LADAKH

HERRMANN, SILKE, editor. *Kesar-Versionen aus Ladakh* [Versions of the Gesar epic from Ladakh]. Asiatische Forschungen Band 109. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991. 417 pages. Cross-references of motifs, bibliography, index. Cloth DM 158.—; ISBN 3-447-03146-8. ISSN 0571-320X. (In German)

The important Central Asian epic of King Kesar — or more commonly King Gesar, the equivalent of the Mongolian Geser Khan — exists in three major variant traditions, from eastern Tibet, from Mongolia, and from Ladakh in far western Tibet. The oral versions from Ladakh were the first to receive academic attention through the work of August Francke at the turn of the century (although a written text from Mongolia was translated by Schmidt in 1839). Most subsequent work, however, has been on the more elaborate (and in part written) eastern Tibetan and Mongolian versions, so this substantial new study of the oral Ladakhi tradition is very welcome.

Silke Herrmann's study is based on performances of the epic by twelve narrators: four Muslim men, six Buddhist men, and two Buddhist women, ranging in age from thirty-seven to eighty-eight. Most of the performances cover four principal episodes, though some omit one or more of the four. Part 1 of the book is mainly taken up with detailed comparisons between the twelve performances and the four versions recorded by Francke around 1900 (28–118). Herrmann's emphasis is on the inclusion or exclusion of particular segments of the story and on differences in narrative detail between the versions. She argues that each major episode reveals the same basic narrative structure (sometimes repeated), commencing with a situation of lack or injury and proceeding through a series of standard stages to Kesar's victory, acquisition of a wife, and return home.

The core of the book is part 2, the translation of a performance by Rahimulla Takarpa, one of the Muslim narrators (Version D, 138–326). This covers the four major episodes (*Kapitel*): 1) the *Layul*, in which the people of Ling ask the king of the gods to send one of his sons to be their ruler, and the youngest of his three sons is chosen; 2) the *Lingyul*, in which this son is born as an unknown and fatherless child but succeeds in marrying the Princess Druguma and becoming Kesar, King of Ling; 3) the *Luyul*, in which Kesar rescues the kingdom of the *lu* (water-spirits) from demons; and 4) the *Horyul*, in which Kesar returns to Ling, finds that Druguma has been abducted by the people of Hor, defeats the King of Hor, and brings Druguma back to Ling. Part 3 includes sixty pages of further text material, including variant segments and a full text of the *Rdutyul*, a popular story in which Kesar defeats a giant demon with the help of the demon's wife. This episode, included in all but two of the Buddhist performances, was replaced by the somewhat similarly structured *Luyul* in the four Muslim versions.

Herrmann's general strategy of giving one complete version and relegating variants to an appendix works well in terms of providing a readable version of the epic. Although her emphasis on things like plot segments and recurrent motifs seems, from the perspective of contemporary anthropological analysis, to remain very much at the surface of the epic narrative, it is valid enough in its own terms, and helps guide the reader through a fairly complex structure of recurrent themes told in slightly different ways. The book's most original theoretical contribution to Kesar studies comes in chapter 1, an English version of which has appeared as an independent article (HERRMANN 1987). Herrmann suggests that the Parry-Lord theory of oral composition might be applied to Kesar (17–19), a reasonable idea but one that she develops no further in the book. She also appears unaware of the extensive critical literature on the Parry-Lord approach (for a useful recent survey of the literature on this theory, see BEISSINGER 1991). Indeed, there is little in Herrmann's book generally to indicate much input after the mid-1980s. The omission of STEIN's valuable discussion of the relationships between the Ladakhi and Amdo versions (1990) is not sur-

prising, but one would have expected reference to TSERING MUTUP's version of the Ladakhi epic (1983), to DARGYAY's work in nearby Zanskar (1987), and to the extensive recent literature in Tibetan and Chinese on the East Tibetan Gesar.

The biggest disappointment, however, is the total absence of the original language (Ladakhi, a Tibetan dialect). The text is given exclusively in translation (with the prose narrative reduced to a summary [133]), and we are provided not even a brief sample of the original. While certain kinds of analysis of oral literature can be carried out in translation, many cannot, and Herrmann's exclusion of the original language severely limits the utility of her work. The short samples presented in DARGYAY 1987 make it clear that, as one might expect, the variations go beyond mere plot-segment substitution to more detailed issues of language and style. Another major (and related) lacuna is the absence of any discussion of performance style and practice, though in this regard Herrmann is no worse than her predecessors (of Western authors, only Mireille Helffer has discussed the music of the epic in any detail).

Despite these weaknesses, the positive contributions of Herrmann's work should be recognized. The text, even in translated form, is our most substantial record of the Ladakhi epic so far, and Herrmann's detailed analysis of variations gives a good idea of the divergence between performers at the level of narrative content. In particular, her discussion of the differences between Muslim and Buddhist versions (110–11) provides an entry into the important general issue of differences in local redactions and of the complex relationship between Gesar and Buddhism. It is to be hoped that in future studies she will fill out some of the linguistic and ethnographic gaps in her present book to provide a more comprehensive account of Ladakhi epic performance.

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