

Reviews

The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization, Frederick M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 13 illus., pp. xxvii+701, \$60.00/£35 (cloth), ISBN: 0-231-13748-6

This magnificent work is the outcome of 14 years of research into deity and spirit possession in Indian religions. It will probably become established quite rapidly as a definitive work on the subject, and will in all likelihood remain required reading on the subject for many years to come. All students of Indian religions, including Buddhism, will benefit by giving it their close attention.

In general, traditional Brahmanic learning and modern Western Sanskrit scholarship alike have tended to situate spirit or deity possession on the margins of Indian religious orthodoxy. While no one has doubted its prevalence in the villages, especially among women, low castes and tribals, far less attention has been given to deity and spirit possession as something of crucial relevance to elite religion. Quite correctly, Smith sees this as a mistake. He argues persuasively that in failing to adequately interrogate elite Sanskrit texts for evidence of possession, we incur the danger of failing to appreciate a most pervasive and important feature of elite Indian religion, which includes a recognizable and distinctive ‘tradition’ of possession. Thus he states at the outset that his work has ‘two overriding contentions’. The first ‘contention’ is that the force of the ethnographic record is so strong that it demands a re-examination of the Sanskrit texts for evidence of possession. His second ‘contention’ is that we need to considerably broaden our understanding of possession in Sanskrit literature, because it is in fact a far more varied and more complex category than is properly understood by either Western or Indian scholarship, taking in phenomena as varied as the devotional merging of the self with another, the occupation by a yogi of a different body, the introduction into one’s body of divine energies, shape shifting and so on. Thus possession can be destructive, instructional, healing, protective, a sign of perfected devotion, a tool used by advanced yogis or a sign of immersion in erotic love, the cycle of rebirth, divine love games or even God. While Smith’s contentions have probably been long accepted by anthropologists, it is only Sanskritists who can really do justice to the materials in the Sanskrit language, and while a few (notably Alexis Sanderson, whom Smith cites many times) have done so previously, none have done so on such a comprehensive scale, so that Smith’s work most definitely has an important ground breaking quality.

Smith’s scope is broad and deep in equal measure, comprehensive and deeply considered. This book was probably not written according to the rigid timelines and fixed deadlines that form the concealed background to so much contemporary research. On the contrary, one gets the impression this work began when Smith first conceived an interest in it, and simply continued until he felt it was sufficiently completed. The advantages deriving from such freedoms are obvious. Smith’s approach is impressively exhaustive, while also integrating and analysing. Over and above his treatment of possession in classic Sanskrit literature, he also deals at length with a variety of other closely related topics.

Theoretical and methodological concerns are always in the foreground, so that modern psychological, philosophical and anthropological approaches to spirit possession are constantly referenced and critically reviewed with insight and acumen. Above all, Smith uses the phenomena of possession as the basis for a sustained and deeply considered analysis of the self and person, which merits a close study in itself.

But far from being largely theoretical, this work is in fact impressively exhaustive with regard to factual content, be it ethnographic, textual, or historical. Although he is primarily a Sanskrit textual scholar, Smith is thus able to employ approaches and perspectives from a number of other disciplines quite successfully. The large anthropological literature on specifically South Asian possession of modern times is critically analysed. Regional factors are considered at length, as are factors of gender, since in South Asia as elsewhere more women experience possession than men. Interesting comparisons are even made with contemporary Western new-age trance channelling.

As a professional translator of Sanskrit texts, it is unsurprising that Smith's treatment of the classical literature is impressive. He reviews Vedic and Upaniṣadic literature, which he sees as a particularly unambiguous source of information for his ideas. He points out that the verbal root \sqrt{vis} occurs 103 times in the *R̥gveda* in various forms, and that 69 of these occurrences are prefixed with \bar{a} . It is clear that $\bar{a}\sqrt{vis}$ of the *R̥gveda* signifies a technical term, not merely a simple entry as though through a door. For anyone familiar with the pervasive Tantric and devotional usage of $\bar{a}veśa$, this makes Smith's fundamental point most clearly: there has undoubtedly been continuity from the $\bar{a}\sqrt{vis}$ of the *R̥gveda* to the ongoing and quite ubiquitous usage of $\bar{a}veśa$ in contemporary Tantric ritual. In the unlikely event that any serious scholars remain who would still argue, whether from a position of haughty orthodoxy or romantic idealization of a folk tradition, that the widespread presence $\bar{a}veśa$ in contemporary Tantric ritual is a sign of the simple one-way adoption of village traditions into the elite traditions, then here they will find cause to reconsider. Through this analysis of the Vedic sources, as elsewhere in the book, Smith constantly thinks through the complex interrelations of popular religion to classical religion, with considerable acumen, subtlety and originality. In this way he brings to the topic of possession an analysis that parallels that of Biardeau, for example in her 1980s' study of the sacrificial post in villages and Vedas.

Classical philosophical literature also offers materials for Smith's ideas. He presents instances of possession in Yoga, Vedānta and Buddhist texts, citing for example the description in the third *adhyāya* of Patañjali's *Yogasūtras* of methods for possessing other bodies, and a similar description in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*. He also refers to the hagiography of the great Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara, in which he famously left his own body to possess the body of a dead king so that he could demonstrate his mastery of *kāmaśāstra* without breaking his vows of celibacy.

Dramas, poems and other literary works present many more examples of possession, reflecting in fictional form many ideas that were prevalent in religious practice. The devotional or *bhakti* traditions are an important aspect of Smith's study, where possession takes the form of absorption by the devotee into the deity: for example, in *Bhagavad-Gītā* 12.2, Kṛṣṇa says that 'those whose minds are absorbed in me' are the best yogis. One could add, this kind of absorption or possession is also fundamental to the central Tibetan Buddhist practice of guru-yoga (*bla ma'i rnal 'byor*). Smith has much to say about possession in the *tantras*, including Tibetan Vajrayāna. Many fundamental Tantric ritual categories, such as *nyāsa*, *pratiṣṭha* and $\bar{a}veśa$ itself, are central to Smith's ideas, and he analyses them at great length. He also gives a very substantial analysis of possession in medicine, and has two

chapters on childhood possession, one dealing with the positive phenomena of oracular possession, and another dealing with the malign invasion of children by demonic forces. This excellent book is well worth reading.

Robert Mayer
 Oriental Institute, University of Oxford
 robert.mayer@orinst.ox.ac.uk

Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture, Amy McNair (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 230 pp., \$52/£33.50, ISBN 0-8248-2994-8

Longmen, located just outside of the city of Luoyang in Henan Province, is one of the most diverse and opulent expressions of Buddhist devotion in the world. Over a period of 250 years (from the late fifth century to the mid-eighth century) an astonishing 2,345 grottoes were dug out of the side of a cliff and ornamented with approximately 100,000 individual statues accompanied by some 3,000 inscriptions, many in fine calligraphy admired to this day by art critics and aficionados (p. 1). Longmen has long attracted the attention of specialists in Buddhist art, drawn both to its beauty and to the plethora of art-historical puzzles it presents.

In *Donors of Longmen*, Amy McNair focuses on the stories behind the images, revealed obliquely through inscriptions and the iconography itself. She leads us through the history of Longmen, beginning with the first grotto, made in approximately 493 by an enterprising monk named Huicheng, himself a member of the royal family, ostensibly to make karmic merit for his emperor and the state. Subsequent chapters focus, in chronological order, on the donors for other grottoes, or grotto complexes, concluding, in the final chapter with a curious set of 48 Amitābhas made by the powerful eighth-century figure Gao Lishi – one of the most famous eunuchs in Chinese history – for his friend and benefactor, Emperor Xuanzong.

McNair provides perceptive observations on style and technique, noting the intentional distortion of one set of figures, whose noses 'stand out rather wierdly' when lit from above in the Metropolitan Museum of Art where they are now housed, whereas in their original setting, lit by a shaft of light from the cave opening, they would have appeared in perfect proportion to the rest of the faces (p. 48). Similarly, she notes that when the massive *lokapāla* and *dvārapāla* figures of the Great Viarocana Image Shrine are viewed from a distance, looking at them directly, we see that 'the figures have been intentionally broadened, with an almost grotesque wideness to the hips and shoulders', but that when they are viewed from the front of the shrine, with the viewer looking up, the proportions seem natural (p. 114). McNair also engages the considerable scholarship on the caves to propose her own solutions to questions of dating and iconographical identification. But as the title suggests, the greatest contribution of the book is its analysis of the donors: who they were and why they made images at Longmen. The results of this analysis carry implications not just for Longmen or Buddhist art history, but for our understanding of Buddhist devotion more generally.

Central to the making of images at Longmen, and a theme that runs throughout the book, is the belief that through making an image one could earn merit that could then be transferred to a loved one to improve their fate in the cycle of rebirth. This, the foundation of Buddhist material culture, was a belief common to Buddhists from all walks of