



Koen Wellens. *Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderlands: The Premi of Southwest China*

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THIS IS the work that anthropologists of southwest China have been looking forward to. Koen Wellens, a Norwegian anthropologist who spent fifteen years on the study of the Premi, has finally revealed his findings: how ideological relaxation

allows the return of religious beliefs and practices among this small group at the edge of the Himalayas across the provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan. The shift from the Maoist collective to the traditional household, he argues, makes possible the return of local ritual specialists and Tibetan Buddhist monks.

Chapter 1 reviews the history of Muli County in the southwest of Sichuan, and is mainly based on two published works. Muli was depicted as a rather closed “lama kingdom” that suffered encroachment from Tibet and China, which finally incorporated Muli into the PRC. In the state ethnic classification project of the 1950s, the Premi-speaking group in Muli was classified as Tibetan, while their counterparts in the Yunnan side became a distinct ethnic group, the Pumizu.

Chapter 2 introduces the social, economic, and political context of Bustling Township, a pseudonym of a Muli town where the author conducted his major fieldwork. Along with the ideological relaxation, the subsistence farmers of Bustling Township in the post-Mao era also feel marginalized and left behind, and, in turn, recourse to the traditional cosmology, values, and ways of organizing their social life.

Chapter 3 delineates how social life revolves around the house (*dzè*), and is an interesting chapter where analysis of religion finally begins. The Premi house-society is ideologically hearth-oriented, demanding intensive involvement of the local ritual specialists (*anji*) or lay Buddhist monks (*yèma*). It is suggested that this demand also reactivates the training of the two. The kinship varieties in polygamy, polyandry, cross-cousin alliance, and patterns of residence are also analyzed against similar literatures on Tibetans, Chinese, and other related ethnicities.

Chapter 4 continues the depictions of the intricate relation between ritual and the state under the banner of “Premi cosmology.” The anti-religion Maoist ideology did not replace the beliefs involving *anji* or *yèma*. Instead, it merely claimed a place in the Premi cosmology which displays complicated relations between deities, living deities, ritual specialists, monks, and the villagers. Behind the religious revival is the claim of moral authority alternative to the state, which played a functioning role in the religious revival after destroying the religious institutions in the Maoist era.

Chapter 5 brings us to the Premi in Ninglang, Yunnan, the Premi-speaking group that was officially classified as the Pumizu. They were examined by some of the best Chinese-speaking ethnographers in the 1950s and 1960s. Their distinctive ethnic identity provides great incentive for the Pumizu elites to revive the *anji* tradition (called *hangui* on the Yunnan side). However, they have to invite the great *anji* (Nima Anji) from Bustling Township where, paradoxically, the local elites who identify the Premi with the Tibetans regard *anji* as unorthodox practice. The ethnicization of religion renders complicity to both ethnic elites and the state in a time of the politics of difference.

Though the author suggests a logical consequence between de-collectivization and religious revival, he does not reveal how exactly they are related. Nor does he provide many concrete examples of the privatization of risks—apart from a bad harvest, human and livestock diseases (11)—risks that he claims actually led to the reemergence of ritual specialists and monks. The privatization of risks from the community to individual households may be sufficient to activate religious revival, but, as the author rightfully points out, the state’s retreat from the township is “ideological.” It would

have been ideal if he had shown how, along with the decline of state-sponsored communities, ideological relaxation also contributes to the revival of local religions. After all, religion is about “human flourishing” as well as about transcendence.

This monograph fills in the ethnographic gap of English-speaking anthropology on the Tibetan-Yi corridor. The absence of English data on this part of the world is so challenging that Wellens has little choice than to present the Premi in a static way. Nevertheless, the book is full of insightful observations that only intensive fieldwork can render. It is therefore a very precious contribution at a time when labor-intensive, traditional ethnography has been almost abandoned, the rigor of traditional fieldwork is being lost, and detailed ethnography about southwest China remains a very scarce commodity.

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