

MARTIN GAENZSLE (Ed.)

*Ritual Speech in the Himalayas. Oral Texts and Their Contexts* (Harvard Oriental Series 93), 222 pp. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2019. £36.95. ISBN 9780674237902.

“Ritual Speech in the Himalayas” aims to ‘present ritual texts in a way that allows them to be appreciated in their inherent richness’ and to ‘show the various methodological possibilities of presenting oral ritual texts in written form’ (p. 3-4). Indeed, the greatest contribution of the volume lies in displaying various methods of rendering ritual speech in a format that can be read, understood and valued by a diverse and multidisciplinary readership. Whereas Gaenzsle himself uses interlinear translation, Shneiderman et al. employ sectional translation, de Sales and Huber use columnar translation, Morey and Schöpf combine morphological glossing, musical notation and dance choreography, and Wettstein, von Stockhausen and Rai use an innovative and highly visualised form of musical notation. These methods and their respective advantages and disadvantages for readers of specific backgrounds are summarised in Gaenzsle’s introduction (p. 8-10), but in the end, it is up to the individual reader’s background, purpose and interest which method is most revealing.

However, no matter the chosen method and exact target audience, for the majority of this volume’s intended international readership, a transcription of an oral text in Roman script, be it a (semi-) official orthography or phonetic spelling, is a prerequisite. Hence, despite Shneiderman et al.’s justification (p. 107) for providing the Thangmi transcription solely in Devanāgarī script, this decision is unfortunate. While the authors’ choice succeeds as virtue signalling, it may not practically widen access to the texts. The usefulness of the English translation in this contribution is further hampered by a lack of explanation of specific terminology printed in cursive, and in an edited volume about ritual speech, readers may actually wish to see the ‘specialised lexical terms’ used in the ‘elevated ritual register of Thangmi’ (p. 107) marked in some way or the other.

In the introductory chapter, Martin Gaenzsle asserts (p. 3) that the rich and complex oral traditions of the Himalayas ‘are still astonishingly alive in most areas’. This may be overstatement of the actual situation. In the past 70-odd years, the state, organised religion and socio-economic development have made their inroads into hitherto relatively isolated Himalayan communities, and lexical registers such as ritual speech have rapidly eroded. Allusions to such changes are made throughout the volume, for example, Gaenzsle’s own assertion (p. 43) that the *hopmacham* genre is ‘highly endangered’, Shneiderman et al.’s report on the Hindu influence on Thangmi wedding rituals (p. 109-110) and Huber writing that some of the *Pla* festivals are now defunct (p. 187). Morey and Schöpf describe how the Tangsa *Wihu* songs still maintain an important social function as markers of identity but note how their religious function is changing because of conversion to Christianity (p. 151-152, 155, 181). On a positive note, the Kham-Magar shamanistic tradition ‘is still very much alive’ (p. 18), and the Dumi *Nujā* ritual is still performed annually in every household (p. 71-72). Still, there appears to be little room for complacency; the present situation renders urgent the documentation of ritual speech, to which this volume makes a timely contribution.

Perhaps, Gaenzsle’s single use of the term ‘the Indo-Tibetan cultural sphere’ (p. 3) delimits the geographical focus of the volume to the area ‘between India and Tibet’. Indeed, four out of six contributions describe ritual speech of communities in

Nepal (Kham Magar, Thangmi, Dumi Rai and Puma), with one in Bhutan. The Tangsa contribution from the Patkai range would be rather in the ‘Indo-Burman cultural sphere’. The heavy representation of work from Nepal likely represents the present state of Western research on ritual speech, which has advanced furthest in Nepal (as Gaenszle describes on p. 4-6) and reflects the general trend that Western linguistic research has hitherto been more rigorous in Nepal than elsewhere. But to justify the general use of ‘Himalayas’ in the title, the volume could have benefited from contributions from the western and the eastern Himalayan ranges, in particular, texts and research on the ritual language of, for example, the Nuoso (Yi), Naxi and Qiang people of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, referred to in Huber’s contribution. Despite the inherent difficulty in inviting contributions from academics mainly or solely using Chinese as scholarly language, this would have given the volume a geographically more balanced view and would also have given some weight to revolving theories that the ‘Sino-Tibetan Marches’ may have been the origin of the Tibeto-Burman languages and, hence, some of the ritual traditions of the Himalayas.

In light of the general aims of the volume, it is encouraging to see that half of the contributors (Gaenszle, de Sales and Morey and Schöpf) made their original sound and / or video recordings available in open access online, although some of the links to the actual recordings provided in the volume do not function and require some searching. In the present-day age it becomes almost pertinent to make full use of the opportunities for digitally recording, storing and disseminating linguistic and ethnographic data, and we expect other authors to follow suit and make their data available in accessible form, for example, on Zenodo.

The contributions in the volume are all highly descriptive, focusing on methodology and data representation, rather than on possible ramifications from a linguistic or ethnographic perspective. Indeed, Gaenszle (p. 13) states that ‘it is so important not only to do proper documentation but also to present the texts in such a way that comparative scholarship can make use of them’ and that ‘only if these texts are accessible and available in a form in which they can be critically evaluated can the larger issues be discussed’. This goal is undoubtedly commendable, and “Ritual Speech in the Himalayas”, and in particular those contributions that provide readers access to the original data, makes an outstanding contribution to it.

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