



Mountains in the Religions of South and Southeast Asia: Place, Culture, and Power

4th SSEASR Conference, Thimphu, Kingdom of Bhutan

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South and Southeast Asian Association for the Study of Culture and Religion (SSEASR)

hosted and co-organised by

Royal University of Bhutan

Institute of Language and Culture Studies, Thimphu, Kingdom of Bhutan

Mountains are associated with the central values, practices, beliefs, and identities of religious cultures and traditions throughout the world. The physical and symbolic geography of mountains has inspired people for millennia with feelings of awe and wonder, as well as of fear and trepidation. In South and Southeast Asia, these experiences have sparked creativity in the realms of both religious discourse and practice. Mountains are perceived and revered in sacred texts, rituals, and practices as markers of both the transcendence and immanence of spiritual power: they are identified as gods or the abodes of gods; they serve as temples or places of worship; they house the ancestors and the dead; and they are sources of inspiration, cultural pride, and local and national identity. As links between nature and culture, mountains occupy a prominent place in the history of the region.

The sacredness of mountains is believed to manifest in two principal ways: mountains embody religious power and are sites for its manifestation. In the first instance, specific peaks are singled out by particular cultures and traditions as embodiments of special sanctity: these sacred mountains have well-established networks of myths, beliefs, values and practices such as pilgrimage, meditation, and sacrifice (e.g. the Himalayas). Mt. Everest is considered the residence of Miolangsangma, the goddess of good fortune; as a result, indigenous peoples have banned the killing of animals (snow leopard, yak, etc) that reside in the higher elevations of the Himalayan zone. In the second instance, mountains that are not revered as embodiments of religious power may nevertheless be the locations of specific religious sites. These sites are subject to reinterpretation and they can become locations of cultural negotiation and conflict. In East Timor, for example, sacred caves, which were once central to local religions, are now linked to the Catholic Church and reinterpreted through a new religious lens. The Cordillera region in the Philippines, which encompasses most of the mountain range of Luzon, provides another instance of partial and selective sacrality. The entire mountain is not a symbol of reverence but its high terrain terraces are believed to be places that sustain life, the environment, and agriculture through ritual and religious practice.

Beliefs about the sacrality of specific mountains often reflect the coexistence of different religious traditions. Some Southeast Asian cultures believe that the ancestral spirits of mountains descended from the mountains in the spring in order to transform into gods of the rice fields; they would then return to the mountains from fall to winter and were once again worshipped as mountain gods. Another example is the peak of Mount Kailasa (in the Tibetan plateau), which is the pagoda palace of Demchog in Tibetan Buddhism and the abode of Siva in Hinduism. In Indonesia, many Balinese believe that there is an inseparable association between the Hindu temple and the mountain, but at the same time, they may continue to practice a form of pre-Hindu worship.

Bhutan is a country of mountains, not only because mountains occupy almost 80% of the country, but also because throughout history, the life, culture and religion of the Bhutanese people have been inseparably related to mountains. Hence, the **Royal University of Bhutan** and **the Institute of Language and Culture Studies**, Thimphu are our natural hosts.

The Conference intends to nurture the highest forms of scholarly dialogue among scholars from all parts of **South and Southeast Asia but scholars from all over the world are equally welcome**. This 4th SSEASR Conference which has been also declared as **an IAHR Regional Conference** for the year 2011. Session and paper proposals dealing with the study of mountains, religion, and culture through various academic disciplines are invited. The papers can be submitted on the following suggested sub-themes (**but not limited to these**):

- Rituals and Symbols of Sacred Mountains in South Asia
- Rituals and Symbols of Sacred Mountains in Southeast Asia
- The Topography, Geography of Religions in South and Southeast Asia
- Mountains, Gender, and Power
- Mountain People, Hill Tribes and their Belief Systems: Ethnicity and World Views
- The Himalayas: A Cradle of Religion
- The Overland Silk Route: Interaction of Trade and Religion
- The Representation of Mountains in Global Mediascapes
- Religious Arts, Performances, and Literatures of Mountain Cultures
- Mountains as Iconic and Marginalized Spaces
- Methodology and Theory in the study of Mountain Religions
- Mountains in Cognition and Cosmology
- The Religious Imagination and Imaginaries of Mountains
- Mountains, Displacement, and Transnational Communities
- Mountains as Religious Sites of Negotiation and Conflict
- Mountains and the Ethics of Globalisation, Development, and Environmental Protection
- Conservation, Preservation, and the Politics of Mountain Sites
- Tourism, Historical and Cultural Practice of Pilgrimage and the Politics of Heritage

Other papers are also welcomed covering the study of culture and religion in the region. The requisite visa fee for foreigners visiting Bhutan is likely to be waived for those scholars who would receive the paper's acceptance letter from us.

Note:
The **SSEASR** operates under the policies and principles of the parent body The International Association for the History of Religions (**IAHR**), which seeks to promote the activities of all scholars and affiliates that contribute to the historical, social, and comparative study of religion. As such, the IAHR is the preeminent international forum for the critical, analytical and cross-cultural study of religion, past and present. The IAHR is not a forum for confessional, apologetical, or other similar concerns."

Some pre and post-conference tours inside Bhutan are being designed for visiting scholars. Details regarding the conference accommodation, and the mode of payment of the registration fees, excursion tours, etc. will be announced very soon. For details, please visit the website www.sseasr.org or email us at BhutanSSEASR@hotmail.com

Important Deadlines

Registration of Interest:	February 15, 2011
Early Registration Payment:	April 15, 2011
Last Submission of Abstract:	May 15, 2011

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