Review

The Traffic in Hierarchy: Masculinity and Its Others in Buddhist Burma, by Ward Keeler. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 350 pp., \$72 (hb), \$30 (pb). ISBN: 978-0-82-486594-8 (hb), 978-0-82-488312-6 (pb).

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In *Traffic in Hierarchy* cultural anthropologist Ward Keeler, a specialist in Southeast Asia, reflects on extended research conducted in Burma (Myanmar) in 1987 and again in 2011 and 2012. Though Keeler is not a scholar of Buddhist texts and traditions (p. 34), his ethnography focuses on Buddhism because it is what Burmans (both monastic and lay) were eager to discuss (pp. 31–32). But his primary interests lie in social issues related to hierarchy and difference, and more broadly in what he describes as Buddhist Burmans' conflicting desires for social connection and personal freedom. Because this conflict is an existential conundrum that affects people everywhere (p. 269), according to Keeler, his work is also an exercise in cross-cultural comparison (p. 275), considering egalitarian societies that privilege individuals in contrast to hierarchical societies like Burma that prioritize people's relationships within the social structure as a whole. Aware of liberal biases among anthropologists who idealize egalitarianism and denigrate hierarchy (pp. 9–10), Keeler intends to describe and analyse Burmese society as a logical system without judging Burmans by western standards of rights, agency and resistance.

Drawing on the work of Louis Dumont (Chapter 1, and the main topic of Chapter 4), Keeler emphasizes that hierarchical societies are based on relationships wherein 'privileges and obligations ... are incumbent on all parties' (p. 3), so that 'participants are oriented to a whole that binds them to one another', and both superordinates and subordinates have responsibilities towards each other (p. 12). As he emphasizes throughout the book, '[h]ierarchical arrangements are always predicated on mutual interdependence through difference' (p. 111). While demonstrating how such ties that bind manifest in Burman society in various ways, Keeler nevertheless finds that autonomy is the 'ultimate value' for Burman Buddhists, revealing a tension

between interdependence and autonomy, both ideals grounded in hierarchical thinking (p. 128). The autonomous Buddhist monk, calm and detached, sits at the apex of this social structure, hence Keeler's attention to masculinity.

A lengthy Chapter 2 presents a detailed ethnography of day-to-day life in a Mandalay monastery where Keeler resided in 2011 and 2012, observing monks and their interactions with the lay community, and noting remarkable diversity among the monastery's residents. Attentive to matters of difference and status in each section, Keeler says in conclusion (pp. 86–92) that boys come to the monastery for different reasons: to move from village to city (closer to spiritual, political and financial centres of power), to learn Burmese and/or Pali, and perhaps acquire Buddhist titles, which enable monks to teach and thereby interact with wealthy lay donors. Becoming a member of the monastic community is thus a means to accessing education and increasing prestige.

In Chapter 3, 'Discretionary Attachments: Monks and Their Social Relations', Keeler notes that men come to the monastery, whether briefly or more permanently, to cultivate a "cool mind" (*sei' nyein de*) and become 'calm and untroubled' (p. 93). Keeler says this goal represents a monastic preference for detachment and autonomy over attachment and intimacy, especially as found in marriage and other intense personal relationships, as the strict prohibition on sexual activity also shows (pp. 93–94). Here Keeler cautions against viewing monks through the lens of 'contemporary American public discourse [that] favor[s] deep, emotionally intense, and long-term relationships' as the source of personal satisfaction, noting that the notion of 'satisfaction' is always culturally and historically conditioned (p. 94). While such anthropological caution is certainly reasonable, Keeler fails—in this chapter and others—to situate such claims about monks and monastic Buddhism within the context of gender studies, despite claiming that he 'take[s] gender as key to [his] analysis of Burman society' (p. 32). Missing from Keeler's study, for example, is any reference to Alan Sponberg's categorization of Buddhist discourses, especially Sponberg's description of institutional androcentrism and ascetic misogyny, both relevant to the monastic context Keeler describes. Masculine/monastic autonomy and detachment, after all, are constructed in opposition to feminine/familial attachment and passion, and though Keeler states explicitly that 'autonomy is gendered masculine and attachment is gendered feminine in Burma' (p. 239), he fails to note the misogyny underlying such claims that enable monks to occupy the apex of the socio-religious system on their way to nirvana.

Similarly in Chapter 8, 'Masculinity', and Chapter 9, 'Masculinity's Others: Women, Nuns, and Trans Women', although he engages with R. W. Connell's influential *Masculinities* (1995), Keeler makes only passing reference to John Powers' illuminating *A Bull of a Man* (2009), a work that seems critical for contextualizing the tensions between ascetic monastic masculinity and productive lay masculinity—a tension Keeler finds puzzling since both represent

'idealized masculinity', but in radically different performances (p. 228). Other seminal works likewise germane to Keeler's study—such as José Cabezón's *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism* (2017) and Serinity Young's *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts* (2004)—are not included in the bibliography, despite their significance for contextualizing masculinity's 'others', namely women. But Keeler tellingly claims that '[f]or monks, the difference that really matters, ideologically, is not gender difference at all but rather that between lay status and religious, since this is the basis on which relations of exchange are elaborated between the sangha and its supporters' (p. 233). This perspective explains Keeler's relative neglect of women in a book nominally focused on gender, despite the fact that the difference between women and men lies at the basis of monks' claims to greater autonomy, prestige, and power, and thus more material support from the lay community. Monks superordinate status therefore rests on women's and nuns' subordination, which explains the sceptical and sometimes contemptuous attitude of Burmans towards nuns (p. 250). But Keeler's work effectively minimizes the significance of sex and gender difference despite his subtitle, 'Masculinity and Its Others', all of which Others are perhaps gendered feminine in relation to monks modelling their behaviour on the ideally masculine Buddha.

Scholars seeking a critical analysis of gender in Buddhism will likely find Keeler's book disappointing, therefore, although his ethnographic data is sometimes rich and fascinating, especially in its focus on an understudied Theravada Buddhist culture such as Burma's. But Keeler's primary interests are not really in gender and Buddhism, as his concluding chapter shows, but rather in what he calls human beings' conflicting desires for autonomy and attachment (pp. 269, 275), a consistent focus throughout the book. The Buddhist Burman case provides a particularly interesting example of this conflict—a universal one, according to Keeler—because while Burma's hierarchical social system and the Buddhist hierarchy between monk and lay donor are both grounded in 'mutual interdependence through difference', the ultimate goal of Buddhist monks is autonomy and isolation, a goal that undoes all social relation, according to Keeler. Although Bailey and Mabbett (another important source neglected by Keeler) have amply demonstrated that the Buddha and his monks were hardly socially isolated in ancient South Asia (*The Sociology of Early Buddhism*, 2003), Keeler's exaggerated emphasis on nirvana as a social ideal that entails absolute isolation (p. 260) undermines Dumontian claims about 'hierarchical principles' evincing 'an orientation to the whole, or holism', in contrast to western individualism (pp. 112–13). Meditation, moreover, the topic of Chapter 7, is modelled on 'an individual totally alone', writes Keeler, like a 'monk in the forest ... in complete emotional and social isolation', invulnerable to others and to life's many challenges (p. 201)—quite unlike the monks Keeler actually encountered, in fact. Yet such an isolated state is clearly unappealing to Keeler, and herein lies the normative message threaded throughout the monograph: despite the

Buddhist idealization of isolation in meditation and ultimately in nirvana, the monastery is a homosocial environment where monks meditate together, which Keeler says supports his 'claim that we humans are fundamentally, and irrevocably, social beings ... even in the most concerted efforts we make to overcome [our sociality]' (p. 211). So not only does Keeler judge monks in their quest for nirvana: '... why bother being alive if you are so removed from social relations as to be, in effect, dead?' (p. 204), but on the whole, the book reveals the author's search for a form of ideal community that privileges relationships and celebrates our common humanity. In Burma, even with its hierarchical social structure that binds everyone together in lasting ways, the Buddhist (monastic) ideal of autonomy favours isolation and detachment, ultimately undoing the community.

Keeler is bold to address such big ideas throughout the book, especially since these hardly find favour in anthropology these days, and the work is engaging and provocative for precisely this reason. Scholars of South Asian religions, however, may find the book frustrating due to its shallow presentation of Buddhism, and due to its failure to deliver on the promise of the title: to expose masculinity as normativity, and to analyse how Buddhist men attain privilege, power and autonomy by trafficking various marginalized and subordinated Others, especially women.