

BOOK REVIEW

Fernanda Pirie, *Peace and Conflict in Ladakh: The construction of a fragile web of order*. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library, Vol. 13. Leiden, Boston: Brill. 2007

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Fernanda Pirie's *Peace and conflict in Ladakh* is an anthropological monograph about rural life in northernmost India. Her book is based on extensive periods of fieldwork in this part of the Himalayan mountain range, supplemented by historical and comparative research on Tibet where she worked previously. The book is well-written and enjoyable to read. It includes two maps and several colored photographs, as well as a glossary and an index. The main questions Pirie tries to answer in her book are laid out clearly in the introduction: First, what are the Ladakhis' constructed ideas of community and social order? Second, how do the Ladakhis maintain their social order? Third, why do the Ladakhis place interests of their community above their own rights? And fourth, what role does Buddhism play in the maintenance of social order? (1-9)

In chapter two Pirie gives a historical overview of Ladakh, focusing on legal developments in this region from the eighth century onwards. While different systems of governance were imposed on the rural population throughout the centuries, Pirie emphasizes that people in the remote areas of Ladakh have always tried to decide community matters, particularly internal disputes, autonomously from state officials and the Ladakhi kings. Surprisingly, this reservation also concerns the local monasteries and individual Buddhist leaders. Pirie argues that, while Buddhism forms an integral part of Ladakhi culture, it is kept separate from village affairs. She speaks of a "dual system" (28) of secular and religious power and authority, which she continues to explore throughout the book.

In chapter three she introduces her actual fieldsite, a mountain community of two hundred inhabitants, the village of Photoksar. Here the reader learns about the villagers' social institutions such as the two kinds of household units (*khangba* and *khangu*), the village council (*yulpa*), and its agent, the headman (*goba*), and a ranking system called *dralgo*, which manifests itself in the way seats are arranged during any social occasion. The chapter also deals with customary regulations, issues of hierarchy and equality, leadership and autonomy, and ways of social

sanctioning such as shaming (*trelba*). Pirie argues that villagers have a strong antipathy towards individualism. Equality is promoted by the pressures to conform to people's expectations and to downplay personal status and superiority.

Chapter four shows how these concepts are put into practice once conflict arises in the village. By means of several case studies Pirie explores how and by whom disputes are mediated, and she looks into the epistemology of conflict, that is, the emic perspective on what a conflict is and how it should be dealt with. She concludes that disputes between individuals are always viewed as posing "danger to the order of the community requiring resolution and the ceremonial restoration of good relations." (87)

In chapter five Pirie investigates religion, and particularly the spiritual realm, concluding that "neither the moral order of Buddhism nor the realm of the spirits is related to the moral and political order of the village" (90). She summarizes her conclusion by stating that the villagers' ritual practices are often determined by pragmatic concerns, while the moral and ritual content of religious texts as proclaimed by monks serve ethical purposes "which the villagers admire, but do not regard as efficacious to deal with their own troublesome numina" (108). Through a critique of authors who have attributed too much social significance to the moral codes of monastic Buddhism, Pirie argues that the monastic elite and the Ladakhi villagers not only live in different geographical and social worlds, but also in different epistemological worlds.

Chapter six is a description of a ritual called *Losar*, which celebrates the new year. During this ritual established social relations and moral ways of conduct between male and female and between old and young are juxtaposed or become exaggerated, caricatured, or transgressed. According to Pirie, *Losar* triggers conflictual dynamics between the village council (*yulpa*) and the resident monks, between villagers and non-villagers, as well as the villagers' "self-conscious suspicion of modernity and resistance [sic] to change" (112). Driving out the evil spirits of the old year, the village community temporarily suspends "the normal world and its social order" (120). This event, on which Pirie has rich ethnographic data, is interpreted in the tradition of classic symbolic anthropology, namely as a rite of passage where "[t]he festival represents the undoing of the well-established pattern of the village's social and political order as much as it affirms it" (120).

Chapter seven explores what Pirie calls "the sacred social order", echoing Durkheim's concept of the sacred social community. Since there is no word for the

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concept of “order” as such in the local language, she looks at what villagers say when a dispute has come to an end: “It is OK again.” She suggests that the idea behind such utterances is to achieve dispute settlement and not “abstract justice” but still argues that there is an “implicit notion of order underlying such concerns” (125). Pirie states that for the Ladakhis “[t]he social and moral order of the community in Photoksar is, therefore, defined by the notion of the ideal community in which everyone lives harmonious lives. The social is sacred” (128).

Chapter eight is a comparative chapter in which Pirie assesses how neighboring Tibet influenced legal developments in Ladakh. Reviewing historical sources and academic literature on this subject, she comes to the conclusion that, while Tibet and Ladakh do not form “a single, coherent, let alone Buddhist, cultural system” (167), certain cultural patterns resonate, such as “a certain attitude to leadership and centralised judicial control” (169).

In chapter nine Pirie looks at broad political changes currently happening in urban Ladakh, such as the establishment of new administrative and religious bodies for dispute settlement. These also begin to impact on rural areas as factions emerge and new forms of organization and control are introduced. But while “[t]hese new systems are undoubtedly forces for change” she concludes that “the old pattern of deference and distance towards external influences remains” (195).

In her conclusion Pirie summarizes her argument that a sense of order underlies judicial processes in her fieldsite, which becomes manifest in the villagers’ understanding that living together in harmony is the ultimate rationale to which individual interests have to be subordinated. Within this “sacred social space”, as Pirie calls it, Buddhism plays no central role. Not only Buddhist thoughts, but also other external (e.g., administrative) influences are kept separate from this sphere. Despite this resistance, “new instances of the sacred social” are created in the face of increasing globalization and modernization, leading to “a composite political order” (Geertz) on “the local level.” To deal with this contradictory dynamic, Pirie suggests that “[t]he insights of Durkheim and Geertz need to be brought together ... to make sense of the way in which order is constructed and maintained amidst the complex pattern of political, economic and religious forces that characterises contemporary Ladakh” (207).

For me, Pirie’s most intriguing argument, based on her own ethnographic data of the villagers’ ritual practices as described in chapters five and six, is that the villagers have maintained a “secular morality” (105) quite separate from Buddhist

values. In addition to this stimulating suggestion, which casts doubts on seemingly established views on the role of Buddhism in everyday life, the data in these chapters is outstanding because Pirie herself participated in the events she so richly describes, whereas much of her data on dispute settlement is limited to conversations with villagers about such cases. As a woman, she chose not to take part in the all-male *yulpa* meetings, for instance, and when a mediator was called in to settle an argument between members of her host family (79), her distanced description gives rise to the impression that she, in fact, did not personally attend the negotiations. As a result, her analysis of “peace and conflict” gives priority to accounts of how life in Ladakh *should be* ordered. Whenever her informants do tell her how little they listen to the village council and how quarrelsome they in fact are (e.g., 126), Pirie deduces from such statements that villagers must have an underlying “sense of order”, and that their practices and discourses aim to maintain such an “order”. Throughout she privileges normative statements on the importance of harmony and formal acts of reconciliation over individuals’ unresolved and lingering conflicts: in one case, she stops her discussion even though the two individuals who had begun the dividing argument “remained on bad terms”, just because the two households involved claimed to have restored their “good relations” (79, 82). Thus the reader increasingly gets the impression that what Pirie deduces from the villagers’ negative appraisal of conflict is her own “implicit idea of order” (e.g., 125, 186).

If “order” is not a concept her informants talk about nor anything which could be observed as visibly guiding their actions, and if the explicit goal of the villagers’ actions is not abstract justice but to achieve a settlement, as she states herself, what do we gain by calling these processes “the construction of a fragile web of order”? Methodologically, it remains unresolved how one can grasp people’s “implicit idea of order”. Pirie’s further differentiation into social, biological, moral, political, legal, cosmological, and religious “order” adds to its arbitrariness.

Notwithstanding this specific criticism, the book succeeds in providing a thorough, well-structured account of the social organization of rural Ladakh, which also takes account of more regional entanglements. The ethnographic depth is remarkable throughout and gives evidence of Pirie’s intimate knowledge of the area. Her exploration of “secular morality” opens up new ways of assessing the role of Buddhism in law and society, in and beyond Ladakh. For these virtues “Peace and conflict in Ladakh” will be of interest to anthropologists, scholars of law and religion, and everybody interested in the region.

