

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION ON THE COMPLEX CULTURE OF BUDDHISM AT THE AJAṆṬĀ CAVES

Tour guides are the dilettantes of memory, scholars its virtuosi. Within this dissertation, I have reviewed what is required of the would-be virtuoso of Ajaṇṭā's past: analytic technique combined with a sensitivity to the site's own temperamental data. My attempt to realize this ideal has been a layered affair. I began with a prolegomenon which set forth historical, methodological, and textual bases for any future study of the community associated with Ajaṇṭā's realization. Every argument within this prolegomenon recoiled from its own assertions. Spink's relative chronology was accepted while his absolute was rejected; the *Daśakumāracarita* was used strategically as a framing story while being undermined by my suspicion of its fictive nature; Schopen's valorization of archaeological evidence was accepted within a context which argued that acceptance is not belief, and that archaeological evidence is no less ideological than textual; the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya* was presented as a privileged source for the reconstruction of religiosity at Ajaṇṭā, though we can never be certain that this text as such was known to the site. Even my summary here is playing a double game, presenting work I myself have done in the passive voice. Perhaps discretion is the better part of virtuosity.

The dissertation's second half played a double game as well, though here with the constitutional symbols of Buddhism rather than the site itself. The attempt to situate a saṅgha at Ajaṇṭā in terms of the classically Buddhist indices of community formation -- the demarcation of *sīmā* boundaries or stipulations within the vinaya on monastic decoration -

- stalled for the lack of positive evidence with which to make such determinations. A more contemporary approach, treating saṅgha formation in terms of exchange relationships, exploded the notion of saṅgha, rendering it a null analytic category. The notion of the Dharma of Ajaṅṭā's community was similarly nebulous, forcing me to circumscribe the scope of my investigation to seek whether we could characterize Ajaṅṭā's *Śākyabhikṣus* and *Śākya-upāsakas* as Hīnayānists or Mahāyānists. I proposed that an answer to this question does not clarify anything about the site so much as it does our own prejudices concerning the history of Buddhism in India. The chapter on Buddha made this point even clearer, demonstrating that the scholarly differentiation between the Buddha as superhuman and as supermundane offers little assistance for the investigation of the Buddha at Ajaṅṭā. There, the "superhuman Buddha" was effective insofar as he acted in a manner supermundane, and the "supermundane Buddha" was effective insofar as he interacted within the human sphere.

Tour guides are the dilettantes of memory, scholars its virtuosi. In the normative economy of recollection, the scholar sets the terms of the discourse, while tour guides are expected to disseminate those terms. It would seem, however, that even virtuosi play the tour guide game . . . and necessarily so, since to tell what we know about a site like Ajaṅṭā might require that we say nothing at all. This observation brings me back to the title of this dissertation, and the title of this final chapter. What was, is, or might be the complex culture of Buddhism at the Ajaṅṭā caves? After the dissertation's first half, we can no longer be certain what "the Ajaṅṭā caves" signifies. Following the dissertation's second half, "Buddhism" is even less clear. What, then, might I conclude about the "complex culture" that I expected to find at the site? Having problematized my other points of entry beyond ready recognition, let us turn to the phrase "complex culture," since, after all, "culture" is the object of my title.

As a critical discipline, culture studies' origin is often traced to a single vastly important definition of 'culture' published in 1871 by E. B. Tylor on the first page of his

Primitive Culture:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

As historian of culture Christopher Herbert rightly observes, "the crux of this definition, the locus of both its radical modernity and (if this is not redundant) its inescapable instability, lies in the phrase 'complex whole,' which at first glance seems precisely to banish all instability."¹

The definition of culture as a complex whole presented in Tylor's work had its first great redactor in the person of Marcel Mauss. A sociologist and anthropologist, Mauss began his classic *The Gift* with a statement of his interest in unraveling social phenomena that "contain all the threads of which the social fabric is composed."² Mauss's work commenced with an image of the "social fabric," a 'weave,' suggesting society as a historically textured but unchanging construct. By the finale, however, this textile metaphor was set aside in favor of the more dynamic images of "systems in motion" and "active forces submerged in their environments."³ For Mauss, the study of society, involved "something more than a set of themes, more than institutional elements, more than institutions, more even than systems of institutions divisible into legal, economic, religious and other parts."⁴ The sociologist and anthropologist was instead "concerned with 'wholes',

¹ Christopher Herbert. *Culture and Anomie: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 4.

² Marcel Mauss. *The Gift*. Trans. by Ian Cunnison. (New York: Norton, 1967): 1.

³ Mauss. *The Gift*, 78.

⁴ Mauss. *The Gift*, 77.

with systems in their entirety," for only by considering a society or culture within the whole is one able to see its essence, its operations and its living aspects.⁵

To accomplish this task, Mauss recommends that scholars see society "as an engineer sees masses and systems."⁶ When making this recommendation Mauss likely had as his model the study of thermodynamic systems, which understands its objects of analysis to be closed orders, either at equilibrium or close to and advancing towards that static state. This paradigm allows for a certain simple elegance to the consideration of a complex domain. The social world can then be calculated as the sum of a complex of variant and invariant elements and their mutual relationships. It can be studied and understood 'mathematically,' using a 'Calculus-of-Sociology' whose differential equations track the mutual influence of individual variables in flux.

Even if this equilibrium model was not precisely what Mauss had in mind, however, the history of post-Maussian sociology and anthropology as told by Christopher Herbert suggests that such was his legacy. According to Herbert, it has become almost a "self-evident truth" that culture is a system "each factor of which is in some sense a corollary of, consubstantial with, implied by, immanent in, all the others."⁷ Historically, scholars have fallen into two camps vis-à-vis cultural systematics: the relativists and the positivists. Cultural relativists treat cultures as closed systems of meanings. Here, cultures are webs of significance whose constituent signs are fully interpretable, but whose "values are ascertainable only as functions of the wholes within which they come into being."⁸ Positivist scholars, like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, seek culture as a matter of

⁵ Mauss. *The Gift*, 77.

⁶ Mauss. *The Gift*, 78.

⁷ Herbert. *Culture and Anomie*, 5.

⁸ Herbert. *Culture and Anomie*, 8.

"concrete, observable facts,"⁹ rather than in the systemic interrelationships that link a people's values into a discernable whole. For these positivists, culture is not an imagined web of relationships binding facts; culture is either a thing itself, suitable for empirical examination, or nothing at all. The intellectual sparring between these two camps is fascinating, and is summarized in Herbert's monograph. What is important for us to recognize is that for both the relativists and positivists, culture is said to be 'complex' as a function of the sheer multitude of factors that coexist within its whole. For instance, Tylor sees culture as the unification of social knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, and custom; Mauss too enumerates the social phenomena within his whole, which include the "legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological, and so on."¹⁰ Moreover, cultural relativists and positivists alike understand such a complex abundance of cultural/social factors to comprise a 'whole' because both understand the system of values these define to be closed and at equilibrium. For the relativists, cultural meaning is a function of the totality of all cultural factors, and can never exceed that totality. For the positivists, meaning is a function of empirical facts, and has value only insofar as it corresponds to those facts, again without excess. In both cases, total systemic entropy is ideally fixed.

As Herbert indicates, current critiques of culture treat this concept as "infested with logical incoherence,"¹¹ for both the relativist and positivist approaches tend towards infinite regress under direct analysis of their presuppositions. The trouble is, in short, that cultural meaning is not a closed system, either internally or externally. That is, meaning is not solely a function of an integral whole or empirical facts, but transcends closed systemic boundaries; the whole can never account for all possible meaning, and cannot be truly

⁹ Herbert. *Culture and Anomie*, 10.

¹⁰ Mauss. *The Gift*, 76-77.

¹¹ Herbert. *Culture and Anomie*, 21.

whole. This is a fuzzy way of restating Gödel's proposition that "given *any* consistent set of arithmetical axioms, there are true arithmetical statements that cannot be derived from the set."¹²

Why, then, have I titled this chapter and, indeed, the dissertation in such a manner as to suggest one can find a Buddhist culture, a complex whole, at Ajaṅṭā? The answer lies in the interstices between the scholar's silent role as a virtuoso of memory and his inevitable chatter as a tour guide. In the recovery of meaning we produce meaning anew: meaning whose significance lies in its ability to bring life to the slide-show; meaning whose truth lies in the slides themselves. *Mahāyāna*, *sīmā*, *lokottara Buddha* these are the Buddhists' own measures of their tradition, italicized for emphasis, brought to bear, abandoned. And this is how one finds a complex culture of Buddhism at Ajaṅṭā: neither at Ajaṅṭā itself, nor within Buddhists' own textual guides to symbolic values, but in the present moment's creation of a possible past.

This point lay beneath my discussion of Schopen's "Archaeology of Religion." Within that chapter I suggested that symbolic values should be understood according to the Peircean idiom as tripartite: as "signs" comprised of the sign itself, the object, and the interpretant. In the context of that discussion I observed that by treating archaeological data as Peircean signs, the 'symbolic values' indicated by such evidence will be understood to be complex and irreducible, self-referential and othered, fluid and evolutionary. Within the present context, a Peircean understanding of 'symbolic values' allows for a complex culture of Buddhism at the Ajaṅṭā caves that avoids the positivist and relativist positions described by Herbert. One can treat 'cultural values' as forming a complex whole insofar one treats them as adaptive; adaptivity is precisely that quality which enables a system of meaning to remain complex and whole while it develops within a dynamic progression of

¹² Ernest Nagel and James Roy Newman. *Gödel's Proof*. (New York: New York University Press, 1958): 58-9.

discursive relationships.

Using the Peircean sign as a model, one can understand the culture of Buddhism at Ajaṅṭā to have been 'complex' because its potential for meaning has always exceeded apparent systemic limits. One can understand the complex culture of Buddhism at Ajaṅṭā to have been 'whole' because signs, in their material aspect, limit their excess of meaning, even if this materiality cannot ultimately delimit or determine meaning. One can understand the complex cultural whole of Buddhism at Ajaṅṭā to have been 'adaptive' because the Peircean sign's self-definition incorporates self-transformation: this is a function of the necessary inclusion of an interpretant to bring together sign and object. We rely upon evidence from Ajaṅṭā for the recovery of meanings of the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha "local" to Ajaṅṭā; yet this evidence is meaningful only insofar the meanings it holds *in potentia* transgress Ajaṅṭā's local cultural boundaries, become incorporated into alien systems of meaning -- our own -- and displace other, established meanings, which then become evolutionary potential for future interpretation by future interpretants. Seek a complex culture of Buddhism at the Ajaṅṭā caves and you shall find . . . but do not look too closely!

Culture is a complex whole insofar as its elements are diverse and linked; it is a complex adaptive whole insofar as the symbolic values which comprise it are fluid, open to reinterpretation and reintegration. Such evolution doubtless went on at Ajaṅṭā. But the significance of Ajaṅṭā's local Buddhism continues to evolve as the symbolic values associated with Ajaṅṭā and Buddhism alike evolve within the free-flow of academic discourse.

APPENDICES