

To sum up, the book reviewed here is a scientific work of the highest standard and it is to be strongly recommended to Tibetologists, specialists of Central Asian history and, in a broader sense, to scholars of ‘historical geography’ in general because of its highly exemplary methodology.

*Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal: Narratives and rituals of Newar Buddhism* by Todd T. Lewis. Albany: SUNY, 2000. 236 pp, 25 figures, bibliography, index. ISBN 079144612-3

Reviewed by Will Douglas

This book is a valuable contribution to the burgeoning field of Newar Buddhist studies. With his long experience working in the Urāy community of Asan in Kathmandu, Lewis is able to document the interaction between mercantile sponsors and Vajrācārya specialists, mediated through the public deployment of Buddhist sacred texts. This volume contains both the local Newari versions of Sanskrit Vajrayāna texts, translated by two learned Urāys together with Lewis, and discussions which set these texts into their ethnographic and historical contexts. In format, the book has five chapters each considering a specific text, together with an introduction and conclusions.

As with many other recent studies, Lewis is intent upon correcting a perceived tendency in past Buddhist studies to listen to, or rather read, the work of the religious elite without also paying proper attention either to their lay sponsors or to the “local literati” (xiv) as Lewis calls them. He is also keen to ground his discussion historically, relating the Vajrayāna Buddhism of the Newars to its Indian antecedents. To this end, he presents a wide range of textual types, from the widely known popular narrative of Śrī Sārthavāha to a Mahākāla *vrata*. Typically the use of the text is described from the perspective of the lay participants in the recitation and accompanying rituals, although we get occasional hints of the manipulation of the tradition by the officiating Vajrācāryas; thus, in accounting for the particular Tārā text he prints, Lewis writes, “These volumes arise both from a patron’s need to have new ritual manuals for the family’s own *vrata* observances and from [Badri Ratna] Bajrācārya’s own effort to revive the performance of Newar Buddhism.” (p. 95)

This book is poorly edited and far too ambitious for its brief format. The editing cannot be laid at Lewis’s door, although the numerous errors in transcription bring down the tone of the book as a whole. As to ambition: in setting out to achieve his

programme Lewis too often overlooks important aspects of the history of Newar Buddhism and the doctrinal context in which it locates itself, and in so doing injures his theoretical argument. While I am broadly in sympathy with his aims, I would suggest that a simple division between philological and ritual studies, or between elite and lay representation, is bound to founder especially when confronted with the Newar Buddhist data. So, where Lewis writes “Buddhism in practice was far more complicated by calculations of wealth and kinship than scholars have imagined and ... the tradition ‘on the ground’ was much less tidy and more diverse than indicated by the documents generated by the monastic elite and stored in their libraries” (88), we have only to remember that the libraries in question, at least for the history of Sanskrit Buddhism, are precisely the libraries of the Vajrācāryas of the Kathmandu Valley, to see the problem. The Badri Ratnas of the past just as now were not static curators but redactors of their tradition, and hence a criticism of Western modes of scholarship which overlooks the dynamism of the indigenous elites falls into the same objectifying trap as the model it criticizes. The situation is only rendered more complex when we take into account the self-awareness of the Newar Buddhist tradition which arises in response to Western interrogation beginning with the early 19<sup>th</sup> century encounter of the Vajrācārya Amṛtānanda and Brian Hodgson.

The history of the Newar Buddhist textual tradition suggests that it was not, as philological scholars (or those who object to them) have often assumed or wished it were, a passive and archival tradition without significant innovation which derived its vitality entirely from ritual praxis. Thus, arguing from the Newar tradition back to the Indian (or even to the medieval Newar) is a hazardous activity. To take some specific examples: Lewis repeats Brough’s peculiar assertion that the *Svayambhūpurāṇa* derives from a Khotanese original (p. 36); while Lewis himself has furthered the study of Tibetan-Newar relations considerably (e.g. Lewis 1996), he has not noticed that the only Tibetan translation of the *Svayambhūpurāṇa* comes from the pen of Situ Panchen Chos kyi Byung gNas (18<sup>th</sup> century), thus undermining Brough’s assertion that the Tibetans transmitted this text to Nepal. The earliest Nepalese versions date at least from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and are probably far older. The *Svayambhūpurāṇa* is clearly an indigenous text with its origins beyond our present historical grasp. Again, Lewis proposes (pp. 53-4, following Lienhard) a linear sequence in which the Indian *Kāraṇḍavyūha* is followed by a Nepalese Sanskrit version, and then by a Newari language version; a review of the published manuscripts, let alone the hundreds circulating in the Kathmandu Valley, would show that the Newars themselves continued to develop the ‘Indian’ Sanskrit version after composing their own Sanskrit verse redaction (the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha*) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, itself subject to modification in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and again at the hands of 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian editors. Multiple Newari language translations and folk song

versions of the text have continued to develop into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and as Michael Hutt (1997: 9) has recently argued, the same story forms the basis of Devkota's *Munā Madan*. Thus the 'local' redaction of the story of Siṃhalasārthabāhu is not, as he proposes, the final stage in the localization of a narrative, but part of a complex process in which Nepalese writers and reciters have produced both elite and popular versions from at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century up to the present day. The complexity of the narrative can further be demonstrated by the diverging traditions of manuscript illustration for the Sanskrit texts, which in at least one case were done in a strongly Tibetan style.

Finally I must object to Lewis's anachronistic use of the term 'Hindu' when drawing historical conclusions about Pāla and pre-Pāla India (118). Especially in the modern political context, this is a very dangerous word. The Nepalese Sanskrit texts themselves never speak of 'Hindu', but Śaiva, Saurya and so forth; thus, a 'dialectic' in the sense Lewis proposes cannot be found. The specific dynamics between traditions such as Śaiva and Bauddha were antagonistic or competitive at times, but (as is clear from the history of Śrīnivās Malla and Karuṇāmaya) the specific relations between Vaiṣṇava and Bauddha were at times collaborative and mutually reinforcing. It may also be helpful here to distinguish between those deities who are common to most Sanskritic Indian religions—Ganeśa, for example, claimed in the Purāṇas by the Śaivas but clearly not of sectarian origins—and those such as Śiva who have their own sects. Different sorts of historical explanation are required to account for the development of contested deities such as Mahākāla and those who are comfortably ubiquitous such as Ganeśa and Haritī. *Vratas*, too, appear to be a common feature of Indic religion and the simple existence of *vratas* within Newar Buddhism is no more surprising than their use of Sanskrit. We know that the Buddhist *aṣṭamīvrata* goes back at least to the 6<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of the dated Chinese translations of its root text, the *Amoghapāśasūtra*.

This book is a valuable collection of useful sources together with careful ethnographic analysis. Lewis reveals a powerful critique of textualist Buddhology implicit in his sources, but the work falters when he tries to supplement this with historical arguments that are not well founded.

### References

- Hutt, Michael 1997. *Devkota's Munā Madan: Translation and analysis*. Kathmandu: Sajha Co-operative.
- Lewis, Todd T. 1996. 'A Chronology of Newar-Tibetan Relations in the Kathmandu Valley'. In *Change and Continuity in the Nepalese Culture of the Kathmandu Valley*, edited by S. Lienhard, pp. 149-66. Turin: CESMEO.