India.* New Delhi, Goodearth Publication.

Reader I. (2005). *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku*. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press.

Reader I. & Walter T. (ed.) (1993). *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*. Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan.

Richardson H. (2003). Political Aspects of the *Snga-dar,* the First Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet. In *The History of Tibet, Volume 1: The Early Period: to c. AD 850: The Yarlung* Dynasty, ed. A. MacKay. pp. 298-303. London, Routledge Curzon.

San C.K. (2001). *Buddhist Pilgrimage*. Malaysia, Subang Jaya Buddhist Association.

Schopen G. (1987). Burial *"Ad Santos"* and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism. A Study in the Archelogy of Religions. *Religions*. 17 (3). pp. 193-225.

Schrempf M. (1999). Taming the Earth, Controlling the Cosmos: Transformation of Space in Tibetan Buddhist and Bon-po Ritual Dance. In *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture,* ed. T. Huber T. pp. 198-224. Dharamsala, India, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

Singh U. (2010). Exile and Return: The Reinvention of Buddhism and Buddhist Sites in Modern India. *South Asian Studies*. 26 (2). pp. 193-217. Routledge.

Sir Bell C. (1928). *The People of Tibet*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Ogyen Trinley Dorje, The Seventeenth Karmapa (2013). *The Heart is Noble*. Boston, Shambala.

Ogyen Trinley Dorje, The Seventeenth Karmapa (2014). *The Kagyu Monlam Book. A Compilation for Recitation.* Bodh Gaya, India, Kagyu Monlam International.

Turner E. (2012). *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy.* New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

Turner V. and E. (1978). *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. New York, Columbia University Press.

Turner V. (1974). *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. New York, Cornell University Press.

Wichasin P. (2009). Stupa Worship: The Early form of Thai Religious Tourism. *Contemporary Buddhism*. 10 (1). pp. 185-191.

Xu, P. (2010). The Mandala as a Cosmic Model Used to Systematically Structure the Tibetan Buddhist Landscape. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*. 27 (3). pp. 181-203.

Yeh E. T. (2007). Exile Meets Homeland: Politics, Performance, and Authenticity in the Tibetan diaspora. *Society and Space*. 25. pp. 648-667.

Zangpo N. (2001). *Sacred Ground: Jamgon Kongtrul on "Pilgrimage and Sacred Geography"*. New York, Snow Lion Publication.