

Tibet



Alex McKay, *Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geography*

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IN THIS FORMIDABLE study, Alex McKay provides the first historical account of the development of Mt. Kailas as an iconic site of Himalayan religiosity. Sifting through textual evidences of Indic, regional, Tibetan, and international provenance, it explores the meanings attached to the mountain and the lakes at its base

(Manasarovar and Rakas Tal) over three millennia. Although commonly identified with the “Kailas-Manasarovar complex” of southwest Tibet, the accreted layers of divergent cultural readings reveal that this geographic location is a recent phenomenon that took place in the context of British India. Thus, for most of its history, the peak that today passes for the abode of Shiva/Demchok was actually conceived as an abstract, ideal space of spiritual excellence rather than a concrete physical locale; a conceptualization born of its close association with Indic, Tibetan, and international interpretations of Asian renunciate traditions. These perceptions’ development in modern sources is supported by extensive archival research and data gleaned from decades of fieldwork, weaving a fascinating narrative of the “dynamic and sometimes overlapping networks of sacred geography” (5) that feed into present-day understandings of Kailas. In investigating the “multiple layers of spirituality” (21) attached to the mountain today, McKay provides crucial context that disproves its popular misconception as a millennia-old center of power by highlighting the cardinal contributions of multiple agents in its construction.

The book is divided into four thematic parts of near equal length that address the beginnings and development of Indic (orthodox and heterodox), regional (West Himalayan/Pahari), Tibetan (Bön and Buddhist), and modern (European and Asian) perceptions of Kailas. The sections are chronologically ordered to balance the micro aspects of each cultural tradition with the macro questions at the heart of the study, namely, how, when and why did Kailas-Manasarovar come to represent a pillar of several world religions? The answer to these questions is deftly delivered in the book’s fourth section, which explicates how the major socio-economic, political, and religious shifts of the twentieth century engendered the Kailas-Manasarovar complex’s present manifestation as a site of global appeal. The mountain’s conceptualization as an ideal space that is exclusively open to the spiritually adept in the preceding eras (explored in the first three sections) carried into this modern reading, thereby accounting for its close association with renunciate traditions. Lingering in the background and addressed in key moments in the text is the quest for Kailas’s precise geographic location, which seems to have differed in accordance with the particular time and tradition addressed. Given the encyclopaedic breadth of the book, this review shall introduce the central theses advanced in each of its sections alongside representative examples of each with the aim of explicating how, by the twentieth century, the confluent readings of Kailas in Indic, regional (West Himalayan), Tibetan, and Western traditions became focused on one of several borderland peaks at the fringes of the plateau.

The first and largest section of the book, entitled “Indic Histories,” investigates Kailas in South Asian religious traditions in the course of six chapters. A discussion of liminal spaces in Ancient Chinese, Indian, and Iranian traditions sets the background for this investigation, and is followed by an identification of a unique class of ritual specialists that was capable of conquering wilderness spaces through purificatory rites as the most likely candidates for its early exploration, namely, Vedic Atharaveda Brahmins and their renunciate counterparts (43). The next two chapters address the earliest mentions of Kailas in Indic literature during the Epic-Puranic Era, and their relation to the rise in pilgrimages (*yatras*) as a

central religious activity in coeval South Asian societies. The praise of pilgrimages in late Vedic, Jain and early Buddhist texts is advanced as evidence of the practise's popularity, and its first textual occurrence detailed. Although recognized as a destination for pilgrims (*tirtha*), the Kailas of the Great Indian Epic, the *Mahabharata*, is primarily a metaphor for excellence, the difficulties entailed in reaching it indicating "the Himalayan region was not a place for the ordinary pilgrim" (53). This is plausibly interpreted as evidence that the first to reach the mountain were liminal, itinerant ascetics who were unfettered by links and obligations towards the temple-centred Hinduism then striking roots in the plains. It is thus neither the priest nor the layman who undertake such journeys, but epic protagonists (of both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*) whose combination of martial heroism and *tapasvi*, ascetic-like qualities, facilitated their tackling of numerous dangers along the arduous route, signalling a modification of the preceding era's reportedly non-combatant ritual specialist frequenters of Kailas (63–64). The epics provide further room for reflecting on the question of geographic location, which is traced to Reinhold Grunendahl's conclusion that the Mt. Kailas mentioned in the epics most likely refers to a peak near present-day Badrinath in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand (42). Characterizing the mountain in Puranic sources (chapter 3) proves trickier in light of these texts' inherent multi-vocality. Their popular appeal and close association with the *māhātmya* genre that would ultimately define the site in the modern era are nonetheless explored given their important role in disseminating knowledge of the site in Indic society through the ages (56–57).

The three remaining chapters of this section discuss the site in light of Tantric (with an emphasis on alchemy), early Buddhist, and early modern influences. The rise of Tantrism in the medieval era accounts for the heterodox beliefs and practises associated with the mountain in popular imagination today (most likely by the Nath yogis who frequented the site from the thirteenth century onwards), while the early Buddhist "Kelasa" is found to represent an idyllic verdant eminence more akin to the imagined space of early Indic sources than the barrenness position it occupies today. The last of these chapters presents an excellent review of early modern and modern texts on Kailas, from the "discovery" of a local *mahatmya* pertaining to Kailas by British administrator Edwin Atkinson to its reinterpretation by Henry Strachey, who penned "the earliest Indic work in which we can definitely identify the textual Kailas with the mountain in Western Tibet" (140). A highly instructive discussion of modern Hindu traditions connected with the site follows. We thus learn of a "three day annual ritual" (176) of regional importance to "the entire Himalayan belt," which had by then come "under various forms of the princely state system and ... [consequently] remained outside of direct colonial rule." Although largely correct, significant parts of the West Himalaya were actually directly ruled by the British (for example, Kumaon, British Garhwal), suggesting their presence in the region may have played a part in the way the mountain was explored and interpreted from 1815 onwards, whence the majority of exploratory expeditions to Kailas and Tibet originated. The second section explores Kailas in "the Western Himalayan Cultural Complex," a term used "to define those elements of the regional culture that predate, fall

outside, or have survived the impact of World-religions” (153) in the mountains between West Nepal and Kashmir. Alternately named the “Khas Cultural Area” after its predominantly ethnic Khas populations (LECOMTE-TILOUINE 2009), this distinct region also goes by the broad appellation “Pahari,” reflecting its concurrent association with and divergence from “Hindu” beliefs and practices current in the plains. A prominent expression of this distinction is the multiplication of Kailas mountains in the region, of which four are examined in detail. Chapter 7 exemplifies the details of this regional distinction through the traditions and practices associated with two Kailas peaks along the Jammu and Kashmir-Himachal Pradesh border (in Bhadrawah and Chamba). These include a connection with Naga cults, customary bathing in high lakes, the undertaking of pilgrimages (*jatras*) to mountain peaks rather than the Sanskritic tradition of circumambulation, multi-caste participation in organized pilgrimages, and a near complete absence of solid (*pa-ka*) temple structures. These themes are further developed in the next chapters, which address additional subvarieties of Kailas closer to West Tibet (Kinner and Adhi Kailas in chapter 8), as well the Sri Kailas of Garhwal, the most probable candidate for the mountain noted in ancient Indic texts (chapter 9). Having charted these sites’ histories, their exploration by nineteenth-century surveyors is singled out as the constitutive moment in which “scientific modernity had demolished that Sanskritic fusion of ideal and real landscapes” that predated it (205). As many of these expeditions were also aimed at discovering the source of the Ganges, they contributed to the recasting of sacred geography in that part of the hills today. This section’s concluding chapter advances a detailed exploration of Kailas in the light of modern neo-Hindu reform movements such as the Arya Samaj, which played a decisive part in popularizing the sacred mountain over the past two centuries. The modern outlook of these movements’ leaders is illustrated in their combination of Vedic knowledge with Western scientific methods by exploring select biographies. Swami Pranavananda (1896–1941) is a case in point. An erstwhile government employee and “rationalist” member of the Royal Geographical Society turned renunciate, Pranavananda undertook several pilgrimages to Kailas that were popularized in print. Tapping into a growing body of South Asian readership, the swami’s writings were conversant with European explorers’ findings (for example, Sven Hedin) even as they promoted the merits of pilgrimage to Kailas as a means for spiritual progress. The dissemination of Kailas as a destination for modern-day Hindu pilgrims thus at least partly sprung from a nexus of Western and South Asian modernities, a topic further elaborated in the concluding section.

The third section on “Tibetan Histories” complements the preceding two by enquiring into views of *Ti se* (Mt. Kailas) in Bön and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Tantric creeds are rightly awarded a place of prominence, the mountain’s taming by ritual specialists akin to the ritual specialists of Vedic India having transformed it from “one too powerful for non-Tantrics to encounter, into one that enables the householder-pilgrim to partake of the sacred power of the place” (302). Chapter 12 probes the appropriation of Kailas by Tibetan Buddhism, unveiling the lengthy, multilayered processes that enabled it through important historical indices that counter its ostensibly immediate conquest promoted in sectarian accounts. The ties

of the illustrious eleventh–twelfth century-sage Milarepa and later spiritual masters to the mountain prove central to this enquiry, which is largely based on hagiographies (also discussed as a genre; see pages 292–95; see also ROESLER 2015). The variety of approaches to *Ti se* in Tibet also points to some surprising twists, such as the rare geographic precision found in the account of the thirteenth-century Sakya Pandita, revealing that “critical approaches are not the exclusive preserve of Western scholars” (319). The last chapter in this section provides a summary of the numerous deities associated with Kailas and their linkages with the mandala concept that also dots its preceding chapters. Resuming the grand narrative of the book, McKay explains the marginalization of the highly developed Tibetan perspectives of *Ti se* in favor of Indic readings today by the “late blooming” of Tibetan Studies in Western academy (337); a reminder of the considerable extent to which modern scholarship is implicated in the shaping of current understandings of Mt. Kailas.

The fourth section constitutes the crux of the book’s thesis, laying bare the origins of the modern characterization of Kailas and its deep links with European traditions in two succinct chapters. Chapter 15 surveys European encounters with Kailas from the early modern reports of Marco Polo and Jesuit missionary-explorers to modern-day visitors. The importance of scientific institutions such as the Royal Geographical Society in the expansion of knowledge regarding Kailas is acknowledged, and the key writings of select (mostly British) figures in its modern construction addressed. Thus, Charles Sherring’s influential “British-authored version of a *mahatmya*” (390) is explored, as is its heavy reliance on the *Manasakhanda*, a text of doubtful antiquity that was edited and translated by Edwin Atkinson a generation earlier (401). The widespread diffusion of this text proved pivotal for advancing the modern interpretation of Kailas insofar as it transformed “the beliefs of a small sect of Saivite renunciates into those of Hindus in general” by refashioning the site from the preserve of initiated ascetics into a destination that is open to all (395). The text’s momentous contribution to refashioning Kailas notwithstanding, its author’s carefully cultivated self-image as “a cultured and scholarly individual with a compassionate interest in the local people” is disproven by the archival evidence, which expose Sherring as “a caricature of the arrogant imperialist, who became accepted as an authority on western Tibet largely by enthusiastic self-promotion” (397); yet another reminder of the intertwining of material and otherworldly elements in the chequered history of the mountain’s construction as a sacred space. Similar instances of reclassification conclude the chapter, exemplified in Sven Hedin’s immortalization of the Kailas-Manasarovar complex as a timeless and static body of knowledge common to all Hindus by way of select readings from the epics and the Puranas. Having contextualized the historical background of Kailas in the modern era, the sixteenth chapter (“Theosophy and Globalisation”) charts the religious genealogy behind its present prestige as a global focal point of spirituality. The leanings of New Age spiritualists in this reconceptualization of Kailas were key in this process, which are again indebted to the unique setting of British India. The association of Theosophical Society founder Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) with Arya Samaj-founder, Vedic scholar, and social reformer Swami Dayananda Sarasvati (1824–1883) was critical in this regard, as it set the tone

for the group's identification with an important indigenous movement sympathetic to the "universalization" of Kailas. Beyond the inner circle of Theosophical Society members, satellite figures of the likes of German-born lama Anagorika Govinda (1898–1985) further helped popularise Kailas as a site that "represents a Western interpretation of Buddhism" (420). By the late 1920s, these and numerous other individuals who are cursorily noted (for example, Alexandra David-Neel, Nicholas Roerich, Water Evan-Wentz) came to form "a small group of seekers" whose exchanges created "a mutually reinforcing body of knowledge" about Kailas (424). Based on a mixture of Asian and Western interpretations, this knowledge diffused through Indian society through the writings of (among others) Maharashtran Brahmin Sri Purohit Swami (1886–c. 1936). Recounting a 1908 journey to the mountain with his guru, Sri Bhagwan Hamsa, Swami's "concise and largely empirical" *Holy Mountain* (1934) is a "transitional" marker that served "as a bridge between the scientific constructions of Sherring and Hedin, and the emerging esoteric construction of Kailas" (425). While the Indic antecedents of the modern Kailas were thus fairly established, the "Tibetan" reading of the site did not lag far behind. However, this latter reading also suffered from certain presuppositions to do with the Universalist interpretations advanced by its central propagator, Anagorika Govinda, thereby depleting it of locally- and culturally-anchored markers of Bön and subsequent developments in Tibetan Buddhism.

In historicizing the multiple genealogies that fed into the current construction of Kailas-Manasarovar as a sacred space, the book more than accomplishes its goals. The span of data, their analyses, and contextualisation are a feat of considerable importance, rendering it indispensable for those interested in the religions of South Asia, the Himalayas, and Tibet, as well as for scholars of sacred geography writ large. While the pervasive impact of modernity on the construction of Kailas as a site of timeless sanctity is clearly demonstrated, this interpretation relied on the staggering overlay of anterior conjunctions of divergent readings originating in multifarious cultural worlds in the Himalayan borderland. In this respect, McKay amply delivers on his initial qualification of Kailas as "a dynamic process as well as a place" (20), while reminding us of the very human agency and motivations of those involved in the construction of sanctified spaces in the Himalayas and beyond.

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