



ISA INTERNATIONAL GUEST LECTURE

Oral and Festival Traditions of Western Tibet: A first look at some counting and alphabet songs from Spiti

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(Solothurn – Berne)

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Centre for Studies in Asian Cultures and Social Anthropology, Seminar room
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Wedding songs and rituals, folk songs, narrative forms of oral traditions as well as folk oratories (as performed by trance-mediums and speech-makers) constitute the main focus of the FWF research project 'Oral and Festival Traditions of Western Tibet: Processes of Cultural Memory and Renewal'. These oral and related festival traditions are characterised historically by reciprocal influences and transitional processes between local village communities and dominant royal, aristocratic and religious elites. Therefore, political and socio-economic factors and, with regard to particular aspects, also conflict-laden processes of cultural memory and renewal constitute central features of the conceptual framework of this project.

In Spiti and upper Kinnaur a special type of songs, here called 'counting and alphabet songs', plays a prominent role. The songs in question are considered especially auspicious by the local village population, who sing them at wedding celebrations or at New Year and other important festivals. This paper investigates into the characteristic features of this type of songs and works out constituting elements of oral tradition in their structure and content.

Veronika Hein (lic.-phil.) has carried out extensive field research since the mid-1990s among Tibetan-speaking communities in Spiti and upper Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh, India). Between 2001 and 2004 she acted as principal investigator in the FWF research project 'Documentation of oral traditions in Spiti and upper Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, India' (director: Dr. Dietrich Schüller, Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences). A substantial corpus of audio recordings of language and various forms of oral traditions (folk songs, legends, oratories, epic tales) bear witness to her work.

Her dissertation project is entitled 'A Linguistic Description of the Tibetan Dialect of Tabo (Spiti)', Institute for Linguistics, Berne University (supervisor: em. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Roland Bielmeier).

She is the author of several scholarly papers on linguistic topics (Western Tibetan dialects) and on oral traditions (folk songs of Western Tibet). She is also a contributor to the 'Comparative Dictionary of Tibetan Dialects', eds. R. Bielmeier, F. Haller et al., Berne (in preparation).