The debate over ‘Hinduism’ has arisen in the context of the current politics of the subcontinent which have necessitated careful thinking through of academic categories and their impact on actual social realities. This book provides a very useful summary of the consequent academic debate and its conclusions.

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This edited collection of articles by Geoffrey Samuel contains work that spans from 1982 to 2001, with five previously unpublished articles and ten chapters that are revisions of previously published works. Following a couple of introductory chapters, the work is divided into three main parts, Historical, Religion in Contemporary Asia, and Buddhism and other Western Religions. Between them, the chapters represent a significant contribution to the study of Tantric Buddhism, both within Tibet and globally, and they suggest connections to scholarship within Buddhist studies more broadly. A number of these papers refer to and develop arguments outlined in Samuel’s books Mind, Body and Culture: Anthropology and the Biological Interface (1990), and Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies (1993). Tantric Revisionings (2005) can therefore be used as a companion volume to these books. However, the ideas in each chapter are clearly explained, with reference to previous scholarship in relevant areas, so that the book could easily stand in its own right as an introduction to Samuel’s thought and, therefore, may be useful to undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Historical. The book contains some provocative propositions. For example, in chapter 2, Samuel argues that despite Tibet’s strong associations with Tantric Buddhism, its state structure is rather unlike what one would expect from a Tantric country, the features of which are better exemplified by Newar and Balinese societies (pp. 29-30, 218). This is because the role of the lama in Tibet is unique in that lamas employ magical powers while at the same time being central to state and religious structures. However, Samuel cautions against exaggerating the powers or coherence of the state in Tibet, pointing to a fairly widespread geographical distribution of power between various monastic institutions, for example. This theme is developed in chapter 3, where he discusses problems in applying Gramsci’s notion of ideological hegemony to de-centralized pre-industrial states (p. 53) and explores the work of Ray (1995), Tambiah (1976, 1984) and Carrithers (1983) to contrast the Thai association of urban monasticism and the hegemonic order with the more fragmented Tibetan picture (pp. 54-55). In chapter 4, Samuel explores ways in which Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet can be understood as ‘shamanic’ – using an extended and theoretical definition of shamanism that focuses on transformation in consciousness and argues that these features are Indic in origin (pp. 74, 77). This chapter also traces developments in Tantric Buddhism that include the influence of Saivite material and the darker, more horrific images and practices, noting that ‘the confrontation with the powers of destruction, and with death itself, is a very widespread component of how one becomes a shaman in many different
Chapter 5 extends this discussion of darker and more magical rites and deities by examining ways in which they may have been utilized for state purposes (p. 95), while chapter 6 explores in some depth the relationship between Shamanism, Bon, and Tibetan religion, including a careful tracing of previous scholarship in this area (p. 121). Chapter 7 suggests ways in which debates concerning the Indus Valley Civilization may be used to broaden an understanding of developments within the early history of Tibet (p. 159) and chapter 8 examines the Ge-sar Epic of Tibet, suggesting that its relevance to contemporary religion lies in the idea that it ‘can be regarded as a narrative about shamanic power and its proper use’ (p. 181).

Religion in Contemporary Asia. Chapter 9 considers the history of scholarship focused on Tibet and some particular issues that remain of urgent intellectual interest, such as gender and animal sacrifice. These themes are further developed in chapters 10 and 11. While chapter 10 explores the ways in which Vajrayana practitioners were able to play a number of roles previously associated with folk religion in Tibet, chapter 11 makes the comparison on a more theoretical level, exploring the effectiveness of ritual and using examples of rituals that focus on female deities to illustrate the mechanisms at work.

Samuel, developing ideas put forward in *Mind, Body and Culture* (1990), suggests that ‘spirits and deities function as labels of modal states’ (p. 235) and uses five examples: rituals that include visualizations of White Tara (a Tantric Buddhist deity); Rajasthani spirit possession; the cult of Kumari in Nepal; the Virgin Mary; and the Goddess Brigid. The ideas and methodology of this chapter are intriguing, but given the range of examples, a more extended exploration of each may be more appropriate, particularly with regard to the complex interpenetration of issues concerning gender, power, and the state that Samuel alludes to. Nonetheless, his treatment of gender in South Asia is developed in chapter 12, with an examination of the notion of auspiciousness, as applied by scholars to the problem of disparity between strong female deities and relative inequality of women compared with men in South Asian societies. This chapter also draws from Santi Rozario’s fieldwork material on birth rituals.

Buddhism and Other Western Religions. The papers in this section are all previously unpublished and their contribution is significant on at least two counts. First, they trace a more recent historical background to issues of interest to sociological scholars of contemporary Buddhist practitioners, and secondly, they are also informative to the recent history of Buddhist scholarship, where some academics may also have been practitioners or are doing close ethnographic work within the kinds of ‘dharma’ centres to which Samuel refers. Chapter 13 considers whether the comparative globalization of Tibetan Buddhism has had a significant impact on the organization and structure of Tibetan lamas and the groups with which they work (p. 309), while chapter 14 focuses more closely on western followers of Tibetan Buddhism, exploring various core motivations for these groups including needs for an alternative science, moral authority, community and technologies of the self. I found the thesis around the notion of technologies of the self particularly interesting but at times theoretically unsatisfying in its present formulation, because it initially draws from Foucault without entering into a discussion of the body and power in sufficient depth in relation to specific Tantric practices. Chapter 15, however, concludes the volume with some analysis of gender and power in Tantra, which suggests (following the work of White 1996, for example) that the part played by sex in Tantric rituals was primarily to obtain sexual substances.
for 'magical' purposes, rather than an exploration of sexuality in human relationships (p. 350). He also suggests that the roots of contemporary (western) constructions of Tantric sexuality are more likely to be found in Islamic Spain than medieval India (p. 356), and rather than dismissing modern Tantra argues for its potential. I would like to see his argument sustained more rigorously. Perhaps one of the difficulties with a collection of articles, rather than a monograph, is the temptation to make exciting propositions without interrogating aspects of them in sufficient depth. There are a number of places where the theoretical underpinnings of these articles would have benefited from a more detailed articulation and expression. Nonetheless, Samuel has met the challenge admirably with a collection that examines, from a number of angles, issues that are important for the study of Tantra in India and Tibet, including shamanism, Bon, gender, and the wrathful deities.

REFERENCES


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Whether one reads this volume from cover to cover, as I did, or dips randomly into sections, one will unavoidably get the sense of encountering an established academic field of study. The reason for this is twofold: first, the remarkable richness and diversity of the topics presented in this volume is organized into five distinct sections, which includes articles from leading scholars on topics ranging from textual hermeneutics, to ethnographic work on gender, to historical-legal and demographic study, to philological analysis. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, not one of the articles is aimed at an audience unfamiliar with Jainism. All are sophisticated presentations aimed at a readership at ease with the history, practices and philosophical tenets of the tradition. In addition, all include substantial bibliographies of historical and contemporary works, leaving one with the impression (and scholarly glow) that the academic field of Jaina Studies has finally come into its own. Paul Dundas comments at the start of his essay that those scholars who commenced studies of Jainism 20 years...