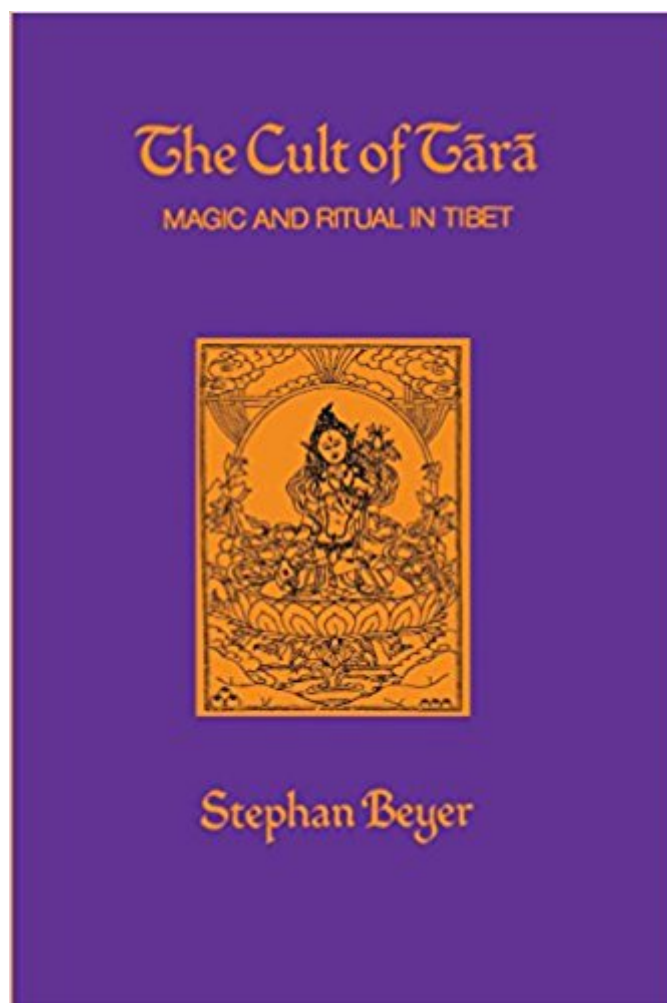


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The Cult Of Tara: Magic And Ritual In Tibet



Synopsis

"The real history of man is the history of religion." The truth of the famous dictum of Max Muller, the father of the History of Religions, is nowhere so obvious as in Tibet. Western students have observed that religion and magic pervade not only the forms of Tibetan art, politics, and society, but also every detail of ordinary human existence. And what is the all-pervading religion of Tibet? The Buddhism of that country has been described to us, of course, but that does not mean the question has been answered. The unique importance of Stephan Beyer's work is that it presents the vital material ignored or slighted by others: the living ritual of Tibetan Buddhists. The reader is made a witness to cultic proceedings through which the author guides him carefully. He does not force one to accept easy explanations nor does he direct one's attention only to aspects that can be counted on to please. He leads one step by step, without omitting anything, through entire rituals, and interprets whenever necessary without being unduly obtrusive. Oftentimes, as in the case of the many hymns to the goddess Tara, the superb translations speak directly to the reader, and it is indeed as if the reader himself were present at the ritual.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is a richly detailed exposition of the major rituals and supporting belief systems of Tibetan Buddhist monastic communities. Beyer uses as his case study the wide-spread devotion to Tara (the Sanskrit form; in Tibetan, Dolma), the (paradoxically) female Bodhisattva who is regarded as one of the special patrons of Tibet. Basic and advanced forms of ritual and meditation are described, and there are attractive line drawings of many of the implements (as well as some

not-so-clear, but interesting, black-and-white photographs). There is an enormous amount of detail about elementary and advanced ritual activities, from those practices known to most lay-people to relatively less-known and complex meditation techniques, very much including the use of permanent objects and material and symbolic offerings. Of course, in a world-view in which the material world is itself an illusion, the differences between the tangible and the symbolic tend to fade away. Beyer's exposition makes clear that the reported association with magic of Vajrayana Buddhism in particular, and the larger categories of Tantric Buddhism and Hinduism in general, is not a complete misrepresentation, but the natural result of a world-view in which magic is a real possibility. In Tibet, at least, the preferred solution has been to try to make sure that those who develop supernatural powers are also indoctrinated with strong ethical teachings; in other words, the specialists in religion. This book is not, as a whole, easy reading, although the introductory chapters should present few obstacles. Beyer is enormously respectful of the religion and those who practice it, but his approach is analytical and, to some extent, critical / historical.

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