

SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPES

This article on spiritual and religious landscapes is based on thoughts and experiences while travelling in Asia during 2003-10 with some additions from Africa, 2010-12 where I researched traditional religion in south-western Uganda¹. The latter inspired the last paragraphs concerning the nature of religion.

Introduction

There is a rich tapestry of religious and spiritual architecture and archaeology in Asia with a fascinating blurring between them given the continuity of ritual observance and practise since Antiquity. Some of the most intriguing shrines are small and anonymous, never having become major centres of worship or pilgrimage but are intimate and specific to the locality. They are found everywhere and often are a testimony to living traditions that, in India, predate the Vedas and the subsequent spread of Hinduism, which was influenced by various reform movements, particularly the 8th century Shankara, and cultural change as it seeped across the subcontinent integrating and absorbing local religions into its munificent bosom.

Similar processes can be found in Buddhism and Islam; the former as it became integrated into northern (Tibet & China) and southern cultures (Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia) and latter as it spread into western Himalayas and Indonesia. The following samples, mostly from the Indian sub-continent, are typical.

Auli, Utteranchal, India

At a small mountain shrine above Auli, Utteranchal, one of India's premier ski-resorts (basic by European standards) is a classic small temple dedicated to Shiva set in a forest facing north to northwest to Nanda Devi, Badrinath and eastern sources of the Ganges. Built on a three meters square platform is a temple whose interior is one meter square, sufficiently high to kneel in front of a small alter, with modern icons, images, offerings and incense. Being outside the Char Dham circuit it retains its simplicity. Yusuf, a local Josimath guide, told me that it was dedicated to an old nameless mountain God, which indicates the continuity of local spiritual tradition. Above and west of Josimath is Badrinath, source of the Alaknanda River and dedicated to Vishnu.

Vedic tradition says that Kali Yuga will end with his next incarnation though this depends on whether one accepts that Lord Buddha was his ninth, a Hindu belief completely rejected by Buddhists. In the meantime some locals believe that Kali Yuga has already arrived at the Ganges' sources through crime and meat-eating among some of the support staff that feed and shelter pilgrims.

Maraiyu, Kerala, India

The second is near Maraiyur, a tribal area in Kerala west of the state frontier with Tamil Nadu. A few miles north of the town is a ravine, c. 1,500m altitude, that has on one side a series of about twenty Stone Age (1,000BC or older) cairn tombs on bare rock. These were constructed with flagstones, the bodies interred and then covered with rocks. Many have collapsed and these show both north-south and east-west orientation and could either be for single or group, up to six, burials.

Above the cluster, to the east, is an altar surmounted by a shiny black stone carved with half a dozen Shiva statues each marked with fresh tikkas. This carving could be any age and probably originally came from a nearby temple. At the base are two groups of arrowheads planted into the soil, each point also with fresh tikkas. A local tribal community, which lives a few miles to the east and integrated into the management of the local National Park, keep the altar with one acting as an official guide. It is stunning to realise that this has probably been a place of worship for at least 3,000 years.

Nearby is rock art, not uncommon in the sub-continent, but in a very different style to Bhimbetka.

¹ See Kigezi Mountain Mosaic for three chapters on Traditional Religion

Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh, India

Very different styles may be found in Bhimbetka (near Bhopal) where there is a magnificent array of paintings up to 12,000 years old. These reflect technological changes in hunting practices from the simple spear, arrow and net to presumably the final scene of hunters on elephants and that raises the interesting question of when they first became domesticated, usually taken to be 6000BC. These carvings generally appear to be creatively independent, for instance those at Hampi, Karnataka, have a different inspiration.

Rameswaram Island, Tamil Nadu, India

Rameswaram Island lies at the end of a long 50 mile sand spit that is joined to the mainland by road and rail, the latter is only about 12m above the sea an indication of how sheltered the channel is. To the east the island continues to narrow and at the end the spit of sand, called Adam's Bridge, is about 5-10m wide depending on tidal variations. Standing at here one can see the sunrise and sunset from the sea. The islands continue in a series of sand banks and reefs to northern Sri Lanka. On the southern side of the spit is the northernmost relentless surge of the Indian Ocean while on the other side coral grows in the warm, calm and placid sea. At the transition pools of mixing water are a refreshing way of escaping the heat and admire the dancing surf with a backdrop of a lightning storm over Sri Lanka.

One can easily imagine Nataraja (Shiva) dancing Creation in the vast sky. To reach this spot take a bus to the end of the road, a cargo lorry to the shrine beyond Danushkodi and walk the last 2km. The shrine known all over the south commemorates one of the many places associated with the Ramayana a 2nd century BC classic tale of good and evil pitting Hindu against Dravidian cultures from the former's perspective. There is a small statue of indeterminate age housed in a small ephemeral palm thatched temple another site of worship for 2,000 years perhaps. If you miss the last lorry c. 6pm then you're stuck since Danushkodi has no accommodation. In 2003 I was put up by local fisher folk who were up and gone by sunrise, magical for me but for them just another working day.

Since 2010 it has become popular with devotees who come in large numbers, particularly for early morning pujas led by local priests. Two wooden shacks have also appeared selling water, basic refreshments and souvenirs. Prior to that, the spit was mostly deserted.

Yuksom, Sikkim, India

A temporary river shrine with a tent and offerings of food and flowers at Yuksom, Sikkim, is one example of a converted place of worship to the many gods that were integrated into Buddhism as it spread through the Himalayas. Though given that Buddhism has only been established in Sikkim (or at least accepted by the local monarchy) since the 17th century there are undoubtedly many earlier layers of natural religion.

It is a few miles from Khecheopalri Lake, a renowned Buddhist sacred lake, also visited by many Bengali Hindus. The latter has many leeches notwithstanding its altitude, a result of the precipitation and cloud forests. The valleys are steeper and deeper than the western Himalayas, which tends only to have rain occasionally because they are generally too far north for the monsoon whereas Sikkim is fairly close to the wettest places on the planet on the border between Meghalaya and Bangladesh. Winters are milder and only arrive from the west around February.

The traditional Buddhist spiritual landscapes of Nepal and Sikkim are fundamentally different, which reflects the two major understandings and interactions with the environment. The first traditional perspective is that certain places are by their nature holy and all ritual monuments highlight and focus these points of power. This is not empirically provable but understanding arrives through intuition; every mani wall, stupa, water wheel, rock carving in the higher reaches of the Nepalese Himalaya is perfectly placed within the landscape.

Bon and Buddhism, Nepal and Tibet

However while these are associated with Buddhism they have their origins in Bon, the original Himalayan religion about which very little of its early history is known, though it is apparently a formalized shaman system that came into being with the development of sacral kingship, c.1000BC. According to Bon mythology all early kings married goddesses who ascended into heaven on the death of the king. What

survives now is a result of about 1,500 years of mixing with Buddhism, which itself is full of Bon to the extent that the religions are indistinguishable to those untrained in their respective rituals and iconography.

The transfer of loyalty to Bon was not uncontested and the conflict led to the eventual downfall of the Tibetan monarchy in the 12th century; naturally Buddhist sources are heavily biased and it is only under the leadership of the current Dalai Lama has the balance shifted to a more balanced understanding even though certain Bon ritual observances, such as anti-clockwise movement, are uncomfortable to Buddhists. Interestingly the current Chinese leadership supports Bon scholarship though it is unlikely to be for altruistic reasons, given that the 11th Panchen Lama became a political prisoner aged six (possibly the youngest worldwide) in 1995 when he was officially recognised by the Dalai Lama. Neither he nor his parents have been seen since.

The second view is that places are sanctified through their association with a god, mythological person, or saint, in other words they have a history. The former is probably the original world-view of natural religions (the older term 'paganism' has been superseded by 'animism' but is often as derogatory) while the latter has developed with monotheism in the first millennium BCE. Hinduism is mostly historic but has many undercurrents of the latter, the sources of the Ganges being one example. In places such as Rishikesh the two views have become intertwined through positive feedback, there is a wonderful image, from the life of Swami Vivekenanda, of Saddhus by riverside winter campfires driven into contemplative silence when, late at night as the embers die away, their discussions come to the Upanishads.

Charpusan Valley, North West Frontier Province, Pakistan

Christianity and Islam have historic landscapes and a lot in common in the way that they have integrated places of natural religion into their all-devouring exclusive beliefs. Early holy places are the transitional points between religion and mythology. One example from Charpusan Valley, in the Northern Territories of Pakistan, is the shrine (zariat) of Baba Gundi; an early Islamic saint who rode a flood that destroyed a community who refused him hospitality bar one widow who had fed him. A story of vengeance that probably originated from a burst glacial lake within the historic period; there is plenty of evidence in the rock-strewn debris down the valley.

This motif would not be out of place in European Christian hagiography that has many flood similar stories. Below his shrine is a Holy Well with the same type of healing powers that one finds in Ireland; wells in both traditions survived conversion and still played an important part in vernacular observance until recent modernization. Trees with offerings of cloth and coins are also found in both traditions.

Tomboctou², Mali

Even at a literal level there are comparisons. The output (by subject, as distinct from theology) of Gaelic scriptoria is very similar to what is now found in the libraries of Tomboctou, Mali. It could also be argued that the destruction of Gaelic manuscripts by the Protestant English resembles the 2012 destruction of Tomboctou libraries by Al-Queda inspired Ansar Dine and other smaller Magreb based militia in terms of motivation.

Kalash Valleys, North West Frontier Province³, Pakistan

An original spiritual view of the landscape can be found in the rapidly diminishing Kalash communities near Chitral, North West Frontier Province where oak groves, sky burial graveyards and shaman temples with organic paintings are the last surviving relic of an original Himalayan religion.

Unfortunately their numbers are diminishing rapidly due to intense pressure from fundamentalist Sunni clerics and Muslim migrants. It is a continuation of the forced conversion by the Afghani leader, Emir Abdur Rahman Khan, of Kafirstan in 1895-6, who allegedly put knives to people throats and told them they could convert or die. It is now called Nuristan and, ironically, home of some of Taliban's strongest

² As spelled locally

³ Renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, c. 2010. However as the Yarkun valley (Chitral and Drosh districts) is geographically distinct from the Khyber Pass and there are few Pashtun the new name is controversial there.

supporters. The Kalash also suffer from economic discrimination by Muslim merchants; as second class citizens they have no rights. They are, however, allowed to make wine and though this is forbidden they receive some underground support from those Muslims who enjoy a glass or two.

What is Religion?

As a general comment: What is a religion? Who defines what a religion is and what standards are used? The standard definitions mostly imply literacy by where theological interpretations are written down and either debated or imposed by negotiation or war. The reason that people believe any one set of faiths has more to do with history than with the quality of interpretation. Who, for instance, could argue the relative merits an immanent or transcendent God or decide between the Roman, Arian, Donatist or Pelagian interpretations concerning the immanent divinity of God?

In sub-Saharan Africa the cosmic hierarchy is a transcendent God, Male and Female universal power, a plethora of spirits in specific places with particular functions, and a host of ghosts of the recently departed. Another major difference (among many) is that in African mythology death was not final and resurrection the norm. But, and here the mythologies differ, due to a particular event, women are the usual protagonists, the dead stayed dead.

In stark comparison, in oral cultures, such as in Africa, there is no one set of beliefs but a continuum over the centuries as belief and practice are passed down through the generations and modified by geography and technology. There is no one set of theological or spiritual beliefs but variations within a general cosmic view. As a result, wars of religion are almost unknown in these cultures while religious persecution usually has a political motive.

The nature of orally transmitted spiritual belief and religious practice challenge how we define religion.