Dr. Sam van Schaik is a renowned scholar on old Tibetan manuscripts, paleography, and early Tibetan Buddhism and his book has been a long-expected contribution to the topic of Buddhist practical rituals or magic at least since he first mentioned it on his blog in 2009, or later in the Aris lecture in Oxford in 2018, and in his paper at a conference in Hamburg in 2019.

In a preface, introduction, and five chapters, the author focuses first on the definition of magic and magic from a cross-cultural perspective and later on the Buddhist context. The preface interestingly reflects the differences between books about magic and books of magic, declaring that this work is a book about a book of magic (van Schaik 2020, ix). In fact, as the reader will see, van Schaik focuses on a far wider topic than the single book of spells from Dunhuang which probably became his inspiration for writing about Buddhist magic. Actually, van Schaik’s book ends with the translation of the spell book and starts with quite a wide analysis of magic, which is striking at least in the current context, where general theories of magic seem to be missing.

In the introduction, van Schaik argues that magic, whatever it might be, has always been present in Buddhist sources and cultures but was often underestimated by observers and considered to be local or folk tradition added to “pure” Buddhism (van Schaik 2020, p. 4).

In the first chapter, van Schaik suggests that Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblance might be a key to understanding the term magic (van Schaik 2020, p. 17). This leads to a comparison of manuscripts from different cultures and epochs labelled as magic—i.e., Atharaveda, Shuihudi bamboo slips, Akkadian tablets from the library of Ashurbanipal, Greco Egyptian papyri, Cairo Genizah, and European grimoires—to get a working definition of Buddhist magic based on the worldly ends of selected rituals (i.e., without focusing on merits or awakening), the direct relationship between ritual and result, and the inclination to collect rituals in a books of spells (van Schaik 2020, p. 39).

The second chapter is focused on magic on the Silk road (which was, in the author’s opinion, crucial for the spread of Buddhism), including the Bower manuscript (van Schaik 2020, pp. 52–55). The role of Sanskrit along the Silk Road and in magical literature, as described by van Schaik, is quite remarkable (van Schaik 2020, pp. 58–61), as is the role of magic in the spread of Buddhism or the relationship of smaller monasteries with local communities.

The third chapter deals with sources of magic in Mahayana sutras. Remarks on weather control and amulets are especially important for further links to currently practiced rituals (van Schaik 2020, p. 73 and p. 78). Apart from that, van Schaik’s remarks on differentiation and the relationship between magic and tantras (van Schaik 2020, p. 80 and further) seem to answer a question which may trouble the reader from the beginning of the book. This chapter ends with sections on magic, violence, and Buddhist ethics.

The fourth chapter provides a brief analysis of the question of who Bikkru Pradnya Praba, the author of the translated spell book, might have been. This reflection is later widened to encompass southeast Asian and Hima-
layan practitioners of magic before returning to Bikkru Pradnya Praba (van Schaik 2020, p. 105). There follows a quite interesting and unexpected interlude focused on the translation of Tibetan terms for supernatural beings, in which van Schaik proposes translating them according to their function (van Schaik 2020, p. 109). The following subchapter on materia magica is, in my opinion, one of the highlights of the book. The author’s remarks on divination using reflexive surfaces seem especially important (van Schaik 2020, p. 124). In van Schaik’s multiple quotations those from the work of Czech Tibetologist Daniel Berounský (2015) might be interesting for Czech readers.

In the fifth chapter, van Schaik moves on to arguably the most substantial topic of his work, which is the book of spells from Dunhuang kept in the British Library (IOL Tib J 401) called Big kru prad nya pra ba’i no phyi ka, i.e., *The ritual collection of Bikkru Pradnya Praba*, as van Schaik translates it. After a brief introduction, each of the nine sections of the spell book is first commented and then translated. Many links to further literature are provided in the commentary and notes on spellings and terms in the translation. As the Tibetan text is not an easy read, a transliteration would be a welcome enrichment of the book.

The afterword is short and focused mostly on similarities between traditions and primarily between rituals, and indications that some rituals might be unexpectedly old and widespread across various cultures and that it is a mistake to consider magic as a kind of non-Buddhist practice.

Readers of this review will probably agree that magic is an anthropological universality but not an easy one to analyze. A pedant might suggest that van Schaik’s book gives the impression of a description of many casual rituals, links, and curiosities with no exactly defined methodological frame or concluding analysis apart from the emphasis on the universality of magic, its (un)surprising acceptability among Buddhists, and the striking similarity of some practices among many cultures and periods. Apart from that, repetitive changes of the scale of his analysis might be somehow confusing for the reader and give a sense of some tension. On the one hand, this feeling may be caused by van Schaik’s Wittgensteinian standpoint (van Schaik 2020, p. 8); on the other, the cause might be the very nature of magic, which is, as Durkheim famously remarked (Durkheim 1915, pp. 44–45), more individual, practical, and non-systematic than religion, and hence more difficult to analyze. Furthermore, it seems that scholars on magic are somehow incarcerated in Frazer’s concepts (Frazer 1890, pp. 9–10) and it is not easy to get away from them.

But van Schaik’s move from Frazer and Durkheim to Wittgenstein seems a bit too swift and some more detailed anthropological comments on magic and ritual would be beneficial. All these problems make it easy for possible critics like me to try old tricks comparable to Diogenes attacking Plato’s definition of man (Diogenes Laertios 1915, p. 231) without being able to suggest another solution. Moreover, I would like to remark that I am not very sure why van Schaik uses the term “enchantment” in the title of the book. To the reader, the concept of disenchantment might be familiar from Max Weber; therefore, one might search for some interplay between the disenchantment expected by “modern” society and the real, strong presence of magic, i.e., enchantment or re-enchantment, to get back to Ernest Gellner. However, in his book van Schaik uses the term enchantment only rarely (e.g., van Schaik 2020, pp. 39–40) and in the sense “to bring someone under magic influence,” i.e., more in the context of a book of magic than a book about it.

Despite critical remarks applicable to many works concerning magic, I do not doubt that van Schaik’s book is (together with the publications of Cuevas 2010, Bailey 2020, and Dalton 2011) an important contribution to the discussion about the concept of magic in the
Tibetan and Buddhist environment. It will be useful for both historical anthropologists, offering them access to the rare Tibetan primary source, and Tibetologists, whom it might lead to become more interested in more general theories, comparisons, and the standpoint of historical anthropology. Like Patton’s *Buddha’s Wizards* or Slouber’s *Early Tantric Medicine*, it is a book that is definitely worth reading.

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**REFERENCES**


