

Dr Amy Lee Heller, Institute for Science of Religion, University of Bern

Research Project Report : Birds and Deer in Tibet and the Himalayas: from ancient Tibetan rituals and archaeology to Sustainable Development" (2023)

Dates of research permit in Sagarmatha National Park : May 6th to May 18th, 2023

Visit to Gokarna Forest Reserve: May 22, 2023

This brief observation period in May 2023 in Nepal is part of a long-term research project studying the cultural significance of birds and deer from pre-history to present day among populations of the Tibetan plateau and the Himalayas. This project explores from an art-historical and historical perspective how people on the Tibetan plateau dealt with wildlife from the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th century) to the present. The attitudes towards birds and deer documented in this early period of Tibetan history subsequently led, through the influence of the Bon religion and Buddhism, to a consistent, sustainable approach to the treatment of wildlife, which continues to influence animal welfare movements in Tibet and the Himalayas today. This project thus contributes to the University of Bern's priority theme of "Sustainability". This project benefits from support by funds from the "David Snellgrove and Tadeusz Skorupski" Fund of the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Tring (UK), generously made available to the Institute for Science of Religion, University of Bern.

1. Background of the research project

Stemming from frequent representations of birds and deer among archaeological artefacts, rock carvings and their descriptions in ancient Tibetan literary narratives, it is apparent that birds and deer are considered to be auspicious creatures. By analogy, in ancient times, it was believed that good fortune will come to the beholder of the animal /bird when represented on a vessel or if a fabric, to the wearer of a garment. This explains their frequent representations in archaeological artefacts of the Tibetan Empire. In the ancient Tibetan rituals, there are narratives where birds carry the body of the deceased to a celestial paradise thus birds are understood to be a vector of communication between the human realm on earth and the vast skies where birds fly are believed to be the sacred realm of the divine. The sacred character of deer is also well documented. Due to their antlers which are shed and grow anew each year, deer are believed to represent the capacities of perpetual renewal of vitality, by analogy, this renewal of vitality leads to immortality and rebirth. Prior to the prevalence of Buddhism, burial in tombs was practiced by communities in ancient Tibet and the Himalayas (notably in Mustang). Antlers have been documented among the funerary

offerings excavated from ancient Tibetan tombs in Qinghai province (PRC). While musk deer lack antlers, instead the male musk deer are recognizable due to the gradual growth of two long canines, protruding from their upper jaw. This distinctive feature is complemented by the presence of the musk pod on the abdomen of the male, renowned for use in perfumes and medicines. Tibetan and Himalayan musk has been regarded as a precious ingredient in medical preparations since antiquity, notably Arab historical sources since the 9th century document trade of Tibetan musk. The Himalayan and Tibetan musk considered to be the best quality musk due to the pure grasses consumed as food by the musk deer, as well as the techniques of preparation of the musk for use in medicinal preparations. Thus there is ample documentation that birds, deer and musk deer are regarded as auspicious and beneficial in Tibet and among Tibetan language communities in the Nepal Himalayas, notably in Dolpo and the Sherpa populations who live in the vicinity of the Sagarmatha National Park.

The attitudes towards birds, deer and musk deer documented in the early periods of Tibetan and Himalayan history subsequently led, through the influence of the Bon religion and Tibetan Buddhism which spread in Tibet and numerous communities in the Nepal Himalayas, to the development of other beliefs. Certain birds are renowned in ritual narratives as particularly auspicious due to specific factors such as the colors of their plumage, i.e. turquoise or green feathers at the neck. Also regarded as auspicious are predictable aspects of their behavior such as “the song of x bird, a sign that spring has come”. The Buddhist appreciation of the auspicious qualities of deer is such that the Buddha, at the moment of his Enlightenment, is seated in the deer park, which is renowned as a peaceful place where deer roam. The narratives of the Buddha life-story all include this important moment of Enlightenment associated with the peaceful deer. The deer in the park reside serenely, for within the park precincts, they are protected from hunters and from predators. In addition to the Indian texts of the biography of the Buddha, later Sherpa and Tibetan literary and ritual traditions emphasize commemorations of individual teachers who lived in various periods, such as Padmasambhava (8th century) and Milarepa (11th century), both of whom are associated with ritual dances performed outdoors. Padmasambhava has animal and bird head attendants among his entourage of dancers, while a famous episode of the Milarepa life-story is the protection of deer. Milarepa encouraged a hunter to renounce hunting, thus he is celebrated in a “deer dance” in some monasteries. These are seasonal gatherings, bringing together a crowded assembly in a monastery courtyard to attend dance performances. In the Sherpa community which reside within the Sagarmatha National Park, since the late 19th century, the Mani Rimdu festival takes place as an outdoor series of 15 ritual dances, notably at Thami and Tengboche monasteries. The belief that

birds are sacred resulted in the inclusion of performers wearing raven and owl bird masks in Mani Rimdu while in Buddhist monasteries following other ritual traditions, the “master of ceremonies” often wears a stag mask with prominent antlers to lead the outdoor rituals and dances.

2. Research protocol

From May 6 until May 8th, we drove from Kathmandu to Pfaflu, then Bupsa where May 9th, we started hiking towards Monjo, our first destination inside the park. We continued to Namche Bazaar, reaching Phortse Tanga on 11 May where we observed the first musk deer. We pursued hiking to Phortse and here made our inquiries with three local monks and two villagers. We did daily hikes for observation at dawn and dusk from May 11 to May 14 when we left for Tashinga, due to the daily visit since one week of a musk deer beside the local lodge. We pursued the daily observations at dawn and dusk in Tashinga, notably visiting the local plant and tree nursery. Both Tashinga and Phortse have been reforested with good results in terms of attracting wildlife and birds.

May 16th we hiked from Tashinga to Namche Bazaar, then May 17th to Ghat, May 18th to Surke, then May 19th to Paiya where we were able to hike to a road. After one night in Pfaflu, we reached Kathmandu on May 20th.

May 22nd we visited the Gokarna Golf which is the former royal hunting reserve. Here we were requested to arrive in late afternoon, after most golfers had stopped. We were able to observe a herd of about 50 does and two fawns, one of which was 1 week old according to the local guide. There were two stags who were roaming separately from the herd of does and fawns.

3. Results of inquiries and observation

As a complement to the religious aspects of consideration of birds and deer, numerous communities in the Nepal Himalayas and in Tibet have developed specific strategies to promote a consistent, sustainable approach to the treatment of wildlife and respect for their habitat. This respectful attitude includes increased prominence of animal welfare movements in Tibet and the Himalayas today. In the Sagarmatha National Park, as protocol for the park, the wildlife protection policies which forbid hunting are in vigor since the creation of the park in 1976, and included in the protocol of the inscription as a World Heritage Site since 1979: “The property hosts over 20 villages with over 6000 Sherpas who have inhabited the region for the last four centuries. Continuing their traditional practice of cultural and religion including the restriction of animal hunting and slaughtering, and reverence of

all living beings. These practices combined with indigenous natural resource management practices, have been major contributing factors to the successful conservation of the Sagarmatha National Park” .

In the interviews conducted among monks and laypeople, consistently each individual insisted upon the need to completely respect the prohibition of hunting of musk deer and birds whose protection was specified as legal obligation and appropriate religious practice, notably the Danphe, the National bird of Nepal. In Phortse village we saw several Danphe, both male and female, scratching the ground of certain fields unimpeded by villagers or any stray animals.

In Phortse, it was possible to interview three monks about bird and deer rituals in the past and current practices in the monasteries; it was also possible to interview three laymen and one lay woman. There are at present no rituals similar to the ancient Tibetan ritual g.yang ‘gug, attracting good fortune, in which deer hoof had formerly been used in the ritual. There are no deer or bird ritual dances performed at present. The monks considered that the musk deer shows the good fortune which is to be maintained by the community.

The Tibetan language term for the musk deer is “gla”, pronounced “la”. This term is virtually a homonym of the Tibetan term for deity “lha”, pronounced “la”. One interviewee explained that it was obvious that the Tibetan name of the musk deer indicated its “holy” sacred status. This remark was made in discussion with three other Sherpa people, all agreed that the musk deer is auspicious and that the very name of the musk deer in Sherpa/Tibetan language was most appropriate. The others present remarked that in spring, the musk deer eat bark of pine trees, some flowers of white rhododendron trees, and the “old beard” lichen. In summer, the musk deer eat the buckwheat in the farmers’ fields and everyone is happy, it is a good omen to share the crop with the musk deer. On the contrary, if mountain goats come towards the fields of buckwheat, they are chased away. One informant stated that snow leopards don’t come down to eat the musk deer cubs and the spotted leopard doesn’t come to the high Himalayas, thus the musk deer cubs are safe from such predators. In winter, the snow leopards do approach the villages as food gets scarce for them, however this prompts the musk deer to go even closer to the habitations. In winter, they easily enter the “cattle bins” where people put dry leaves for the cattle during winter. The musk deer easily sleep on those dry leaves. In summer the musk deer remain in the forests.

Upon inquiry, it was clear that the medicinal properties of musk were known to the villagers as “ancient tradition”. They spontaneously explained that local musk was no longer in use by traditional

Tibetan medical doctors “amchi”. Although previously there was use of musk in medicinal preparations, this is now prohibited and the prohibition is respected. The prohibition of killing musk deer inside the park and the buffer zone means that local musk is not available, instead Indian musk or Chinese musk may be purchased.

One informant described that in former times, there were healing rituals where a musk deer leg and hoof was burned, however this practice is now stopped; instead a pig leg and hoof is substituted.

Encouraging the participation of the villagers in the ecological movement in terms of conservation of musk deer and danphe, blood pheasant etc, this is one of the results of the local committees and strong commitment among the villagers; it represents a complement to the traditional livelihood of herding and farming where hunting was infrequent due to religious stipulations. Even farming now is slowly changing from barley and buckwheat to include more vegetables. The degree to which the musk deer are cognizant of protected status is such that they do not avoid villages. The first deer observed was at dawn, visiting a mani wall in Phortse Tanga, near the River Resort. The deer quietly roamed towards the resort and the mani wall, where it tranquilly ate the lichen “Old Man’s Beard” growing in abundance on several trees and shrubs near the mani wall. Further observation nearby led to deer droppings and trees where certain portions of bark had been consumed by the deer. During the following days, several deer of different gender and ages were observed, at least one female adult deer, two young deer (without tusks, their age too young to exhibit sexual differentiation and three different male adult deer.

Acknowledgements:

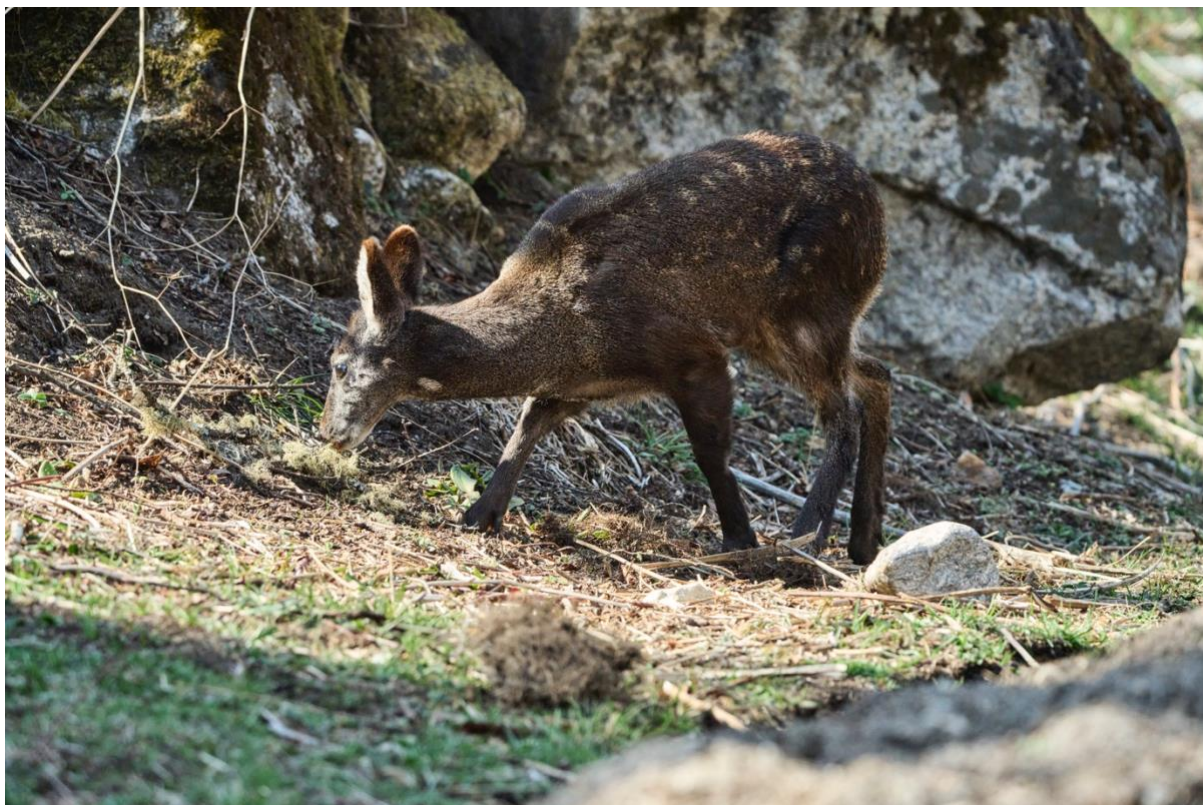
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Photography:

In Phortse village, and Phortse Tanga, these photos document the observation of musk deer. In addition, in Phortse village, it was possible observe many birds, as well as in Tashinga. All photography @ Luigi Fieni, except where otherwise indicated.



Blood pheasants, (*Ithaginis Cruentus*), also known as Blood Partridge
Phortse village, 12.05.2023



Young musk deer, Phortse Village, 12.05.2023



Adult male musk deer, Phortse village, 12.05.2023

Adult male eating rhododendron flowers, Phortse village, 12.05.2023



Female (left) and Male (right) Danphe also known as Himalayan Monal (Lophophorus impejanus), Phortse village, 12.05.2023



GOKARNA FOREST RESERVE / KATHMANDU

Herd of Does with two young fawns, Gokarna, 22.05.2023, photograph by Chamba Ongdi.

