

Portable Heritage in the Himalayas

The Example of Namgyal Monastery, Mustang: Part I, Sculpture

Christian Luczanits

From the late 1970s onwards, when areas of Tibetan culture in India and Nepal were opened to foreign visitors, photographs of art objects began to be used to instigate exchanges, purchases and thefts of major artworks. Major collections were removed from their traditional placement in temples and shrine rooms, and hidden away in storage boxes, inaccessible to both local believers and foreign visitors, including researchers. Indeed, stories of objects that have disappeared from private and monastic ownership abound across the Himalayas.

By the time I went to Mustang for the first time in 2010, I had been documenting Himalayan art for two decades. This documentation usually centred on the sculptures and murals of the monuments and only occasional on objects, as it was rare to see larger

collections of portable art. Tabo monastery in the Spiti valley, for example, has little in the way of ancient portable art. It was thus a surprise to discover the amount of artwork, of consistently high quality, that was on display in diverse monasteries of Mustang.

During four visits since 2012, the first three of them funded by the Rubin Museum and one by Heritage Watch International, I documented six monastery collections, photographing and measuring each object. The most important among the collections documented so far is that of Namgyal monastery, introduced in this article (Fig. 1). While the exhibition project is currently on hold, the documentation intended to contribute to the preservation of this precious heritage in the region continues.



Fig. 1 View of Upper Mustang with Namgyal monastery on the left and Lo Manthang on the right
(Photograph: C. Luczanits, 2010)



Fig. 2 The abbot of Namgyal, Khenpo Tsewang Rigzin, overseeing construction (Photograph: C. Luczanits, 2013)

A discrete geographic region of the Himalayas located in north-central Nepal, Mustang dominated one of the major trade routes between Tibet and India in the 15th and the 16th century, when roads paralleling the Kali Gandaki river provided direct access to Tibet's natural resources, including salt and gold. The surplus of wealth from this trade enabled the creation of substantial monasteries and remarkable artwork, much of which is preserved to the present day. The murals of some of its major monuments and a selection of caves have received considerable scholarly attention (Neumann, 1994; Sanday, 1999; Slusser and Bishop, 1999; von der Heide, 2011; Sanday, 2012; Luczanits, 2014a; Luczanits, 2014b), as have single artworks directly from or related to the region (among others in Lo Bue, 2010). These studies have contributed to establishing the richness, quality and distinct character of Mustang's art within the greater corpus of Himalayan art.

Nevertheless, the heritage of portable artworks preserved in situ has largely remained unknown. In part, this is due to the ongoing restrictions on photography imposed in the region for the interiors of temples and monasteries, but research interests may also have been at play. In fact, so far no research has been conducted on historically grown monastery collections, even though their composition, assembly, maintenance and display are important aspects of Tibetan Buddhist practice. Such collections not only



Fig. 3 View of Namgyal monastery during the construction of the new monastic quarters in 2013 (Photograph: C. Luczanits, 2013)

add a sizeable body of new objects to the known research corpus, but also offer many new research themes. In this context 'collection' refers to the portable objects a monastery owns, including its library, as far as the books contained are of historical significance.

The collection of Namgyal monastery and its recent history offer a perfect example for the potential monastery collections have to pose new research questions. It also demonstrates the position of such a collection within a monastic context and the dangers they, and the heritage of monasteries in general, face in the rapidly changing environment of the 21st century.

Namgyal monastery lies at an altitude of 3,850 metres on the hill immediately west of Lo Manthang, just above a village of the same name. Even though it is just half an hour's walk from the capital, only a fraction of the visitors to Lo Manthang actually visit this monastery. The most vivid memories from my first visit to Namgyal in 2010 are its picturesque appearance from afar, the view it offers of Lo Manthang, and the Lamdre Lhakhang, the monastery's chapel dedicated to the teachers of the 'Path with the Fruit' (Lamdre) transmission, which can be considered the main teaching of the Sakya school. It is this room of teacher portraits at Namgyal monastery that at least in part triggered the present documentation project.

Both Buddhism of different denominations and the Bön religion flourished in the Mustang region long before the reign of its first king Amepal (b. 1388) in the early decades of the 15th century. It was Amepal who invited Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (1382–1456), then a prominent Sakya school master, to Mustang for the first time in 1427–28. Ngorchen went on to found Ngor monastery in 1429 and with it the Ngor school, a branch of the Sakya school. Ngorchen's three visits to Mustang were decisive in establishing the Sakya school in the region.

It is unclear when Namgyal monastery was founded and what its original affiliation was, but at the time of Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo's second visit to Mustang (1436–37) he initiated the restoration of the old Namgyal Chöde ('the Dharma area of Namgyal') monastery and probably also its expansion. By the time of his third visit (1447–49), the new monastic centre, dubbed Thubten Dargyeling ('the sanctuary in which the Buddha's teachings flourish'), could house as many as 1,000 monks. Monks from three other earlier foundations were summoned to this new centre, and may well have brought some of the objects that now form the Namgyal collection with them (Heimbel, 2014, pp. 377–90; Vitali, 2012). Since then, Namgyal has remained a seat of the Ngor school, which is well known for the quality of its art production.

While present-day Namgyal monastery is known by a combination of its two earlier names, Namgyal

Chöde Thubten Dargyeling, none of its architectural features, according to observations in 2012, date from antiquity. The previous structure is said to have been destroyed by fire and the monastery subsequently rebuilt, with the painting done by Kamal Dhoj Tulachan in 1959–60 (Beck, 2014, p. 199, citing Ratan Kumar Rai's 'Along the Kali Gandaki'). In fact, when visiting the monastery a few years later, the ethnologist, adventurer and author Michel Peissel (1937–2011) remarked on their freshness (Peissel, 1979, pp. 149–52).

Since my first visit, Namgyal monastery has changed significantly. The Lamdre Lhakhang I saw in 2010 was destroyed in spring 2012 to give way to an enlarged monastic courtyard in front of the main temple. This work, driven by the energetic abbot Khenpo Tsewang Rigzin (Fig. 2), has substantially altered the character of the monastery, replacing the traditional clay brick structure with a concrete one—the choice being a condition of the development funding received from the Indian government. The monastery has also grown, expanding the monastic quarters by a new front portion (Fig. 3). Of course, it is a pity that the organic and traditional structure had to give way for a larger, displaced-looking concrete building in direct view of Lo Manthang, but a final assessment of this change must await the completion of the construction—right up to and including the painting of its walls.



Fig. 4 Part of the left side wall of the Namgyal temple with the Buddha Maitreya in the murals and some of the larger papier-mâché sculptures placed along the wall (Photograph: C. Luczanits, 2012)



Fig. 5 Interior of the Namgyal temple in 2012, with the metal objects behind glass and the books in the flanking shelves (Photograph: C. Luczanits, 2012)

In spring 2015 Namgyal village and monastery suffered substantially in the earthquake and its aftermath. The lantern of the main temple, the only building remaining from the old complex, collapsed and crashed into the assembly hall, and the beams supporting the roof shifted. This damage resulted in the abandonment of the structure, and plans are under way to replace it with a new construction. All sculptures were moved to the building housing the caretakers, which was constructed within the last two decades. The rear part of this building was also damaged, and the books found a temporary shelter in one of the rooms of the new monastic quarters. It was not possible to continue construction in 2015; the Namgyal monks remained at their winter quarters near Pokhara, and the monastery was staffed only by caretakers, along with the usual fearsome watchdogs.

The same drive by the abbot to modernize the monastery structure has also made its collection accessible for documentation for the first time. Unlike the collections of other major monasteries in Mustang, such as Choede in Lo Manthang and Tsarang, the collection of Namgyal has never previously been recorded.

Since the damage sustained by the Namgyal temple during the earthquake makes its future preservation unlikely, here I shall briefly summarize the iconographic programme of its murals. These are generally of mediocre quality and covered with dust, the latter particularly severe on the north wall, which is leaning outwards. The iconographic programme, as far as it is accessible, is simple, with each bay of the side walls occupied by a central Buddha.

On the north wall, the first main image on the altar side is covered by furniture, and the remaining ones are the five esoteric Buddhas in monastic dress beginning with Akshobhya and ending with Amoghasiddhi on the side of the entrance. On the entrance wall, there is a protector on each side flanking the door, a form of Mahakala covered by cloth on the left and Mahakala Brahmanarupa accompanied by two forms of Palden Lhamo on the right. Curiously, a Nyingma triad is painted above the door, namely Padmasambhava in pandita form flanked by the Indian scholar Shantaraksita and King Trisong Detsen. This triad references the establishment of monastic Buddhism in Tibet at Samye under King Trisong Detsen in the late 8th century. This space is usually dedicated to protective

deities prominent within the respective school to which the monastery belongs.

On the south wall the main Buddhas are, from the entrance towards the altar: blue Akshobhya, yellow Maitreya (Fig. 4), yellow Shakyamuni flanked by his chief disciples, another yellow Buddha with unusual gesture, and Sarvavid Vairochana. The latter is the specific form of Vairochana associated with the ritual cycle of eliminating lower rebirths. He is white, has four faces and sits in meditation, and his name signifies his omniscience. The middle group of Buddhas likely represents the Buddhas of the Three Times, identifying the right side Buddha of the group, whose right hand performs the gesture of fearlessness while the left is depicted turning the wheel, as Shakyamuni's predecessor Kashyapa. The remaining space is covered by repeated depictions of the five esoteric Buddhas in monastic dress.

The collection of portable objects at Namgyal, largely consisting of sculptures and books, is impressive and of great historical importance. Of approximately 370 objects at least 300 are sculptures.

About half of these are metal images, while the rest is produced in diverse forms of papier-mâché-like materials. Of the metal images, at least half bear dedication inscriptions, usually naming the depicted figure, the benefactor and the religious intention of the commission. In addition, the collection contains almost eighty ancient books with some form of artwork, be it carved or painted covers, illuminations, silk curtains or repoussée work, and usually combinations thereof. There is, however, only one ancient Tibetan scroll painting (thangka), a mid- to late-15th century painting of the Vajradhatu mandala, in urgent need of restoration.

Originally, the collection was displayed in two areas, the main assembly hall and the Lamdre Lhakhang. By the time I was able to photograph the interior of the temple in 2012, the sculptures of the Lamdre Lhakhang had been moved to the Assembly Hall, literally overcrowding it. For security reasons, all metal images were assembled in the three windowed areas of the altar (Fig. 5), while the papier-mâché sculptures were placed on improvised furniture along the walls (see Fig. 4). Thus, at that stage the location



Fig. 6 Three-family triad with (from left) the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, and the Buddha Vajrapani West Tibet, 11th century Metal alloy, (from left): 38 x 17 x 8 cm, 39 x 18 x 8.5 cm, 37 x 17 x 8 cm Namgyal monastery



Fig. 7 Goddess Nairatmya,
Lamdre lineage set of Tsewang Zangpo
Mustang, late 15th century
Metal alloy with silver, copper and
turquoise inlays, 30 x 19 x 14 cm
Namgyal monastery



Fig. 8 Mahasiddha Damarupa,
Lamdre lineage set of Tsewang Zangpo
Mustang, late 15th century
Metal alloy with silver and
gold inlays, 29 x 19 x 14.5 cm
Namgyal monastery



Figs 11a and b Front and back views of the wealth deity
Vaishnavana commissioned by Tsewang Zangpo
Mustang, late 15th century
Metal alloy with silver and gold inlays, 30 x 20 x 12 cm
Namgyal monastery



Fig. 9 Sakya master Sönam Tsemo (1142–82),
Lamdre lineage set of Tsewang Zangpo
Mustang, late 15th century
Metal alloy with silver and gold inlays, 28.5 x 19 x 14 cm
Namgyal monastery



Fig. 10 Fourth abbot of Ngor Kunga Wangchuk (1424–78),
Lamdre lineage set of Tsewang Zangpo
Mustang, late 15th century
Metal alloy with silver and gold inlays, 29 x 19 x 14 cm
Namgyal monastery

of the sculptures was only defined by material and size.

The sculptures assembled at Namgyal mirror the history of Mustang and its close connections to the western Himalayas, the craftsmanship of the Kathmandu valley, and the Sakya school. Throughout the history of Mustang, there have been close ties to the western Himalayan regions, including Purang, just south of Mt Kailash, which at times was part of the Mustang kingdom. It is thus no surprise to find in the Namgyal collection west Himalayan objects that significantly predate the monastery.

The most valuable of these are three 11th century sculptures from West Tibet forming a triad of Shakyamuni flanked by Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani (Fig. 6). This triad was originally attached to one stand that is not preserved, which made the photography of the figures rather challenging. Slightly larger than the other images, the central Shakyamuni wears a triple crescent crown and a three-pointed cape, both features adopted from earlier Kashmiri examples. Avalokiteshvara holds a large lotus in his left hand at the stalk, and Vajrapani holds an only half-preserved vajra horizontally in his right. Together these images



Fig. 12 Drogmi Lotsawa Shakyas Yeshe (992–1072)
commissioned by Lodro Gyaltsen
Mustang, late 15th century
Gilt bronze, 19 x 14 x 11 cm
Namgyal monastery

stand for the three families—the Buddha, lotus and *vajra* families of deities—which are thought to counter the three poisons of ignorance, desire and hatred, which keep beings bound to the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). This triad reflects the popularity of this group in the early esoteric Buddhism of India and Tibet.

The three sculptures are, of course, much distorted by the grotesquely painted faces and crowns, done between my first visit in August 2010 and May 2012. In Tibetan Buddhist culture, the faces or heads of sculptures are occasionally ritually painted. Such painting is commonly applied by master painters with traditional materials, and thus adds an additional aesthetic dimension to the images. Typically, outside its original context, such painting is only preserved in the most appealing cases. All the Namgyal metal sculptures, however, have been painted in a childish manner using poor-quality modern paint that appears inappropriate for the context.

Most of the portrait sculptures belong to at least six different sets of the Lamdre teaching transmission, of which two are in metal and inscribed. These images were formerly located in the Lamdre Lhakhang, and will receive a similar space in the new monastery. The most sophisticated and valuable set is one commissioned by Tsewang Zangpo, of which seventeen sculptures are preserved in the Namgyal collection. Various alloys have been used for these sculptures, and they are rich in skilful engravings and silver and copper inlays. The extremely high quality of the sculptures in this set is even more obvious when viewing the backs of the figures. The following four sculptures are representative of the variety found in this set.

The Lamdre lineage usually begins with the primordial Buddha Vajradhara, which is not preserved at Namgyal, followed by the goddess Nairatmya (Fig. 7). Her graceful depiction is adorned with silver, copper and turquoise inlays. The following four teachers are *mahasiddhas*, namely Virupa, invariably shown teaching, followed by Krishnapada, Damarupa (Fig. 8) and Avadhutipa. These and the following Indian monk, Gayadhara, are made in a darker, copper-rich alloy, and their inlays are thus in gold and silver. Damarupa can be recognized by the hand-drum (*damaru*) he holds in his raised right hand.

The Lamdre teaching transmission reached Tibet via Drogmi Lotsawa Shakya Yeshe (992–1072), and eventually the five great Sakya masters, Sönam

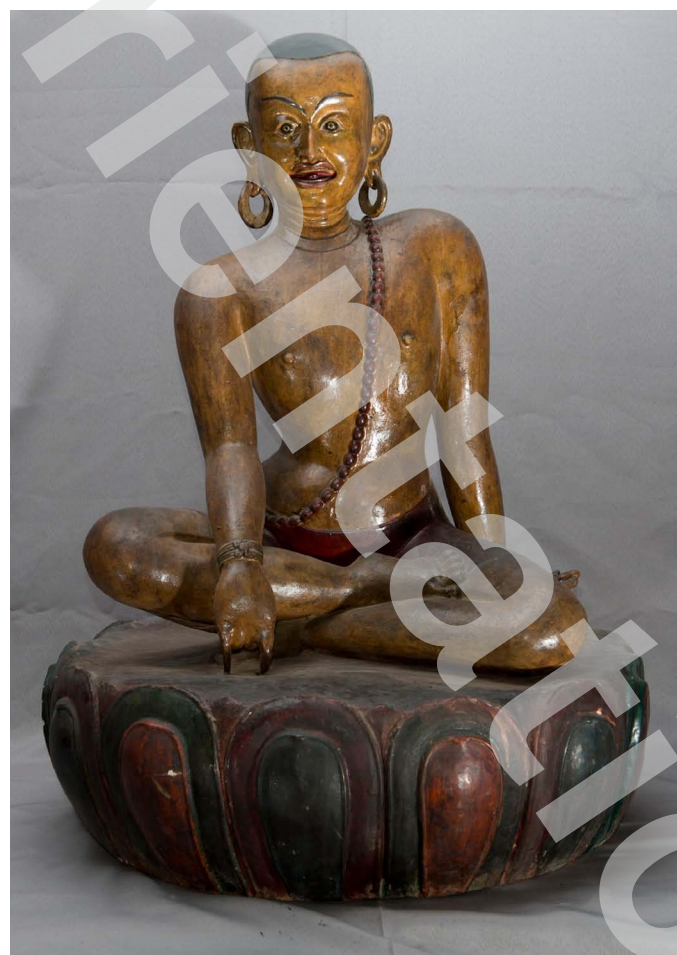


Fig. 13 The great adept Avadhutipa
Mustang, 16th century
Papier-mâché, 72 x 51 x 51 cm
Namgyal monastery

Tsemo (1142–82) among them (Fig. 9). He wears the garb of a nobleman, but his gesture and the attributes of *vajra* and bell on the lotuses he holds at their stems qualify him as an accomplished practitioner of tantric Buddhism. The dress is beautifully engraved at the back, but no inlay has been used for this sculpture. After his younger brother Dragpa Gyaltsen (1147–1216), who was also a lay practitioner, the transmission continues among monks only.

In the Namgyal set, the most recent figure in the lineage is the fourth abbot of Ngor Kunga Wangchuk (1424–78; Fig. 10). In his depiction, Kunga Wangchuk performs the teaching gesture (*dharmachakra mudra*), and his patchwork robes are meticulously rendered and rich in inlays of copper and silver.

The lineage does not go back to the original



Fig. 14 The great adept Damarupa
Mustang, 15th–16th century
Papier-mâché, 34 x 24 x 15 cm
Namgyal monastery

establishment of the Ngor school in Mustang under Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo, but its commission is probably the result of the extensive teaching activities of Kunga Wangchuk. Kunga Wangchuk visited Mustang twice, once bestowing the Lamdre teachings to as many as 900 monks, and died there in 1478 (Heimbel, 2014, pp. 417–19). The lineage transmission represented by the set also became the main Ngor tradition, rather than the specific transmission received by Ngorchen and depicted on a set of paintings commissioned by him (see Jackson, 2010, pp. 179–90). Ending with Kunga Wangchuk, the complete set must have originally consisted of at least 23 figures, seventeen of which are preserved at Namgyal.

It is noteworthy that the missing sculptures include three of the five eminent Sakya scholars,

namely Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092–1158), Dragpa Gyaltsen and Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen (1182–1251), as well as Ngorchen and his immediate successors. These distinguished masters are also the most likely candidates to be gifted to visiting dignitaries.

A unique feature of this set is the usage of a different, darker metal alloy to distinguish the Indian adepts and teachers from the Tibetan ones. That this is indeed the case is proven by the comparative size of the images and the identical inscriptions. Needless to say, the fact that these images form a set can only be deduced if a considerable number of them is preserved together in the same place, and thus a monastery collection.

The high quality and the sheer size of this set indicates that the benefactor Tsewang Zangpo must have been rather affluent, making it very likely that the name refers to an influential minister who was active in the late 15th and early 16th century. This is further supported by three more single objects in the Namgyal collection and commissioned by the same person, among them a stunning representation of the guardian king of the north, Vaishnavana (Figs 11a and b). In this image, the usage of silver and copper inlays is extensive and sophisticated.

The second inscribed set is gilded and was commissioned by one Lodro Gyaltsen. These sculptures are approximately 18 centimetres tall and of somewhat simpler workmanship, but still of high quality—for example, the image of Drogmi Lotsawa Shakya Yeshe (992–1072), who can often be recognized by the book he holds in his left hand (Fig. 12). This set probably dates to approximately the same time as the Tsewang Zangpo set, as here, too, the most recent teacher depicted is the fourth abbot of Ngor monastery. While Lodro Gyaltsen is too frequent a name to identify the donor with any certainty, it is interesting to note that a nephew of Lobo Khenchen Sonam Lhundrup (1456–1532), a prominent scholar from Mustang and the eldest son of the Mustang king Tashigon (d. 1489), was ordained under that name.

Among the papier-mâché sets, one of comparatively large sculptures stands out in terms of its quality and expressiveness, including the image of the great adept Avadhutipa (Fig. 13). Although the varnish applied to the sculptures and obvious later repairs affect the aesthetic impression of some of the sculptures, their early date and original quality is without doubt. In fact, this is only the third large-size Lamdre lineage set known, after those of the Gyantse

Lamdre Lhakhang and the repoussé sculptures today in Mindroling monastery. Featuring later Ngor teachers with their distinctive headwear, this set is certainly later than the bronze sets and likely dates to the 16th century.

It will take a while to identify the other papier-mâché sets in detail. Some of the sculptures, like another representation of the adept Damarupa (Fig. 14), are of exceptional quality, but as with the large set, varnish and later repairs occasionally make it difficult to appreciate these sculptures properly in aesthetic terms. Rarely found in Western collections, papier-mâché and clay images nevertheless represent a major aspect of Tibetan Buddhist cultural heritage. Researching monastery collections allows us to fill a major gap in our knowledge in this respect.

Of course, there are numerous sculptures of prominent religious personages of Mustang found in the Namgyal collection which are not part of a Lamdre lineage set. Together these portraits add unprecedented depth to our knowledge of the variations in the representations of individual teachers, concepts of portraiture in Tibetan Buddhism, and their history. They are also invaluable to establish a more precise history of the artistic production of Mustang during its most prolific artistic period.

The examples presented above offer only a glimpse of the richness and diversity of the sculptures preserved in the collection of Namgyal monastery. In the standard classification of material supports for Buddhist practice they represent the first of three categories, that of the body. Examples for representations of the speech and mind of the Buddha in that collection are introduced in a second part to appear in the June 2016 issue of *Orientations*.

Christian Luczanits is David L. Snellgrove Senior Lecturer in Tibetan and Buddhist Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

The author is extremely grateful to Khenpo Tsewang Rigzin for both permitting the documentation and instigating this two-part article, as well as for the generous support provided by the Namgyal monks during documentation.

To support the reconstruction efforts of Namgyal monastery, contact information is found on its website (namgon.org/site/). If funds donated should specifically be used for the conservation and display of the collection within the new monastery structures, please also contact the author.

Selected bibliography

- Michael Beck, *Mustang: The Culture and Landscape of Lo*, Kathmandu, 2014.
- Jörg Heimbels, *Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382 – 1456). An Investigation into the Life and Times of the Founder of the Ngor Subschool of the Sa skya Order*, Universität Hamburg, doctoral thesis, 2014.
- David Paul Jackson, *The Nepalese Legacy in Tibetan Painting: Masterworks of Tibetan Painting*, Washington, New York, 2010.
- Erberto Lo Bue, ed., *Wonders of Lo: The Artistic Heritage of Mustang*, Mumbai, 2010.
- Christian Luczanits, 'The Cave of Great Adepts', *Orientations*, June 2014, pp. 50–61 (2014a).
- , 'Bringing a Masterwork Back to Life?', *Orientations*, March 2014, pp. 184–86 (2014b).
- Helmut F. Neumann, 'The Wall Paintings of the Lori Gonpa', *Orientations*, November 1994, pp. 79–91.
- Michel Peissel, *Mustang: A Lost Tibetan Kingdom*, London, 1979 (reprint edition; original edition, London, 1968).
- John Sanday, 'The Gateway to Nirvana: Conserving the Temples of Mustang', *Orientations*, October 1999, pp. 84–89.
- , 'The Wall Paintings of Thubchen Lo Manthang, Upper Mustang: In Defence of History', *Orientations*, April 2012, pp. 77–78.
- Mary Shepherd Slusser and Lila M. Bishop, 'Another Luri: A Newly Discovered Cave Chorten in Mustang, Nepal', *Orientations*, February 1999, pp. 18–27.
- Roberto Vitali, *A Short History of Mustang (10th–15th Century)*, Dharamsala, 2012.
- Susanne von der Heide, 'Hidden Gems Revealed: Clay Statues and Murals at the Mentsün Lhakhang Cave-temple in Mustang, Nepal', *Orientations*, June 2011, pp. 41–49.