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.1 After defining this phenomenon, which I refer to as “domestication,” I demonstrate how the narrative elements of the Simhasārthabāhu 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

Early versions of this article were presented at the 1991 South Asia Meetings, University of Wisconsin–Madison, at the 1991 Harvard University Himalayan Seminar, and at the 1992 Annual Meetings of the American Oriental Society. I would like to acknowledge funding from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for supporting the research on which this study is based. Special thanks go to John Esposito for his reading the manuscript. This article is dedicated to Pratyek Man Tuladhar, former Lhasa trader, generous informant, and true kalyānamitra.

1 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.

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0018-2710/94/3302-0002$01.00
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 Śākyamuni 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.2

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" (tirascakathika). 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.3 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 Simhala Avadāna.4

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”). Following this genealogy, the Simhala story reached nearly all Asian Buddhist communities. Siegfried Lienhard has established that the modern Newari recension likely derives from the early Divyavadāna that subsequently inspired a longer Mahāyāna-styled revision in the Kārandaṃavyāha. The Nepali Buddhist narrative draws on the Kārandaṃavyāha-derived Guṇakārandaṃavyāha, 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.

It also seems likely that the modern Newari version developed through the local storytelling of the Guṇakārandaṃavyāha, 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.” 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, the mercantile sector of the

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6 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 three 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 Simhala (Berlin: Museums fur Indische Kunst, 1985), explores the early textual traditions of the Simhala story and presents a long scroll with a translation of its caption text.

7 The Sanskrit version of the Simhala story in the Guṇakārandaṃavyāha is found in Y. Iwamoto, Bukkyō Setsuwa Kenkyu Josetsu (Kyoto: Hozokan, 1967), pp. 247–94.


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

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

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. The most famous, pan-Buddhist exemplary donors in the literature are the royal donors: King Vessantara, the last incarnation of the Buddha Sakyamuni, and King Aśoka. There are also two similarly renowned merchant families: Anāthapiṇḍika and Visākhā. Other prominent merchants are Ghosita of Kausambi and the merchant Purna of Śrāvasti (Lamotte, pp. 20–21). The most famous Mahāyāna lay sage Vimalakīrti is also described as being a businessman who gives lavishly to the saṁgha 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.)


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12 Lamotte, p. 66.


15 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 sārta-vāhā’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], pp. 79; Samuel Beal, trans., Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World [New York: Paragon, 1970], 1:xxii, xxxix, lvi, 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 Buddhās, 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.” 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), sobriety, and disciplined investment. Wealth acquired dishonestly is said to lead to later torments in hells.

Wealth, although not the summmum 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.” Rightly acquired wealth, if donated as dāna, will beget even greater future wealth, encouraging the merchants to

of Indic Buddhist history. The Kharosti records support this hypothesis. As reported in T. Burrow, A Translation of the Kharosti 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 Kharosti 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).

18 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.
20 As summarized in Radhagovinda Basak, ed., Mahāvastu Avadāna (Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1963), 1:xxv.
redistribute their riches back into society.\textsuperscript{21} Material wealth cannot be “taken with you”; but turned into \textit{puṇya} through \textit{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 \textit{Mahālamaṅkāra śāstra} compares the dharma to a “great market where the goods are sold to all.”\textsuperscript{22} The \textit{Saddharmapuṇḍarika} calls Amitābha “Caravan Chief of Living Beings.”\textsuperscript{23} One Mahāyāna text explicitly promises success in overseas trade as a reward for proper service to one’s parents.\textsuperscript{24} Another area of the tradition, also hardly explored, designated certain Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and allied \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{25} 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;\textsuperscript{26} in Tibet and Java it was Jambhala.\textsuperscript{27}

Mahāyāna texts also extol bodhisattva \textit{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.\textsuperscript{28}

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\textsuperscript{29}—created symbiotic relationships with traders.\textsuperscript{30} Given the commonality of vaiśyas becoming monks, the regular income from

\textsuperscript{21} I note below the religious institutions within Buddhist merchant communities (ancient and modern) that did precisely this.


\textsuperscript{24} Paul, p. 36.

\textsuperscript{25} Noted in George Coedes, \textit{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 \textit{Sīṃhalāvadāna} festival (as discussed below).

\textsuperscript{26} Lamotte, p. 688.


\textsuperscript{30} Ray (n. 10 above), pp. 87–89.
dana, 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.31

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.52 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.33 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 (gōsthīs) that from antiquity onward have been established by lay communities to organize their dāna and wider devotions. Pali jātakas cite subscription plans among upāsakas,34 and such groups were often formed to complete cāitya and cave-building or renovation projects.35 If centuries-old modern Newar traditions are representative of older Indic precedents, there were also gōsthīs to organize regular monthly rituals, pilgrimage, restorations, even shrine cleanings.36 An important economic aspect of practice should be underlined: gōsthīs hold collective

31 Heitzman (n. 11 above), p. 32.
32 Liu (n. 10 above), pp. 127–36.
33 Christopher I. Beckwith, “Tibet and the Early Medieval Florissence 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/entrepreneurising 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 Sātavāhana era.
34 Rhys-Davis (n. 16 above), p. 886.
35 Dehejia (n. 14 above), pp. 141ff.
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.37

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).38 In 1685, there was even a Eurasian Armenian trade network linked through the region into Lhasa.39 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.40 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.

37 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.

38 Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, Himalayan Traders (New York: St. Martin’s, 1975).


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 rājāvāma calling itself Licchavi. Alongside various Hindu traditions existed diverse Buddhist traditions, with the most mentioned samgha that of the Mahāsāṃghikas. Among more than two hundred recorded inscriptions, there are frequent references to land-owning vihāras, bhikṣus, and bhikṣunis. 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 Śākyamuni 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-Hinayāna Indic Buddhism. The many Mahāyāna traditions still observed there likewise point to universal patterns of Mahāyāna Buddhist sociocultural adaptation that once characterized other communities of South, Southeast, and Central Asia.

The Mahāyāna samgha 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. Like married Tibetan lamas of the Nyingmapa order,

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, Śākyas, and the Uraī (merchant/artisan subcastes) eligible to take esoteric vajrayāna initiations (Skt. dikṣā; New. dekka) that direct meditation and ritual to tantric deities such as Śaṃvara, Hevajra, and their consorts (yoginis). 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) and make regular offerings at temples dedicated to the celestial Bodhisattvas (such as Avalokiteśvara) and Buddhist saviors (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.

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, festival pūjās, textual recitations, healing rites, and site consecration ceremonies. 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. Laypersons and the

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45 Riccardi, p. 274.
47 Slusser, pp. 420–21.
48 The Newari Ācāryakriyasamuccaya 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 Ācāryakriyasamuccaya of Jagaddarpana,” in Buddhist Studies in India, ed. R. C. Pandora [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
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The prominence of a caste-delimited *samgha*, 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. Newars for at least one thousand years were highly sought artisans across Tibet, and in more recent times lamas were called to Kathmandu to supervise major renovations of Swayambhū and Baudhā. 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 *samgha* 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.

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

III. SUMMARY OF THE NEWARI SIMHALASĀRTHAṬABĀHU 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.53

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

53 A Chinese text, likely alluding to the chief rākṣasi 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.

To allay disbelief, Simhala 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. Simhala 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 Jambudvipa, we would not obtain such pleasures. We will stay here forever and do not want to return.”

Great consternation greets Simhala’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 Brahmapūtra, meet a divine horse there, and follow its instructions exactly.

The day comes and they all slip away to meet the horse named Vara-haka 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 Simhala 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 Simhala thanks Avalokiteśvara, having been informed that his safety was ensured by the past performance of a popular Mahāyāna ritual, the āṣṭami vrata. After he receives a sword, a prediction of his future, and a special darṣan of the departing bodhisattva, Simhala sets off for home.

SECTION B

The rākṣasīs force the demoness paramour of Simhala to pursue him. She creates an apparitional child who resembles Simhala and approaches a caravan she meets, concocting a story of Simhala 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 Simhala tells them his experience, they flee in terror. Simhala finally reaches home, to his parents’ great relief. But soon the rākṣasi 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.54 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 rākṣasis. Therefore, after forgiving her faults, you must love her.” But Simhala 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 rākṣasi has repeated her story and taken refuge. Called before the king, Simhala again hears strong advice, “All women are rākṣasis! 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

54 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 *rākṣasi* 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 Simhala 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 Simhala 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, Simhala 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 socio-economic 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.”

55 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 samgha: “a process by and in which the samgha 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 samgha. 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 Marriot’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).” 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. Newars in the great cities of
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.58

In the face of such dangers, it should not be surprising that the Śimhalasārthabāhu 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 Śimhalasārthabāhu chorten and a shrine in the Jokhang that contained an image of his “wife” that Newar traders venerated.59

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.60 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 Dipankara Buddha associated with the hero (who bows before the fixed Śimhala 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 Śākyamuni; the savior deity taking the form of the white horse is

58 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).


60 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 Śimhalasārthabāhu 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 Simhala’s monastery finds no basis in the story, although it is consistent with the final resolution of the conflict.
Avalokiteśvara; the ritual lauded is the astami vrata, still a popular devotion to Avalokiteśvara. 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. 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.

The Astami Vrata, also called Upasatha Vrata, is a two-day devotional event focused on Avalokiteśvara. As described by John K. Locke, S.J. (“Uposadha Vrata of Amoghapāśa Lokesvara in Nepal,” L’Ethnographie 83 [1987]: 159–89), the lay community is lead by a vajrācārya 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.

Newar Buddhist savants in Kathmandu also have pointed to a deeper, metaphorical reading to the story: namely, that the rākṣasis 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 (ṭṛṣṇā).63

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 Mahārātanakīṭa:64

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.65

63 Paul (n. 24 above), pp. 6–7.
64 In a recent article, “Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism,” in Buddhism, Sexuality, Gender, ed. Jose Egnacio Gabezon (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 Pali 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 Yasodhara:

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 sansāra was not universally encouraged in the Buddhist literature, however.

65 Paul, p. 44.
The author of the *Siksāsammuccaya* 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.66

The Siṃhala text graphically depicts the “feminine temptation” situation: the drama of men grasping a savior, trying to focus on Buddha-Dharma-Samgha 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 (*rākṣasis*).”

**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.

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.67

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.68

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.69

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.70

67 As Phyllis Granoff has noted in a recent talk, “When Miracles Are Too Many: The Tapi Khanda of the Skanda Purāṇa,” 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.
69 Ibid., p. 59.
70 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!71

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.72

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 Simhalasarthabahu was one site for seeking divine assistance, as was the yearly jātra of this Bodhisattva that brought the protector’s presence into merchant neighborhoods for pūjā. The aṣṭami vrata could also be done in the husband’s name, despite his absence. All Newar merchant families also worship Bhimsen for protection and prosperity.73

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

71 Ibid., p. 60.
72 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 hierophany despite its close proximity to an eloquent statement on ahimsā. (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.
73 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 Bhima during the Pandhava 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.74 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 Sīmhala 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 Sīmhala. (This is apparently part of the literary editing involved in redacting the local Newar text: earlier versions of the story [up through the Guṇakaṇḍavyūha] contain an account of the magical fortress that defies mundane escape, in explanation of this omission.)75

In Part B, the ethnic Himalayan resonances continue: unlike the hero, who refuses to admit the former wife rākṣasi—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 rākṣasi arrives without property and with the burden of a son, a khaccar; she, too, expresses pious Buddhist affirmations. The text's unmissable 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 Sīmhalaśārthabāhu shrine are only rarely performed. I found no record in the last fifteen years of a public

74 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.

75 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 asiyaṭi [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 Sīmhala 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 guilded 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.76

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the *Simhalasārthabāhu* *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.77

In the *Simhalasārthabāhu* 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

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77 Other domesticated Buddhist tales in modern Newar Buddhism are the *Vessantara Jātaka* (the most popular tale across the Buddhist world), the *Manicāda 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 *Manicāda* tale has been translated by Siegfried Lienhard in *Manicādaavadānoddhṛta: A Buddhist Re-Birth Story in the Newāri 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 astami 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 magnified the relevance of the Lhasa traders' conduct. The fact that less than half of the traders studied actually married Tibetan women indicates the problematic situation and the countervailing sentiments involved.

The Simhala 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 Simhala 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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79 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 Lall, Lore and Legend of Nepal [Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1985], p. 7).