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Newar-Tibetan Trade and the Domestication of "Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna"

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Todd T. Lewis

NEWAR-TIBETAN  
TRADE AND THE  
DOMESTICATION OF  
*SIMHALASĀRTHABĀHU*  
*AVADĀNA*

INTRODUCTION

This article presents an analysis of a popular didactic story (*avadāna*) of Indic Mahāyāna Buddhism that is still important in the Newar Buddhist community of Kathmandu, Nepal. Drawing on a translation of the text and anthropological research in Nepal that demonstrates the text's multifaceted relationship within Newar society, it is concerned with the nature of the Nepalese community's incorporation of the story, a universal process in the successful missionary adaptation of Buddhism in venues throughout Asia.<sup>1</sup> After defining this phenomenon, which I refer to as "domestication," I demonstrate how the narrative elements of the *Simhalasārthabāhu avadāna* have been adapted to and adopted within the Buddhist mercantile community of Kathmandu, for whom long-distance trade with Tibet was an important undertaking throughout the last millennium. For these reasons, focus on the domestication

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<sup>1</sup> The published Newari version of this text is found in Bhikshu Sudarshan, *Simhasārthabāhu va Kabir Kumār Bākhan* (Kathmandu: Cvaspasa, 1967). A monograph presenting a full translation of this Newar *avadāna* and a study of its domestication is in preparation.

of narrative traditions suggests how problematic it is to rely on literary texts to “center” representations of the tradition.

#### I. BUDDHIST TEXTUAL BACKGROUND

One attribute of Gautama Buddha as a “great teacher of gods and men” was doubtless his skillful turning of a story to demonstrate a point, awakening doctrinal insight through narrative illustrations. Such parables are found in all canons compiled by all schools. Numerous stories attributed to Śākyamuṇi are karma-retribution stories illustrating the cause and effect of moral actions. Throughout its first millennium, Buddhist literati collected such tales, called *avadāna* and *jātakas*. Many are pan-Indic, redacted to conform to Buddhist doctrine, ethics, and hagiography. As indicated by its title, an *avadāna* (“significant deed” or “adventure”) is a form of Buddhist literature that imparts simple religious instruction through the actions of the Bodhisattva or another spiritually advanced being.<sup>2</sup>

Familiarity with this material, and public recitation of it, eventually became a recognized monastic avocation, as one text notes six such roles within the *saṃgha* that include “folklorists” (*tiraścakathika*). The magnitude of their collections is striking, as clearly this genre found a widespread audience among the laity, most likely through the performance of public storytelling.<sup>3</sup> It is not my intention to rehearse the storytelling textual tradition but to examine one single *avadāna* in context: the Newar recension of the *Caravan Leader Siṃhala Avadāna*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Etienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Saka Era*, trans. Sara Webb-Boin (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste, 1988), p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> The Newar Buddhist *saṃgha*'s role as publicizer of *avadānas* and *jātakas* still endures. There is also evidence of *saṃgha* members keeping personal story compilations that are used when they accompany disciples to Buddhist pilgrimage sites around the Kathmandu Valley. As I-Tsing remarked in 690 C.E.: “The object of composing *jātakas* in verse is to teach the doctrine of universal salvation in a beautiful style, agreeable to the popular and and attractive to readers” (J. Takakasu, trans., *A Record of the Buddhist Religion* [London: Clarendon, 1896], p. 163). Few anthropological studies of texts in living Buddhist contexts have been recorded, with the exception of Robert F. Spencer, “Ethical Expressions in a Burmese Jātaka,” *Journal of American Folklore* 79 (1966): 278–301. Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich present some comments on the *Vessantara Jātaka* in *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977). A useful collection of Buddhist tales, with analytical commentary, is found in Roy C. Amore and Larry D. Shinn, *Lustful Maidens and Ascetic Kings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). A recent study by Madhu Bazaz Wangu, “Hermeneutics of a Kashmiri Mahātmya Text in Context,” in *Texts in Context*, ed. Jeffrey R. Timm (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 147–68, examines the composition of a “new” Hindu text in relation to its sociopolitical context.

<sup>4</sup> The classic resource is Maurice Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, 3 vols., trans. Mrs. S. Ketkar (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1933). Valuable recent discussions are found in John S. Strong, “The Transforming Gift: An Analysis of Devotional Acts of Offering in Buddhist Avadana Literature,” *History of Religions* 18, no. 3 (1979): 221–37, *The Legend of King Asoka* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), and *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

This narrative adventure has ancient origins: there are rudimentary tales in the Pali *Jātakas* and an extant Jain Prakrit version. It appears in two recensions in one of the most popular collections of Buddhist stories, the Sanskrit *Divyavadāna* (“heavenly stories”).<sup>5</sup> Following this genealogy, the *Siṃhala* story reached nearly all Asian Buddhist communities.<sup>6</sup> Siegfried Lienhard has established that the modern Newari recension likely derives from the early *Divyāvādāna* that subsequently inspired a longer Mahāyāna-styled revision in the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*. The Nepali Buddhist narrative draws on the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*-derived *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha*, a sixteenth-century Sanskrit text devoted to Avalokiteśvara, but shows yet another stage of redaction into Newari, especially through its innovative plot turns and attention to certain details.<sup>7</sup>

It also seems likely that the modern Newari version developed through the local storytelling of the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha*, providing a Buddhist example of what A. K. Ramanujan so aptly describes as “the way texts do not simply go from one written form to another but get reworked through oral cycles that surround the written word.”<sup>8</sup> Before delving into the distinctive redactions in the text itself, I must first describe the ancient affinity of merchants with Buddhism, then establish the religious context of the Newars and the Hindu-Buddhist culture of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal.

## II. HISTORICAL AND HIMALAYAN CONTEXT

### BUDDHISM AND TRADE

Although it has long been recognized that Buddhism spread across India and Asia following the trade routes,<sup>9</sup> the mercantile sector of the

<sup>5</sup> Siegfried Lienhard summarizes the text’s classical lineage in “A Nepalese Painted Scroll Illustrating the *Siṃhalāvādāna*,” in *Nepalica*, ed. Bernhard Kolver and S. Lienhard (Sankt Augustin: VGH Wissenschaftsverlage, 1987), pp. 51–53.

<sup>6</sup> Later Buddhist versions were also translated into Khotanese, Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese Buddhist texts. Buddhist artists of different areas and eras have depicted this story: it is found on a third century stone pillar at Mathura, in cave 17 at Ajanta, in Central Asia as well as in Burma (Pagan), Ankor, in Borobudur, and in Nepal. The story also enjoyed popularity in East Asian art, as discussed by Julia Meech-Pekarik, “The Flying White Horse: Transmission of the Valahassa Jataka Imagery from India to Japan,” *Artibus Asiae* 43 (1981): 111–28. Siegfried Lienhard, *Die Abenteuer des Kaufmanns Siṃhala* (Berlin: Museums für Indische Kunst, 1985), explores the early textual traditions of the *Siṃhala* story and presents a long scroll with a translation of its caption text.

<sup>7</sup> The Sanskrit version of the *Siṃhala* story in the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha* is found in Y. Iwamoto, *Bukkyo Setsuwa Kenkyu Josetsu* (Kyoto: Hozokan, 1967), pp. 247–94.

<sup>8</sup> A. K. Ramanujan, “Who Needs Folklore? The Relevance of Oral Traditions to South Asian Studies,” *South Asia Occasional Papers (University of Hawaii)* 1 (1990): 12.

<sup>9</sup> Sylvain Levi, “Les ‘merchants de mer’ et leur rôle dans le bouddhisme primitif,” *Bulletin de l’Association Française de Amis de l’Orient*, October 1929, pp. 19–39; Balkrishna Govind Gokhale, “The Merchant in Ancient India,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 97 (1977): 125–30; and James Heitzman, “Early Buddhism, Trade and Empire,” in *Studies in the Archaeology and Paleanthropology of South Asia*, ed. Kenneth A. R. Kennedy and Gregory L. Possehl (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing, 1984), pp. 121–37.

Buddhist *śāsana* has not received systematic attention.<sup>10</sup> Instead, scholarship on the elite traditions of the Buddhist monastic virtuosi has dominated scholarly representations of Buddhists and Buddhism as a religion.

The *Siṃhalasārhthabāhu Avadāna* highlights the merchant class in ancient South Asia, a group often featured in both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhist popular literature. In all early Buddhist literatures, wealthy merchants are both extolled and cultivated as exemplary donors.<sup>11</sup> The first human beings converted by the Buddha after his enlightenment were both Bactrian traders, and it was they who built the first *stūpa*.<sup>12</sup> One measure of the early *saṃgha* itself suggests that about 30 percent of it were *vaiśyas*,<sup>13</sup> and inscriptions at early monastic centers suggest that individual merchants and artisans, as well as their collective communities (*goṣṭhi*) or guilds (*śrenī*), vied with kings to act as principal supporters.<sup>14</sup> This relationship spanned the earliest sectarian divisions within the greater Buddhist community, with strong evidence from both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna literatures as well as in the epigraphic sources.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Recently there has been Himanshu P. Ray's *Monastery and Guild* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), a study of Satavahana patterns of trade and political alliance, and Xinru Liu's *Ancient India and Ancient China* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1988), a survey of Indo-Chinese contacts in Kushan times. Several articles from the recently published volume edited by Russell F. Sizemore and Donald K. Swearer, *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), devote attention to the early merchants mentioned in the Pali texts.

<sup>11</sup> The most famous, pan-Buddhist exemplary donors in the literature are the royal donors: King Vessantara, the last incarnation of the Buddha Śākyamuṇi, and King Aśoka. There are also two similarly renowned merchant families: Anāthapiṇḍika and Visākha. Other prominent merchants are Ghosita of Kausambi and the merchant Purṇa of Śrāvastī (Lamotte, pp. 20–21). The most famous Mahāyāna lay sage Vimalakīrti is also described as being a businessman who gives lavishly to the *saṃgha* and to the poor. (See Robert A. F. Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture* [University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976], pp. 21, 41.)

<sup>12</sup> Lamotte, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> See Balkrishna Govind Gokhale, "The Early Buddhist Elite," *Journal of Indian History* 43 (1965): 395.

<sup>14</sup> Vidya Dehejia, *Early Buddhist Rock Temples: A Chronology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972); and Heitzman, pp. 121, 132.

<sup>15</sup> Lamotte, p. 414, has noted that at Sanchi, the greatest number of lay donor inscriptions are recorded for bankers (nineteen) and merchants (five). Gregory Schopen has noted that the earliest-known Mahāyāna inscription records a *sārtavāha*'s ("caravan trader's") gift (Schopen, "Mahāyāna in Indian Inscriptions," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 21 [1979]: 1–19). The Chinese pilgrims' accounts all mention specific instances of merchants' leadership in early festivals (see James Legge, trans., *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1886], p. 79; Samuel Beal, trans., *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World* [New York: Paragon, 1970], 1:xxxii, xxxix, lvii, lxxii, lxxxvii, 81; 2:129, 175–77). It is now beyond doubt that monks were also prominent donor patrons of Buddhist establishments (see Gregory Schopen, "The Ritual Obligations and Donor Roles of Monks in the Pali Vinaya," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 16 [1991]: 1–21). The monks' control of wealth (including laborers) must have been a factor in the economics

The tradition supported merchants in many areas. There were natural doctrinal affinities: Buddhist teachings undermined the ideology of birth-determined sociospiritual privilege of *brāhmaṇas* and *kṣatriyas*, for whom the *vaiśyas* were inferiors. The duty of giving (*dāna*)—to Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, saints, or the *saṃgha* (usually given in that order)—is presented as the best investment for maximum *puṇya*. The Buddha's teachings on lay life also instructed *upāsakas* to avoid trade in weapons, animals, meat, wine, and poison (Anguttara I). A Pali *jātaka* also lists “the four honest trades: tillage, trade, lending, and gleaning.”<sup>16</sup> Such declarations by the Buddha surely encouraged followers to move into these occupations, a tendency (and similar preference) especially pronounced in the history of Jainism. In addition to encouraging nonviolent occupations, early Mahāyāna texts also emphasize mercantile honesty (standing by quoted prices and measuring accurately),<sup>17</sup> sobriety, and disciplined investment.<sup>18</sup> Wealth acquired dishonestly is said to lead to later torments in hells.<sup>19</sup>

Wealth, although not the *summum bonum*, is ubiquitously held up as the reward for moral uprightness and pious generosity. Many texts clearly promise worldly blessings to the laity in return for adhering to the Buddhist norm. This meshes with descriptions of an ideal Buddhist kingdom ruled by a Cakravartin: among traits listed in the *Mahāvastu* is “thriving in wealth.”<sup>20</sup> Rightly acquired wealth, if donated as *dāna*, will beget even greater future wealth, encouraging the merchants to

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of Indic Buddhist history. The Kharosthi records support this hypothesis. As reported in T. Burrow, *A Translation of the Kharosthi Documents from Chinese Turkestan* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1940), monks are reported as slave holders (p. 65), complaining of lost goods (p. 64), paying in goods (p. 66), borrowing food (p. 65), and receiving horses as compensation for land (p. 120). Another passage even notes one monk selling land to another monk (pp. 135–36). Note what one Kharosthi record states about the ethos of being wealthy: “Just as a man travelling on a journey rests here and there when overcome with fatigue, so a man's possessions from time to time, having rested, come back again. . . . Alas the life of the poor; again alas the life of those rich people who have not the sense to enjoy or distribute [their] riches” (p. 103).

<sup>16</sup> Caroline F. Rhys-Davids, “Notes on the Early Economic Conditions in Northern India,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 53 (1901): 881.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Robinson, “The Ethic of the Householder Bodhisattva,” *Bharati* 9 (1966): 49.

<sup>18</sup> The formula found in both Pali (*Sigalovada Sutta*) and Sanskrit traditions (*Upāsaka Śīla Sūtra* (in Robinson)) allot one's wealth as follows: one-fourth to family; two-fourths to business; one-fourth held in reserve. Note how the Buddhist merchant *upāsaka*—sober, benevolent, honest, ascetic, and pious—would have resembled the ideal Muslim merchant.

<sup>19</sup> *Mahāratnakūta* (29. T. v. 11, n. 310), as translated in Diane Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), p. 34.

<sup>20</sup> As summarized in Radhagovinda Basak, ed., *Mahāvastu Avadāna* (Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1963), 1:xxv.

redistribute their riches back into society:<sup>21</sup> Material wealth cannot be “taken with you”; but turned into *punya* through *dāna*, one can seek to reacquire the circumstances of wealth beyond this life. The juxtaposition of wealth and advanced spiritual progress is one of the great paradoxes of Buddhist tradition, embodied in the life of Śākyamuni in his last and former lives.

Buddhist texts often speak in the language of the bazaar: the *Mahālamkāra śāstra* compares the *dharma* to a “great market where the goods are sold to all.”<sup>22</sup> The *Saddharmapūṇḍarika* calls Amitābha “Caravan Chief of Living Beings.”<sup>23</sup> One Mahāyāna text explicitly promises success in overseas trade as a reward for proper service to one’s parents.<sup>24</sup> Another area of the tradition, also hardly explored, designated certain Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and allied *devas* as protectors of merchants. Buddhist merchants across the maritime communities of medieval South and Southeast Asia worshiped former Buddha Dipankara as “Calmer of Waters.”<sup>25</sup> There is also pan-regional evidence for “Buddhist deities” that gave assistance to devotees seeking wealth and trade: Pañcika and Pāṇḍuka seemed to have enjoyed popularity in the Northwest and Khotan;<sup>26</sup> in Tibet and Java it was Jambhala.<sup>27</sup>

Mahāyāna texts also extol bodhisattva *bhakti* and specifically mention their services to merchants. For example, a Tibetan text citing the “Eight Dreaded Things,” potential dangers from which Avalokiteśvara offers protection, cites eight situations that might befall merchants, and two of the examples given involve them explicitly.<sup>28</sup>

Monks traveled with the caravans, allied with artisans and merchants plying the trade networks. By the Gupta era, many Buddhist monasteries were granted land and also had extensive economic ties with their surrounding communities. The administrative practices of monastic officials—for example, lending money at interest and warehousing goods<sup>29</sup>—created symbiotic relationships with traders.<sup>30</sup> Given the commonality of *vaiśyas* becoming monks, the regular income from

<sup>21</sup> I note below the religious institutions within Buddhist merchant communities (ancient and modern) that did precisely this.

<sup>22</sup> Richard H. Robinson, trans., *Chinese Buddhist Verse* (London: Murray, 1954), p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Leon Hurvitz, trans., *The Lotus Blossom of the True Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 407.

<sup>24</sup> Paul, p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> Noted in George Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1971), p. 21. This Dipankara tradition seems to be linked to the yearly Newar festival involving the hero of the *Siṃhalāvadāna* festival (as discussed below).

<sup>26</sup> Lamotte, p. 688.

<sup>27</sup> Jan Fontein, *The Sculpture of Indonesia* (New York: Abrams, 1990), pp. 189–91.

<sup>28</sup> L. Augustine Waddell, “Note on Some Ajanta Paintings,” *Indian Antiquary* 22 (1893): 9.

<sup>29</sup> D. D. Kosambi, *Ancient India: A History of Its Culture and Civilization* (New York: Meridian, 1964), p. 185.

<sup>30</sup> Ray (n. 10 above), pp. 87–89.

*dāna*, and the attested role that merchant *upāsakas* played in administering the *vihāras*' practical affairs, the economic evolution of Buddhist institutions as endowed, financially sound concerns seems an intelligible historical convergence. The early missionary success of Buddhist monasticism must be linked to the devoted patronage and service of the mercantile class and the alliances with the dynamic political and economic sectors of prospering Indic empires.<sup>31</sup>

A study of Chinese and Kushan merchants has demonstrated that the spread of Buddhist tradition itself motivated transregional trade and that the material culture of later Buddhist decoration and devotion—silks, gems, metalwork, amulets—itself created a commodity market, as monks and merchants crossed the lands synergistically while cultivating converts and new markets, respectively.<sup>32</sup> The alliances and wealth generated affected the entire Indo-Sinic region. Across the trade routes leaving South Asia—northward on the international silk route, across the Himalayas, via Tibet and Yunnan, and eastward via maritime trade—the network of marts, ports, and oases defined a web of Buddhist monasticism.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the logic of Buddhism's diasporas, domestications, and historical survivals conformed, in part, to the exigencies of trade and the patronage of merchants.

Brief mention must be made of the distinctive committees (*goṣṭhis*) that from antiquity onward have been established by lay communities to organize their *dāna* and wider devotions. Pali *jātakas* cite subscription plans among *upāsakas*,<sup>34</sup> and such groups were often formed to complete *caitya* and cave-building or renovation projects.<sup>35</sup> If centuries-old modern Newar traditions are representative of older Indic precedents, there were also *goṣṭhis* to organize regular monthly rituals, pilgrimage, restorations, even shrine cleanings.<sup>36</sup> An important economic aspect of practice should be underlined: *goṣṭhis* hold collective

<sup>31</sup> Heitzman (n. 11 above), p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Liu (n. 10 above), pp. 127–36.

<sup>33</sup> Christopher I. Beckwith, "Tibet and the Early Medieval Florissance in Eurasia: A Preliminary Note on the Economic History of the Tibetan Empire," *Central Asiatic Journal* 21 (1977): 91–92. As other groups did elsewhere, Buddhist merchants created diaspora trade networks, mercantile/entrepreneurial webs of import/export trade, that were often in the hands of single ethnic groups with their own core and periphery zones quite distant. This mode of livelihood, relying on business acumen, capital, family partners stationed in strategic venues, and diplomatic skills, was a pervasive global phenomenon. (On diaspora trade in comparative perspective, see Philip Curtin, *Cross-cultural Trade in World History* [Cambridge University Press, 1984].) D. D. Kosambi, p. 24, suggests that there is ancient evidence for Indic and Indo-Greek diaspora traders as early as the Sāta-vāhana era.

<sup>34</sup> Rhys-Davis (n. 16 above), p. 886.

<sup>35</sup> Dehejia (n. 14 above), pp. 141ff.

<sup>36</sup> See Todd T. Lewis, *The Tulādharas of Kathmandu: A Study of Buddhist Tradition in a Newar Merchant Community* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1984), pp. 166–82; and Gerhard Toffin, "Études sur les Newars de la Vallée Kathmandou: Guthi, Funerailles et Castes," *L'Ethnographie* 2 (1975): 206–25.



properties, including money; most include some provision for making money for the group by lending out these common funds at interest. Thus, not only pious Buddhist practice is underwritten by group banking but such institutions become important sources of community investment capital. This practice exemplifies the symbiosis of Buddhist faith and wealth.<sup>37</sup>

In the central trans-Himalayan region by the time of our text's early local redactions (1400 C.E.), this ancient relationship between merchants and Buddhism endured. Highland salt, gold, silver, musk, and yak tails were valuable commodities in the plains, and a wide variety of diaspora trade networks existed to exchange products for them. Prominent Kashmiri, Bengali, Marwari, and Tibetan traders figure prominently in the region's history alongside Newar and other Nepalese traders (Thakali, Sherpa, and Manangi).<sup>38</sup> In 1685, there was even a Eurasian Armenian trade network linked through the region into Lhasa.<sup>39</sup> In the Kathmandu Valley and environs, however, the dominant merchants were Newar Buddhists. It is to their text and traditions that we must now turn.

#### NEWAR BUDDHISM

This study is centered on the Newars, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group whose culture hearth zone for more than 1,500 years has been the Kathmandu Valley (prior to 1769, the defining area of all "Nepal"). Riches from trans-Himalayan trade, fertility of valley soils, and relative geographical isolation all endowed this valley with the ability to support a prosperous and artistic civilization. Newar society has been thoroughly Indicized: caste defines the social order, and there are both Hindu and Buddhist sectors. Newar culture has evolved as a frontier region that has absorbed many traditions from ancient India and, to a lesser extent, Tibet.<sup>40</sup> In the heart of Kathmandu's old bazaar, the capital of modern Nepal, resides one of the few remaining merchant groups adhering to Mahāyāna tradition.

<sup>37</sup> The problem of Buddhist monasteries "locking up" too much of a society's wealth is a key issue. If lent to merchants, then we have a more Keynesian expansion as against monasteries gilding images and creating overembellished estates. This dynamic in the economic history of Buddhism may explain the synergy-symbiotic bond between Buddhism and merchants that lies beyond the spiritual level.

<sup>38</sup> Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *Himalayan Traders* (New York: St. Martin's, 1975).

<sup>39</sup> Levon Khachikan, "The Ledger of the Merchant Hovhannes Joughayetsi," *Journal of the Asiatic Society* 8 (1966): 153–86.

<sup>40</sup> Siegfried Lienhard, "Nepal: The Survival of Indian Buddhism in a Himalayan Kingdom," in *The World of Buddhism*, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (New York: Facts on File, 1984), 108–14.

Although mentioned in passing references across earlier Indian literature, no epigraphic evidence has been found in Nepal before 464 C.E. when Sanskrit inscriptions attest to the Kathmandu Valley as an Indic frontier zone ruled over by a *rājavāmsa* calling itself Licchavi.<sup>41</sup> Alongside various Hindu traditions existed diverse Buddhist traditions, with the most mentioned *saṃgha* that of the Mahāsaṃghikas. Among more than two hundred recorded inscriptions, there are frequent references to land-owning *vihāras*, *bhikṣus*, and *bhikṣuṇīs*. The merchant prominence in Kathmandu's Buddhist traditions may span more than 1,500 years: two mention donations by caravan leaders. A few hints of Vajrayāna practice are discernible, but Mahāyāna themes predominate: votive praises are addressed to Śākyamuṇi and other Tathāgatas as well as to the Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī, Vajrapani, Samantabhadra, and—most frequently—Ārya Avalokiteśvara.

Unconquered through its history by North Indian empires, Hindu, Muslim, or British, the Kathmandu Valley civilization is noteworthy for its distinctive urban society and enduring Hindu-Buddhist traditions that are still observed in rich multiplicity. The thousands of Sanskrit texts found in the Kathmandu Valley in the nineteenth century by Brian Hodgson and his successors were the landmark discovery that supply most of the Sanskrit sources by which we know of non-Hīnayāna Indic Buddhism.<sup>42</sup> The many Mahāyāna traditions still observed there likewise point to universal patterns of Mahāyāna Buddhist sociocultural adaptation that once characterized other communities of South, South-east, and Central Asia.

The Mahāyāna *saṃgha* of the Newars has for centuries married, and been domesticated, as a closed patrilineage: a two-section endogamous caste group with surnames Vajrācārya and Śākya maintain the “monastic traditions.” They still inhabit dwellings referred to as *vihāra* (New. *bāhā*) and more than three hundred *vihāras* exist in the valley today. Thus, the modern Newar Buddhist community consists entirely of householders.<sup>43</sup> Like married Tibetan lamas of the Nyingmapa order,

<sup>41</sup> Theodore Riccardi, Jr., “Buddhism in Ancient and Early Medieval Nepal,” in *Studies in the History of Buddhism*, ed. A. K. Narain (New Delhi: Agam, 1979), pp. 265–81; Mary S. Slusser, *Nepal Mandala* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 18–51.

<sup>42</sup> For listings of these textual collections, see Rajendralala Mitra, *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1971); Hidenobu Takaoka, *A Microfilm Catalogue of the Buddhist Manuscripts of Nepal* (Nagoya: Buddhist Library, 1981); notes in Sylvain Levi, *Le Nepal*, 3 vols. (Paris: Leroux, 1905–8). Appendices in William Wilson Hunter, *The Life of Brian Houghton Hodgson* (1896; reprint, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991), give useful manuscript lists.

<sup>43</sup> For a concise overview, see John K. Locke, S.J., “The Vajrayana Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley,” in *The Buddhist Heritage of Nepal*, ed. John K. Locke (Kathmandu: Dharmodaya Sabha, 1986), pp. 43–72.

young Vajrācāryas take training and learn to serve the community's ritual needs, with a few distinguishing themselves with specialization in textual study, medicine, astrology, and meditation. The spiritual elite still passes on *vajrayāna* initiations (Skt. *abhiṣeka*; New. *dekka*) through *guru-chela* ("teacher-disciple") lineages.

The practice of Newar Buddhism is also segregated on caste lines and is formally divided into two sections, with only Vajrācāryas, Śāk-yas, and the Urāy (merchant/artisan subcastes) eligible to take esoteric *vajrayāna* initiations (Skt. *dikṣā*; New. *dekka*) that direct meditation and ritual to tantric deities such as Saṃvara, Hevajra, and their consorts (*yoginīs*). Most Newar Buddhists, including all lower castes, participate exclusively in the exoteric level of Mahāyāna devotionalism. They direct their devotions to *caityas* (especially the great *stūpas* such as Svayambhū)<sup>44</sup> and make regular offerings at temples dedicated to the celestial Bodhisattvas (such as Avalokiteśvara) and Buddhist savioresses (such as Tārā). Buddhist groups have created hundreds of voluntary organizations (New. *guthi*, from Skt. *goṣṭi*), some with land endowments, that have supported devotional practices for many generations. Buddhist institutions and devotions in Nepal have been underwritten by *goṣṭhis* since Licchavi times.<sup>45</sup>

Newar householders support their local *vajrācārya saṃgha* who, in return, guide ritual devotions shaping their spiritual destiny in this world and beyond. A vast and complex web of ritual relations link laymen to their *vajrācārya saṃgha* who perform life cycle rituals,<sup>46</sup> festival *pūjās*, textual recitations, healing rites, and site consecration ceremonies.<sup>47</sup> On the basis of Mahāyāna ideology, the Newar *saṃgha* still justifies their Buddhist occupation, continuing use of monastic designations, and their being worthy of merit-making *dāna* from others.<sup>48</sup> Laypersons and the

<sup>44</sup> See the forthcoming work by Todd T. Lewis, "Contributions to the History of Buddhist Ritualism: A Newar *Avadāna* on *Stūpa* Veneration from the Kathmandu Valley," *Journal of Asian History*, vol. 27 (1993).

<sup>45</sup> Riccardi, p. 274.

<sup>46</sup> See Todd T. Lewis, "The *Nepāl Jana Jivan Kriyā Paddhati*, a Modern Newar Guide for Vajrayāna Life-Cycle Rites," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 36 (1993): 135–81.

<sup>47</sup> Slusser, pp. 420–21.

<sup>48</sup> The Newari *Ācāryakriyasammucaya* states: "The real teacher is he who apart from other qualities, does not live like a monk, does not shave his head and puts on good clothes and beautiful ornaments. Amongst other qualities of a teacher are counted his knowledge about purificatory rites, his kind disposition, pleasing humour, maintenance of all the *ācāryas*, insight into the art of architecture and in the science of *mantras*, skill as a profound astronomer . . . and his capability to select an auspicious plot for the construction of a *stūpa* and for the installation of the idol of the Buddha." (The translation is by N. S. Shukla, "The Qualities of an Ācārya on the Basis of the *Ācāryakriyasammucaya* of Jagaddarpaṇa," in *Buddhist Studies in India*, ed. R. C. Pandera [New Delhi: Manohar, 1975], pp. 127–28.) David N. Gellner's *Monk, Householder and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism and Its Hierarchy of Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) is

*saṃgha* exchange material support for ritual protection and merit accumulation. Despite the anomaly of a caste-delimited *saṃgha*, this exchange is fundamental to all Buddhist societies and Newar Buddhist laymen closely resemble coreligionists in other countries.

The prominent role of Newar merchants and the trans-Himalayan Buddhist trade network must be emphasized in the histories of both Nepalese and Tibetan civilizations.<sup>49</sup> Newars for at least one thousand years were highly sought artisans across Tibet,<sup>50</sup> and in more recent times lamas were called to Kathmandu to supervise major renovations of Svayambhū and Bauddha.<sup>51</sup> For more than five centuries, Newars desiring the classical celibate monastic discipline could take ordination in the local Tibetan *vihāras*. As we have seen, this trade/art connection likely represents an ancient transregional pattern.

In many domains, Newar Lhasa traders have exerted a strong effect on their own core tradition. In addition to transplanting lamas and highland monasteries into the Kathmandu Valley, the often great mercantile profits returned to contribute to Kathmandu's economy, primarily through religious patronage. Local inscriptions and records amply document that in this century Lhasa traders restored and made additions to all major indigenous Buddhist shrines. In addition, they sponsored the majority of extraordinary patronage events to the Newar *saṃgha* in this century. Thus, we cannot fully understand Buddhist history in the Himalayan region or in the Kathmandu Valley without taking into account the transregional relationships that diasporic Newar merchants sustained across the Indo-Tibetan Himalayan frontier.<sup>52</sup>

While this overview establishes the basic setting of the *avadāna*, additional specific details of the regional context will be added to comprehend

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the first book-length study of the Newar *saṃgha* community and Newar Buddhist traditions. Submitted about the same time this landmark study appeared in print, this article unfortunately does not draw upon it.

<sup>49</sup> Todd T. Lewis, "Newars and Tibetans in the Kathmandu Valley: Ethnic Boundaries and Religious History," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 38 (1989): 31–57.

<sup>50</sup> Important studies are found in A. W. Macdonald and Anne Vergati Stahl, *Newar Art: Nepalese Art during the Malla Period* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1979), pp. 31–37; Dor Bista, "Nepalis in Tibet," in *Himalayan Anthropology*, ed. James Fisher (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), pp. 187–204; Erberto Lo Bue, "The Newar Artists of the Nepal Valley: An Historical Account of Their Activities in Neighbouring Areas with Particular Reference to Tibet. I," *Oriental Art* 21 (1985): 262–77, (1986): 409–20; and Amy Heller, *Tibetan Collection*, vol. 3, 2d ed. (Newark, N.J.: Newark Museum, 1986).

<sup>51</sup> Todd T. Lewis and Lozang Jamspal, "Newars and Tibetans in the Kathmandu Valley: Three New Translations from Tibetan Sources," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 36 (1988): 187–211.

<sup>52</sup> See Jahar Sen, "India's Trade with Central Asia via Nepal," *Bulletin of Tibetology* 8 (1971): 21–40; and the forthcoming article by Todd T. Lewis, "Himalayan Frontier Trade: Newar Diaspora Merchants and Buddhism," in *Anthropology of Tibet and the Himalayas*, ed. Martin Brauen et al. (Zurich: Volkerkundemuseum, 1993).

the domestication of the text. But first, we must recount the Buddhist tale of sex and violence itself.

### III. SUMMARY OF THE NEWARI *SIMHALASĀRTHABĀHU AVADĀNA*

#### SECTION A

The tale opens by introducing a wealthy family with a history of long-distance trade. Although the parents want their only son to live off of the great largess created by past success, he has other plans, arguing against complacency by stating his need to make more money for *dāna*. Gaining their reluctant permission, Simhala assembles a five-hundred-man caravan and sets off overland. The only event reported en route is that members of the party damage a *caitya*, to the consternation of the leader who vows to make repairs later. Eventually they reach a great “sea,” which the Newari text glosses as the Brahmapūtra River, where they take a ferry but are overtaken by a storm and are shipwrecked, barely escaping with their lives.

Once ashore, they are greeted by an equal number of what appear to be beautiful young women, but who are, unbeknownst to them, flesh-eating *rākṣasīs* (“demonesses”). In this country called Ratnapura, they are treated as lords whom the alluring consorts wine, dine, and eventually seduce. Says the leader of the *rākṣasīs*:

O Masters, how great is our fortune. . . . We have lived alone in the country called Ratnapura and we also happen to have come here seeking virile men, since we are now fully mature and beautiful. By our good luck we have taken sight of you. . . . Please come to our Ratnapura and make love to us . . . in all the different ways.

This is all to the merchants’ great collective delight, and only after seven days, the text notes, do they finally go to sleep.<sup>53</sup>

Awakened from his slumber, leader Simhala is addressed by Śrī Avalokiteśvara from a lamp and told the truth about the traders’ lovers.

<sup>53</sup> A Chinese text, likely alluding to the chief *rākṣasī* of this narrative, describes her entrancing allure in a storytelling style:

All the onlookers said: It is better to take advantage of this moment and look at this woman at the risk of losing one’s life, than to live long and never to have seen her. . . .

She is clever and mild,

She could dance exquisitely

so that everybody was enchanted by her.

She was like the empress of demons

She was able to move even a man who can divest himself of passion

Not to speak of us ordinary people.

This text is translated in V. Hrdlickova, “The First Translations of Buddhist Sutras in Chinese Literature and Their Place in the Development of Storytelling,” *Archiv Orientalni* 26 (1958): 124.

To allay disbelief, Siṃhala is told to look inside a high-walled fortress outside the city and he does so. He sees the horrifying sight of earlier traders who are imprisoned and slowly being cannibalized by the *rākṣasīs*. Siṃhala talks to the inmates, then returns and receives further instructions from the bodhisattva.

Next day, he assembles his men surreptitiously. The caravan leader elicits numerous opinions and all report feeling elated about their present fortunes. Six speeches are quoted in the text. For example:

“To have had the chance to enjoy sex and such lovemaking, etc.—How fortunate we are to have been so divinely blessed! We have no desire at all to leave this, our own great fortune, and again go back.”

Another said, “Oh leader, my beloved wife, having put on different jewels and ornaments, honored me happily and allowed me such delightful sexual dalliance with her.”

And another, “O Brave One! By the fruit of what *puṇya* have we enjoyed the pleasures of these tender-bodied ones? We have certainly lived here happily and with the greatest respect. Such kinds of pleasure, even for those kings living in the Three Realms, must be rare. Again, in the Amaravati heaven, even with Indrayani does Indra rarely obtain such pleasure. . . . For this reason, if we were to return to Jambudvīpa, we would not obtain such pleasures. We will stay here forever and do not want to return.”

Great consternation greets Siṃhala’s report regarding the true identity of their young objects of affection. He also informs them of Avalokiteśvara’s instruction for salvation: to go to a sandy shore of the Brahma-pūtra, meet a divine horse there, and follow its instructions exactly.

The day comes and they all slip away to meet the horse named Varaha who instructs them: “O five hundred merchants, if you have the wish to go across the river, I will send you across. Until you reach the other side, you must remember the *Triratna* and not look back. If you obey this, I will deliver all of you to the other side.” They hold on and take off. But the *rākṣasīs* quickly discover their flight, assume their horrific forms, then fly behind their former paramours, seeking their return:

Flying up close to them, the *rākṣasīs* made lamentations as to elicit sympathy . . . [and] create the illusion of enchantment and love. From behind them, they cried, “O Masters! Where are you going? Are you leaving us with youthful figures, whose longings you have satisfied in Ratnapura? Where are you going? Why are you disgracing us? What misery has arisen! O Masters! Why are you going, abandoning your royal robes and sensual pleasures, forgetting the virtues of heaven-like Ratnapura, forsaking our love? O Husbands, Beloved Ones, Lords of Life! Being unable to subdue the longing for enjoyment and the various ways of sex, we have followed after you. Let us accompany you to your country. If you will not do so, then just look back a little, show us just a little glimpse

of your faces. How can you abandon our love and not give us even a glimpse of your faces? We will be helpless! Because of you, we will die! We never thought that you could be so cruel!" They cried on and on with these and other love-inducing words, speaking to them as they followed [behind] in the sky.

Eventually, all but Siṃhala look back, fall off, and are eaten alive, a scene depicted graphically in the Newar hanging scrolls (fig. 1). The text comments that the bad karma from their earlier damaging of the *caitya* was also involved in this catastrophe. Set down on the other shore, the now-solitary Siṃhala thanks Avalokiteśvara, having been informed that his safety was ensured by the past performance of a popular Mahāyāna ritual, the *aṣṭamī vrata*. After he receives a sword, a prediction of his future, and a special *darśan* of the departing bodhisattva, Siṃhala sets off for home.

#### SECTION B

The *rākṣasīs* force the demoness paramour of Siṃhala to pursue him. She creates an apparitional child who resembles Siṃhala and approaches a caravan she meets, concocting a story of Siṃhala abandoning her after they were married and later shipwrecked. She takes refuge in them, expressing Buddhist devotions and persuades them to confront the hero. Once Siṃhala tells them his experience, they flee in terror.

Siṃhala finally reaches home, to his parents' great relief. But soon the *rākṣasī* arrives, telling the same tale to a gathering crowd. Struck by her beauty and moved by the sight of her son, they demand that the caravan leader's father force his son to live up to his paternal responsibilities and admit her into the house.<sup>54</sup> They make their case for compassionate forgiveness: "Having married this woman who seems to be a heavenly nymph, a blameless woman, why did you abandon her in the forest? Even if blameworthy, forgive her. Welcome this princess who has a son and please keep her inside our home."

Convinced of his son's guilt, the father counsels: "O Son, all women are *rākṣasīs*. Therefore, after forgiving her faults, you must love her." But Siṃhala refuses and angrily gives an ultimatum: if she is admitted to the house, he will depart. The parents, of course, side with their son and throw her out.

The same scene then unfolds at the king's palace, where the *rākṣasī* has repeated her story and taken refuge. Called before the king, Siṃhala again hears strong advice, "All women are *rākṣasīs*! Forgive them and love them." Having himself been "caught by lust," the king also proposes, "If you do not really like her, then turn her over to me." The

<sup>54</sup> Like the merchants in the story, one might review the narrative in n. 53 to imagine how this scene could be conjured by a skillful Buddhist storyteller.

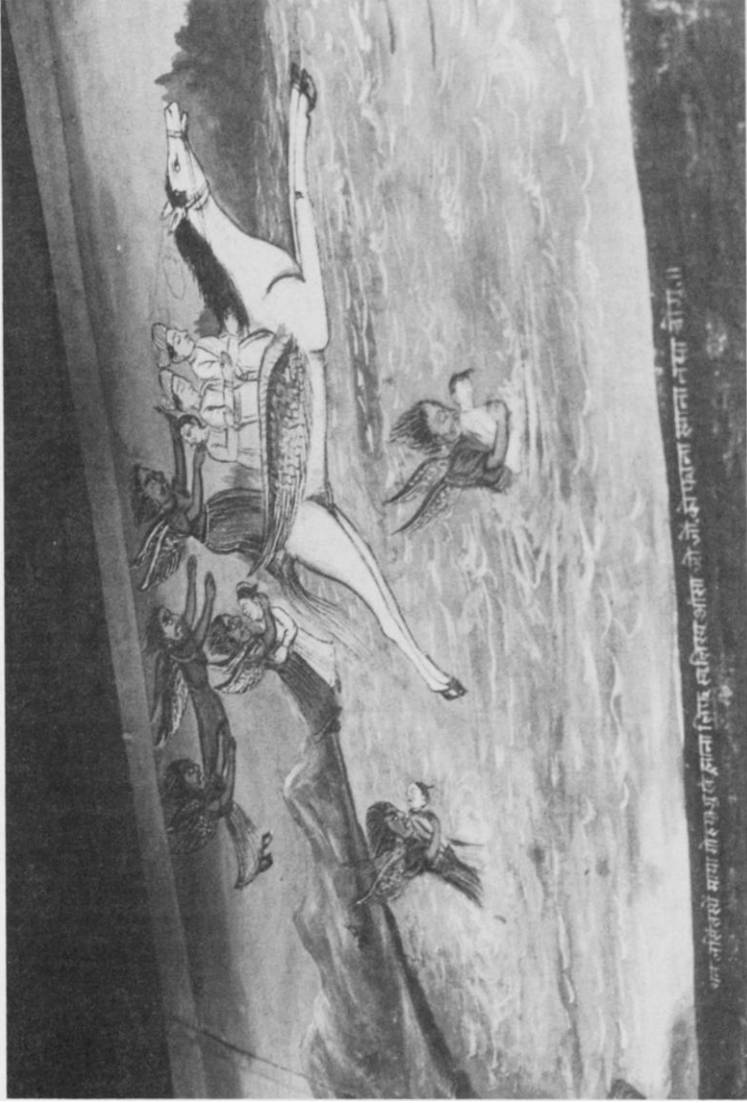


FIG. 1.—Hanging painting illustrating the moment when all merchants but Simhala fail to recall the *triratna*, fall from the *bodhisattva* horse, and are killed by their *rākṣasī* paramours.



king disbelieves the caravan leader's disavowals and takes in the alluring woman along with her child.

Several days later, vultures are seen circling the royal palace and Siṃhala leads the citizenry in discovering that all the inhabitants had been devoured by *rākṣasīs*, who are seen fleeing back to their own land.

#### SECTION C

The citizens meet and elect Siṃhala king. He establishes a just and prosperous society centered on refuge in the *triratna* and marked by the regular observance of the *aṣṭamī vrata*. Eventually, he organizes an army that returns to Ratnapur and routs the *rākṣasīs* after a fierce battle.

Once the *rākṣasīs* surrender, Siṃhala responds to their pitiful confessions that elicit his guarded compassion. He does not execute any but makes each take an oath to go to a faraway forest and never return. He then converts Ratnapur to Buddhism, introduces the *vrata* and social reforms, and finally returns to his home land, where his citizens "cultivated virtuous minds, served the *triratna*, found both pleasure and happiness."

#### IV. THE DOMESTICATION OF A BUDDHIST NARRATIVE TRADITION

##### DOMESTICATION AND NEWAR DIASPORA TRADE

I would define "domestication" as the dialectical process by which a religious tradition is adapted to a region's or ethnic group's socioeconomic and cultural life. While "Great traditions" supply a clear spiritual direction to followers who are close to the charismatic founders, including norms of orthodox adaptation and missionizing, religious traditions' historical survival is related—often paradoxically—to their being "multivocalic" so that later devotees have a large spectrum of doctrine, situational instructions, and exemplary folktales to draw on. The study of "religious domestication" seeks to demonstrate the underlying reasons for selectivity from the whole as the tradition evolves in specific places and times to the "logic of the locality."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> In his article "On Generalized Exchange and the Domestication of the *Sangha*," *Man* 18 (1983): 466, Ivan Strenski has used the term "domestication" to analyze the logic of evolutionary adaptation evident in the history of the *saṃgha*: "a process by and in which the *saṃgha* and laity enter into a complex variety of relationships: residential, ritual, social, political, and economic." This is most apt for tracing the history of the Newar *saṃgha*. Here, domestication is more narrowly focused: in subject matter, as a single story narrative; in geographical scope, with specific lands identified with protagonists in the story; in the linguistic translation from Sanskrit into a Tibeto-Burman vernacular. Literary "domestication" entails the specific redaction of a version of a pan-Buddhist story: local editors within the tradition "make the story their own." This analytical approach might be compared with another theoretical concept long ago contributed to the anthropology of South Asia: McKim Marriott's early discussion of "parochialization," which he

The most popular domesticated stories of a locality engender the community's familiarity such that "retelling the myths takes on the function of communion rather than communication. People listen to the stories not merely to learn something new (communication) but to relive, together, the stories that they already know, stories about themselves (communion)."<sup>56</sup> Our task in studying literary domestication can thus be defined in other terms: among the hundreds of *avadānas* that were conveyed to Nepal, why was this one, like only several others, adopted, enshrined, given local identification, and repeatedly recited among the Buddhist Newars? The remainder of this article will attempt to formulate an answer to this question.

We have seen that trade with Tibet was an important undertaking throughout the last millennium for Buddhist Newars of Kathmandu and Patan who were well situated to control the flow of trade goods going by caravan across the Indo-Tibetan frontier. To trade effectively in Tibet, Newar families sent family members to the major cities—Lhasa, Shigatse, Gyantse—to live for years at a time, forming a classic "trade diaspora." These men learned to speak Tibetan, took part in the cultural life centered on Buddhism, and frequently married Tibetan wives. Newars who traveled to Tibet were of many sorts: some extended successful family businesses from Kathmandu, others attached themselves as salesman in the dominant Newar trading houses, and still others struck out to start new businesses. Newars in Tibet did gather together as a group to celebrate their own festivals and for dealing with Tibetan officials.

The journey to and from central Tibet was perilous: personal illness, the natural hazards of traveling high mountain trails, and even banditry could end in death or destroy the years of profit, especially when returning with gold coins and other treasures.<sup>57</sup> Newars in the great cities of

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defines as "the downward devolution of great-traditional elements and their integration with little-traditional elements . . . a process of localization, of limitation upon the scope of eligibility, of deprivation of literary form, of reduction to less systematic and less reflective dimensions. The process of parochialization constitutes the characteristic creative work of little communities within India's indigenous civilization." ("Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization," in *Village India: Studies in the Little Community*, ed. McKim Marriott [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955], p. 200). While Marriott is certainly correct in noting such transformations as universal and central to Indic history, his framework of distinct traditions is difficult to apply to the entirely urban settings of Kathmandu and Lhasa. Compared with other textual recensions of the *Simhala* tale, the Newar narrative does lose some "reflective dimensions" but adds others, making it difficult to assert a loss of literary qualities.

<sup>56</sup> Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "Impermanence and Eternity in Indian Art and Myth," in *Contemporary Indian Tradition*, ed. Carla M. Borden (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), p. 87.

<sup>57</sup> Schuyler Cammann, *Trade through the Himalayas: The Early British Attempts to Open Tibet* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951).

Tibet (Shigatse, Gyantse, Lhasa) were generally tolerated and treated well, with some having commercial ties with high Tibetan officials. But even in these places there were scattered incidents of uprising against them, including murder.<sup>58</sup>

In the face of such dangers, it should not be surprising that the Siṃhalasārthabāhu *avadāna* was literally domesticated into Newar culture because of this Tibetan trade. Several ferries across the Brahmaputra were constructed to resemble the horse Varahaka (fig. 2). There was also a *stūpa* in Lhasa known as the Siṃhalasārthabāhu *chorten* and a shrine in the Jokhang that contained an image of his “wife” that Newar traders venerated.<sup>59</sup>

The incorporation of the textual tradition was even more elaborate in Kathmandu. The hero of the story is regarded as a bodhisattva and a large gilded image of him is enshrined in one of the Kathmandu’s oldest Buddhist temples (Vikramaśīla Mahāvihāra), dating back to the eleventh century.<sup>60</sup> A visit to this shrine was felt to be propitious before commencing the one-month overland journey to Tibet.

This bodhisattva is also worshiped in the yearly monastery festival. For this, an image of Dīpankara Buddha associated with the hero (who bows before the fixed Siṃhala shrine before the proceedings set out) is carried in procession around the city, accompanied by a gold-inscribed *Prajñāpāramitā* text housed in a palanquin. This entourage, accompanied by musicians and *goṣṭhi* members, visits many neighborhoods, especially those where Tibetan traders predominate.

## V. MULTIPLE LEVELS OF TEXTUAL MEANING IN CONTEXT

### LITERAL BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

The text is an exemplary tale depicting many facets of “Northern Buddhism” in practice: the main hero is identified as an earlier incarnation of Śākyamuṇi; the savior deity taking the form of the white horse is

<sup>58</sup> According to Prem Uprety’s *Nepal-Tibet Relations, 1850–1930* (Kathmandu: Puja Nara, 1980), there were violent incidents against Newar merchants in Lhasa in 1854. Others are noted in 1862 and 1871. In 1883, “all 84 shops in Lhasa were looted” (pp. 97–98). Again in 1911–12, rioters killed five Nepalese and burned thirty-eight shops (p. 132).

<sup>59</sup> Field notes, Lhasa, 1987.

<sup>60</sup> Purna Harsha Bajracarya, “Than Bahil, An Ancient Centre for Sanskrit Study,” *Indologica Taurinensia* 7 (1979): 62–64. Modern informants now identify a small shrine outside the Siṃhalasārthabāhu Vihāra as that of his *rākṣasi* wife. Ajimā herself has been extensively incorporated into Newar Buddhist traditions: her story of child eating and conversion is well known (most recently in John Strong, *Legend and Cult of Upagupta* [n. 4 above], p. 45) and many prominent Newar *stūpas* and *vihāras* have such nearby temples dedicated to her. The domiciling of the defeated *rākṣasi* just outside Siṃhala’s monastery finds no basis in the story, although it is consistent with the final resolution of the conflict.



FIG. 2.—Ferry on the Brahmaputra, circa 1935

Avalokiteśvara; the ritual lauded is the *aṣṭamī vrata*, still a popular devotion to Avalokiteśvara.<sup>61</sup> The closing lines of the Newari text highlights all the benefits of observing this rite.

In its most straightforward doctrinal message, the text is a morality or karma-retribution tale that underlines the dire consequences of damaging *stūpas* and failing to recall and honor the *triratna*. This concern with *stūpa* veneration and the great penalties for desecration span all Buddhist schools.<sup>62</sup> More Mahāyāna in tone is the utter need to rely on the saving graces of the Bodhisattva, whose help is necessary to avoid a disastrous death. This *avadāna* also holds forth with some general teachings about the ideal Buddhist king and society.

<sup>61</sup> The *Aṣṭamī Vrata*, also called *Uposatha Vrata*, is a two-day devotional event focused on Avalokiteśvara. As described by John K. Locke, S.J. (“Uposadha Vrata of Amoghpaśa Lokeśvara in Nepal,” *L’Ethnographie* 83 [1987]: 159–89), the lay community is lead by a *vajrācāra* priest to fast, bathe, and worship the *guru maṇḍala pūjā* during which they take refuge and repeat the bodhisattva vow, the *pāramitās*, eightfold path, etc. After making clay or sand *stūpas*, all in unison make a series of offerings to three *maṇḍalas* dedicated to the *triratna*, then to an Avalokiteśvara *maṇḍala*, including a visualization meditation on his image. After final offerings are made, the priest explains the moral, material, and next-lifetime benefits of the *vrata* and tells one or more stories certifying the benefits. Other *vratas* observed in the Kathmandu Valley are described by Todd T. Lewis, “Mahāyāna *Vratas* in Newar Buddhism,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 12 (1989): 109–38.

<sup>62</sup> Gregory Schopen, “Burial ‘ad sanctos’ and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archaeology of Religions,” *Religion* 17 (1987): 208.

## SYMBOLIC RENDERINGS OF THE FEMININE

Newar Buddhist savants in Kathmandu also have pointed to a deeper, metaphorical reading to the story: namely, that the *rākṣasīs* should be read as symbols of the uncontrolled sense faculties by which people are deluded, making this a tale upholding detachment. Among the earliest textual formulations of this symbolic association is the Pali account of Śākyamuni's temptation by Māra's daughters who personify lust (*rāga*), aversion (*arati*), and craving (*trṣṇā*).<sup>63</sup>

The theme of women's wayward effects on male spiritual attainment is encountered in many *avadānas* and *jātakas*. There is no shortage of examples of the misogynous voice in all compilations of such narratives, as in this example from the *Mahāratnakūṭa*.<sup>64</sup>

Confused by women  
 One is burnt by passion.  
 Because of them  
 One falls into evil ways.  
 There is no refuge.  
 The fool, committing adultery,  
 Lusts over another's wife  
 Imagining there is joy.  
 But, like the domestic chicken  
 Or the wild pheasant,  
 While wandering, he is killed.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Paul (n. 24 above), pp. 6–7.

<sup>64</sup> In a recent article, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," in *Buddhism, Sexuality, Gender*, ed. Jose Egnacio Gabezón (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 3–36, Alan Sponberg has suggested four views of women evident in Buddhist literature: soteriological inclusiveness, institutional androcentrism, ascetic misogyny, and soteriological androgyny. Our tale is the third, nurtured by the second. Another perspective from which to view gender attitudes is through the attitudes expressed toward marriage. There are passages in the Pāli canon that uphold the value of marriage and express a wish for multilifetime conjugal connection. In the *Anguttara Nikāya* (II, 61), an elderly husband Nakul Pitā addressed Śākyamuni, "Blessed one, when my wife was brought to my house, she was a mere girl, and I was only a boy. I cannot recall having been unfaithful to her, not even in thought. Blessed One, we both want to live together in this way, in this life and in our future lives." The wife expresses the same opinions (quoted in Mohan Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Monastic Life* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], p. 169). This same view is expressed in the *Buddhacarita* (E. B. Cowell, trans., *Buddhist Mahayana Texts* [1894; reprint, New York: Dover, 1969], p. 88) through the speech of Śākyamuni's wife Yasodharā:

He does not see that husband and wife are both consecrated in sacrifices, and both purified by the performance of the rites . . . and both destined to enjoy the same results afterwards.

I have no such longing for the joy of heaven, nor is that hard even for common people to win if they are resolute; but my one desire is how he my beloved may never leave me either in this world or the next.

Clearly, the hope for multilifetime relationships in *saṃsāra* was not universally encouraged in the Buddhist literature, however.

<sup>65</sup> Paul, p. 44.

The author of the *Sikṣāsamuccaya* provides another instance of Buddhist gender calculus, extending male ambivalence even toward a wife:

The Bodhisattva in the presence of his wife must realize three thoughts. . . . She is my companion for passion and dalliance, but not for the next world; my companion at meat and drink, but not for the fruition of the maturing of my acts. She is the companion of my pleasure, not of my pain. . . . Three other thoughts are these: that a wife must be regarded as an obstacle to virtue, meditation, and to wisdom. And yet three more: she is like a thief, a murderer, or a guardian of hell.<sup>66</sup>

The *Siṃhala* text graphically depicts the “feminine temptation” situation: the drama of men grasping a savior, trying to focus on Buddha-Dharma-Saṃgha as their former paramours work them over, is a powerful existential image. This theme is reiterated in the Newar text twice again by the hero’s parent and the king through their blunt advice, “All women are, in fact, demonesses (*rākṣasīs*).”

#### TEXT AS ALLEGORY: FURTHER CONTEXTUAL DOMESTICATIONS

The allegorical reading of the story builds on the “woman as danger” sentiment. While the first two messages constitute the general program of Buddhist teachings, connecting the text to the Himalayan context takes us into the specific Newar domestication of the *avadāna* and this requires attention to several additional points regarding the ethnohistorical setting.

It was the custom of many Newar merchants in Tibet to marry Tibetan wives. These wives were usually younger than they and often quite beautiful. Their children, called *khaccar* (Nep. “mongrel” or “offspring of forbidden intercaste union” [Turner 1931: 111]), normally resided in Tibet and received support from their fathers. Most Lhasa traders kept their dual families separated by the Himalayas. How was this practice viewed from Kathmandu? First, polygamy was (and is) legal in Nepal, although it was usually only the rich who could afford to support two households. The Tibetan wife, however, has an attribute that a second Newar wife, even if from a lower caste, would not: the Tibetan wife is a “*sem*.” This is a derogatory Newar term that implies high-caste disdain for Tibetans as dirty and low in caste status, a prejudice that dates from the later Malla era (1429–1769). For the original Newar wife, then, a husband’s marriage in Tibet was often a source of heartache, jealousy, and competition. Affection and ultimately inheritance resources were at stake.

<sup>66</sup> Cecil Bendall and W. H. D. Rouse, trans., *Sikṣā Samuccaya* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), p. 83.

Part A of the *avadāna* provides a graphic cautionary tale that connects directly to the situation: to fall for non-Newar women who are alluring and sensually adept is illusion, as it entails forgetting one's primal loyalty to Newar wife and kin while introducing the danger of enslavement, drowning, and being cruelly eaten alive by the foreign mistresses.<sup>67</sup>

Popular songs from Kathmandu articulate the “nightmare fears” that Newar wives of Lhasa traders confronted. The most prominent theme expressed is the bleak emotional existence they had to endure alone:

The man I love has abandoned me.

He went to Tibet and has become a voluntary exile. Now my mind has become extremely wanton. My highest desire is to sit at his feet. My mind is impatient.

. . . That man left me and went. Fate did not give me the essence of a married woman's life. Oh Lord, do unite me soon with that man. . . .

At night, when I was sitting alone and I remembered, I wept and my heart was depressed.<sup>68</sup>

Another recurring theme in these songs of Tibetan traders' wives alludes to the stresses in the household, since they lived patrilocally and so had to adapt to domestic life under their mothers-in-law and raise the children in the absence of the husband for years on end. As one singer laments:

When I get up in the morning and I go to the room at the top of the house, I see the white snow [of the Himalayas]. When I see this snow, I become mad like a madwoman.

When having the morning meal, the child asks, “Where is father?” Hearing the child's words, my mind becomes restless.<sup>69</sup>

Yet another song elaborates:

Why should I eat and adorn myself? My husband has gone to Tibet. . . . Half the night I have not slept. Today I am weeping, oh husband. . . . My body has dried up. . . . Whither shall I send my sorrow?

There is no help, Oh my husband.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> As Phyllis Granoff has noted in a recent talk, “When Miracles Are Too Many: The Tapi Khanda of the *Skanda Purāna*,” presented at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meetings, New Orleans, April 13, 1991, the universal tendency to demonize one's enemy is common in the Hindu *mahātmyas* as well, where Muslims are often transformed into *rākṣasis*.

<sup>68</sup> Siegfried Lienhard, *The Songs of Nepal* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), p. 51.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

In the face of these obstacles to happiness, these songs indicate the bitter recognition that mercantile wealth is poor compensation for being the wife of a Tibetan trader:

Having been tempted with bracelets and jewels, I have become yours, oh husband. You behaved as if you were a millionaire. But I have been living in hope, oh my husband. . . . Knowing me to be helpless, please help!<sup>71</sup>

The greatest of the “nightmare fears” was widowhood, as this is a recurring theme in these emotion-laden verses. Two even recount the wives committing *sati*.<sup>72</sup>

Given the situation, it should not be surprising that the Buddhist traditions in Kathmandu adapted to the deeply felt need the community had for merchant husbands to return to Nepal safely. The *vihāra* shrine of *Siṃhalasārthabāhu* was one site for seeking divine assistance, as was the yearly *jārā* of this Bodhisattva that brought the protector’s presence into merchant neighborhoods for *pūjā*. The *aṣṭamī vrata* could also be done in the husband’s name, despite his absence. All Newar merchant families also worship *Bhimsen* for protection and prosperity.<sup>73</sup>

Further contextual analysis points to yet other related factors underlying the story’s broad appeal. Occasionally *khaccar* children did return to Kathmandu. There are cases of *khaccar* girls marrying *Urāy*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>72</sup> Although evidence of this tradition of widow immolation may seem striking in a Buddhist community, it is found not infrequently in the *Mahāyāna avadāna* collections in the Kathmandu Valley. In a recently published study of another popular Newar *avadāna*, *sati* figures prominently in the plot, making possible a miraculous Bodhisattva hierophony despite its close proximity to an eloquent statement on *ahiṃsā*. (This text is translated in Todd T. Lewis, “Contributions” [n. 44 above].) Other examples from the later *avadāna* literatures must be surveyed to evaluate this aspect of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism’s domestication in later lay societies of South Asia. There were apparently opposing opinions regarding suicide across the *Mahāyāna* literature, with *avadānas* illustrating both views: see Cheng-mei Ku, “A Ritual of *Mahāyāna* Vinaya: Self-Sacrifice,” in *Buddhist Thought and Ritual*, ed. David Kalupahana (New York: Paragon, 1991), pp. 159–71; and Jan Yun-hua, “Buddhist Self-Immolation in Medieval China,” *History of Religions* 4 (1965): 243–68.

<sup>73</sup> The historical basis for the Newar association of *Bhimsen* with Tibet has not been explored in depth. The tradition seems to originate in Nepal, where nearly every Newar shop in the Kathmandu bazaar will have a small shrine to this deity that the shopkeeper will worship at each day’s opening, reflecting a general sentiment that *Bhimsen* protects traders. The domestication of the *Bhimsen* tradition may reflect an influence of the *Mahābhārata* in which *Bhīma* during the *Pāṇḍhava* exile marries a tribal wife of the north and seeks gold in the Himalayas. Over the past two hundred years, Newar Tibetan traders have welcomed a delegation that has walked the thirty or so days from Kathmandu’s large *Bhimsen* temple to Lhasa, where the *pūjāri*, wearing ritual clothing and falling into divine possession, received elaborate and costly *pūjā* offerings from the resident Nepalese community. As indicated in Lienhard’s anthology (*Songs of Nepal*, cited above), several Newar songs likewise invoke his help in bringing a husband’s return.



boys, since in community reckoning the children would retain their father's status (although this was a minor blemish on the patrilineage). But *khaccar* sons were another case entirely. They were of course not welcome in their father's Kathmandu homes or in the valley, either, for the reason that they could under customary Nepalese law claim a share equal to that of the "pure" Newar sons from their father's estate.<sup>74</sup> They were not of acceptable status for marriage to proper Urāy girls, either, and the *khaccar* men in the Kathmandu Valley have mainly married other *khaccars* or Tibetans.

The Newar redaction of the Siṃhala tale presents a dramatic allegory of this problem. In Part A, the hero's ethnospecific sentiments are implicit in his curious failure to extend his salvific leadership to the imprisoned, soon-to-be cannibalized merchants who arrived from another land before Siṃhala. (This is apparently part of the literary editing involved in redacting the local Newar text: earlier versions of the story [up through the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha*] contain an account of the magical fortress that defies mundane escape, in explanation of this omission.)<sup>75</sup>

In Part B, the ethnic Himalayan resonances continue: unlike the hero, who refuses to admit the former wife *rākṣasī*—and son—into his house, the lustful king does, and his entire family is devoured because he admitted the outsider. Like a Tibetan woman taken in marriage, the *rākṣasī* arrives without property and with the burden of a son, a *khaccar*; she, too, expresses pious Buddhist affirmations. The text's unmistakable message for a Newar of Kathmandu is to impart the danger of breaking the circle of Newar ethnicity and kinship: all can be lost. Even the apparent common devotion to Buddhism should not cloud a recognition of impending disaster.

A final note must be made on the destiny of this tradition. Newar trade with Tibet effectively ended in 1959 after the Dalai Lama's government fled Lhasa into exile. The traditions described above have in several respects declined in the thirty years since then. Special merchant rituals at the Siṃhalasārthabāhu shrine are only rarely performed. I found no record in the last fifteen years of a public

<sup>74</sup> Some of the rare stories I could collect of family violence in Kathmandu's Buddhist merchant families occurred under these circumstances, directed against *khaccar* sons.

<sup>75</sup> As J. W. De Jong has pointed out, the hero in literary versions confronted an "iron fortress" that was magically charged with transformative powers to defy escape. The walls respond to any *thought* of escape by an inmate and compensate by growing higher, lower, or thicker ("The Magic Wall of the Fortress of the Ogresses: Apropos of *asiyati* [Mahavastu III, 86.3]," in *Buddhist Studies by J. W. de Jong*, ed. Gregory Schopen [The Hague: Mouton, 1981], pp. 293–96). The Newar version omits this situation, raising the question of why the hero Siṃhala and, for that matter, why Avalokiteśvara did not include earlier victims in the horse-escape operation.

storytelling event featuring this *avadāna*; and unlike every other popular and valley-domesticated Buddhist story tradition, only this one has not yet been “canonized” into a vernacular Newari comic book. Most striking is the fate of the *cakan dyah jatra*: always held on the same lunar day overlapping Holi’s weeklong celebration, for at least twenty years this festival procession into the bazaar has seen greatly diminished numbers of participants and patrons. For many, it has also lost its meaning and dignity since the gilded image and palanquin are now a prominent target for water balloons and the festival attendants are treated rudely as just another raucous Holi procession of young men. This is a striking simulacrum for the modern city’s shifting religious allegiances and the general drift toward Nepal’s state Hinduism.<sup>76</sup>

#### VI. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu avadāna* and the Newar Buddhist traditions that developed around it looks beyond the explicit didactic message of the text, although they surely matter, to the contextual factors to explain why this *avadāna*, among the hundreds of stories in the literature, came to enjoy unique articulation and domestication in the Kathmandu Valley. It joins only several others in being incorporated into the religious geography and temporal lives of the Newar Buddhists.<sup>77</sup>

In the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu* story redaction, we can observe how a pan-Buddhist story of caravan merchants crossing the ocean was translated—linguistically and culturally—into a trans-Himalayan adventure in Kathmandu-Lhasa trade. The pan-Asian popularity of this *avadāna* can also be explained by the universal presence of diaspora merchant groups as Buddhist *upāsakas*. In several ways, the *avadāna* is a strong cautionary tale for all diaspora merchants, aligning the central ideas of Buddhism with both practical *and* sacred counsel to remain chaste while abroad and loyal to one’s own ethnic group and kin.

The literary evidence shows how the last Nepalese redaction went beyond mere geographical transposition to achieve a finely tuned and nuanced narrative with strong local resonance within the Newar mercantile

<sup>76</sup> Leo E. Rose, “Secularization of a Hindu Polity: The Case of Nepal,” in *Religion and Political Development*, ed. Donald E. Smith (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), pp. 31–48.

<sup>77</sup> Other domesticated Buddhist tales in modern Newar Buddhism are the *Vessantara Jātaka* (the most popular tale across the Buddhist world), the *Mañicūḍa Avadāna* (in which the Bodhisattva sacrifices his life for medicine to save a country from plague), the *Mahāsattva Rāja Kumār Avadāna* (“The Great Prince Story,” in which the Bodhisattva saves a hungry tigress and cubs), and the *Śṛṅgabheri Avadāna* (“Buffalo Horn Blowing”). The Newari *Mañicūḍa* tale has been translated by Siegfried Lienhard in *Mañicūḍavadānoddhṛta: A Buddhist Re-Birth Story in the Nevāri Language* (Stockholm: Alquist & Wikesell, 1963). The last has been translated by Lewis, “Contributions” (see n. 44).

community. The heartache and fears of Newar wives who stayed at home while their husbands lived for years in Tibet are aroused, while devotions to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (at the yearly festival and especially through the *aṣṭamī vrata*) simultaneously highlighted and alleviated the anxiety. These themes would also resonate with the majority of male traders who lived in the Kathmandu Valley and whose interests were also threatened by brothers and fathers who were Tibetan traders and in whose hands the family fortune resided. The wide-ranging Newar kinship networks<sup>78</sup> magnified the relevance of the Lhasa traders' conduct.<sup>79</sup> The fact that less than half of the traders studied actually married Tibetan women indicates the problematic situation and the countervailing sentiments involved.

The Siṃhala tale alludes to the problem of upholding primordial boundaries, an allegory reaching deeply into kin and ethnic awareness. I conclude that it was precisely because of the possibility of admitting Tibetan wives and their children into the nexus of Newar kin and inheritance that this text received elaborate attention as it upheld family boundaries while paradoxically overruling countervailing sentiments of Buddhist universalism. Most strikingly, the frame of Himalayan adaptation leaves the redacted story out of exact alignment with Mahāyāna doctrinal teachings. The Newar Siṃhala traditions indicate how certain voices of Buddhist interpretation are domesticated and enter the life and logic of their context on multiple levels. Although the Newar redaction on one level upholds Mahāyāna traditions, on others—in its historical, social setting—it cautions about the dangers of embracing outsiders, even those who may also claim to follow the Dharma.

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<sup>78</sup> Gerard Toffin, "La Terminologie de Parente Newar: Analyse descriptive et comparative," *L'Homme* 15 (1975): 81–98; Declan Quigley, "Introversion and Isogamy: Marriage Patterns of the Newars of Nepal," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 20 (1986): 75–95.

<sup>79</sup> This sentiment is captured by the Newar proverb: "It is not just a question of the flood carrying away the husband, but the loss of the boat" (Kesar Lal, *Lore and Legend of Nepal* [Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1985], p. 7).