

ISA INTERNATIONAL GUEST LECTURE

BON PRIESTS OF THE TIBETAN BORDERLANDS: CASE STUDIES IN A VANISHING RITUAL TRADITION FROM NEPAL AND SICHUAN

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The kings of Mustang, in Nepal, are known as devout patrons of the Sakyapa school of Buddhism. What is less well known is that their clan god was a Bonpo divinity, and that for five centuries they maintained a family of Bonpo chaplains to perform domestic and community rituals. The priestly line came to an end in about 1960, to be replaced by Buddhist lamas, but its library has survived largely intact. Thanks to the colophons of some of their texts, as well as occasional mentions in archives from other communities and the accounts of Tibetan travellers, it is possible to reconstruct the extent of this vanished family, while the library itself offers a valuable insight into the religious services they performed for their royal patrons and for the well-being of the kingdom and its subjects. In a few remote communities on the far eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau is another class of priests, called Le'u, representing a form of Bon that is gradually disappearing but that has left a vast literary heritage. In spite of their many differences, a preliminary comparison reveals much in common between these two far distant, non-monastic branches of the Bon religion.



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