

Ward Keeler. *The Traffic in Hierarchy: Masculinity and Its Others in Buddhist Burma.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017. 350 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-6594-8.

Reviewed by Patrick McCormick

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Commissioned by Bradley C. Davis (Eastern Connecticut State University)

Keeler's excellent volume offers a timely, much-needed study of social hierarchy and its pervasive influence in Burman society. As a keen observer of Burma (Myanmar), Keeler first spent an extended period of time in the country in 1988 before returning regularly in the mid-2000s.[1] In the intervening years, he spent considerable periods of time in Java and Bali, two other Southeast Asian societies where social hierarchy features prominently and has been described. With his language skills in Burmese and his training as a cultural anthropologist, Keeler is well positioned to observe disparate aspects of Burmese society and draw out the commonalities underlying them.

At the heart of Keeler's work is the idea of hierarchy, the phenomenon of people arranging themselves into a unified whole—society—according to difference. Those differences represent differences in value—that is, how members of society evaluate and place a value on them—from lesser to greater. A hierarchical arrangement by nature generates and reinforces difference, because only when there is difference can there be the ranking upon which hierarchy depends. In other words, if everyone in society is the same, there can be no difference and hence no hierarchy. Differences must be meaningful, and must be observable, whether in constructions of gender,

or displays of wealth and education, or between ethnic groups. Differences in, for example, hair-style and clothing can mark out ethnic differences, but can just as easily be interpreted as manifestations of hierarchical differences, together with language and consumption practices.

In his formulation, Keeler has relied heavily on the work of the French anthropologist Louis Dumont's classic of the 1970s, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, in which he analyzed the workings of hierarchy in South Asia. Keeler is keenly aware of the criticisms of hierarchy, which I address below, and the differences in social context of South Asian and Burman society. Perhaps the most salient difference between South Asia and Burma is descent: whereas South Asian society is patrilineal, Burman society (that is, the society of the Burman Buddhists, who are the majority group in the country) traces descent through both one's mother and father. The category of kin is sharply delineated in South Asia, but in Burma, far more people can be kin, so much so that one's natal village can just as easily serve to demarcate kin networks. When kin are clearly delineated, moral demands are also clear—one knows one's own duties towards kin, and also knows who to turn to in times of need. But in a more diffuse system like in Burma, the demands are potentially endless, while the duties are more

vague and subject to negotiation. Hence in Burma has arisen the ideal of creating and maintaining autonomy, not so much in an absolute sense of removing oneself from the social obligations of society altogether, but rather removing oneself from them as much as possible.

These two interconnected ideas, hierarchy as a principle for organizing society, and autonomy as a cultural ideal, inform Keeler's analysis of seemingly disparate aspects of life in Burma in successive chapters. For example, Keeler argues that the rules of traffic reflect the local understanding of hierarchy. To an outsider, the behavior of pedestrians and bicyclists entering traffic without looking or slowing down first seems foolishly risky. Keeler argues that to do so would to admit a subordinate position in what is, after all, a situation in which everyone is free to assert their own rank, privilege, and status. The overall system, however, reflects a common understanding that the more powerful (vehicles already in motion) must accommodate their inferiors, if not by slowing down, at least by not hitting them.

Keeler spends several chapters considering religious life and religious practices. Autonomy is gendered. Burmese Buddhism, which reinforces societal norms, offers many more ways for men to be relatively autonomous than women. Hence Keeler considers in depth the epitome of masculine autonomy, the monk, who sits at the pinnacle of prestige in the Burmese Buddhist social order. Autonomy, however, is hardly absolute: Keeler sees it as constrained by, and relative within, the systems of exchange and mutual reliance that are inherent to hierarchy. In the case of monks, despite their high prestige and status, they are nonetheless utterly reliant upon laypeople to feed them because of religious strictures against monks cooking food. Thus the superior monks are locked in a system of exchange in which they receive food in exchange for providing their inferiors with opportunities to make merit and improve the conditions in their next lives. Such comple-

mentarity and mutual dependence, based on mutual obligations and duties, mark social relations throughout society.

A tension in the relationship between monks and laypeople is the desire of monks for greater autonomy, against lay supporters (often women) and their desires for greater intimacy and attachment, often simply in the form of demanding the time of the monks to whom they give resources. Burman society, Keeler observes, regards attachment or *than'yawzin* with wariness as an impediment to spiritual development. It is not that Burmese Buddhism fosters emotional distance and coldness. Rather, Keeler argues, Buddhist norms offers much encouragement to become detached, to those inclined to do so. This cultural logic follows that women are "naturally" more inclined to form attachments as mothers and wives, and also have greater difficulty in freeing themselves from attachment because of those obligations. Nevertheless, women are also interested in asserting some autonomy. Keeler sees the rise of lay meditation and attending dharma talks as particularly popular among women precisely because both are venues where women can free themselves of their regular duties and attachments.

Keeler reviews the discourse on the supposed high status of Burmese women in light of the principle of hierarchy. One of the earliest observations by Europeans of Burmese society was that Burmese women are free and have high status, at least compared to women in India or China. In Burma, for example, women are highly visible as market sellers and as petty traders. What Keeler points out is that women being involved in trade actually reflects their *lower* status, since trade and money are potentially spiritually polluting. By extension, the seemingly tolerant attitudes toward women and cross-dressing men actually reflect an understanding of women (and their proxies) as inferiors complementary toward superior males.

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Anthropology has been going through a crisis of conscience for several years now. As a discipline, it has been closely associated with the project of colonial empires—Alice Conklin's *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950* (2013) comes to mind. Recent years have seen a move away from discussing other cultures or peoples as radically different from “us,” tacitly understood as fellow right-minded Western-trained academics and thinking people. One reading of much of the work on Zomia, or at least James Scott's contribution to it, for example, would be that when Southeast Asians see powerful people and institutions, they run for the hills, choosing freedom and autonomy over the extractions and predations of the lowland states. Suddenly Southeast Asians seem not so different from libertarians and are seeking “freedom” in reassuringly familiar ways. Keeler, in *The Traffic in Hierarchy*, writes directly against this trend. The difficulty, he argues, is that when we assume that “we” are all fundamentally alike and share the same interests and values, we end up simply imposing our own views and concerns on other peoples. Keeler is not defending some kind of essential exotic difference. Rather, he argues for the necessary, if difficult, task of understanding other peoples and places on their own terms.

Take, for instance, critiques of hierarchy, which many academics have ideological difficulties accepting seriously as a model for social organization. If we assume that egalitarianism—the antithesis of hierarchy—is a universal norm, or at least a universal goal, we become blinded to how the ideal of egalitarianism arose recently out of the experiences of Western Europe. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nation-states, in which there is supposed to be relative isomorphism between language, ethnicity, culture, territory, and state, emerged out of former empires. Out of this came an ideological shift

away from an acceptance of social hierarchy to the ideal of egalitarianism. It is well to remember that before British colonialism, the Burman kingdoms were empires attempting to control a vast array of peoples and territories, and despite successive efforts to turn Burma, such as in its latest incarnation as the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, into a nation-state, the society retains many features of an empire.

Not every society, Keeler reminds us, is based on the same post-Enlightenment ideals that we claim to espouse. Indeed, to people in a hierarchical society, egalitarianism represents moral disorder and chaos, a system in which no one knows their place, and no one can rely on the reciprocity and complementarity necessary for social relations. NGO workers keen on bringing about “universalist” ideals of political or personal empowerment, or creating more fair and representative forms of governance, would do well to understand how profoundly such egalitarian ideals go against the grain of Burmese society. Neither Keeler nor I would argue that Burmese society is unchangeable. Rather, it is profoundly oriented towards hierarchical arrangements.

Keeler is part of a wave of scholars who have slowly been moving the conversation on Burma forward after decades of stagnation. In Burma studies, few of the early conversations begun under British colonialism (1824-1948) or just after by such “classical” scholars as political observer J. S. Furnivall, historians D. G. E. Hall and G. E. Harvey, archaeologist and philologist G. H. Luce, or anthropologist Melford Spiro, have been reconsidered or pushed forward. This state of affairs reflects conditions inside the country itself—Burmese universities have not been able to foster research or intellectual inquiry in recent decades, while at the same time, the closure of the country to foreign scholars from the 1960s through to the early 2000s meant that many of those interested in the country had to choose instead other places to study. As far as I am aware, *The Traffic in Hier-*

archy is one of the few new works coming from anthropology, and probably the first to offer a theoretically informed understanding of the workings of Burmese society.

Keeler's book is particularly timely now as the political transition beginning in 2010 has brought Burma back to world attention after it had languished for decades. A new generation of UN, NGO, and development workers, political analysts, journalists, and other observers have flocked to the country, all trying to make sense of the country and gauge the degree of change. With no language skills and little contextual knowledge, many of them flounder in their efforts. Keeler's formulation of the centrality of hierarchy helps elucidate such seemingly disparate phenomena as the Rohingya crisis and ethnic diversity. The persecution of Muslims, Keeler argues, reflects an understanding of non-Buddhists as threats to a Buddhist-inflected moral universe arranged according to hierarchy. On the other hand, the great ethnic and linguistic diversity of the country reflects how hierarchy creates and maintains difference.

Keeler's takes on Burmese life, told in a lively prose free of jargon and abstruse language, will be sure to appeal to scholar and informed observer alike. Along the way, Keeler lingers over scenes of daily life, most prominently a life in a monastery, as a way to illustrate various aspects of power and prestige. This book forms an invaluable contribution to Burma studies, anthropology, and the study of Southeast Asia more generally.

Note

[1]. In the early 1990s, the Burmese junta replaced the term "Burma" with "Myanmar," arguing that the new term was somehow more correct. No term like "Myanmar" or "Burma," used alone without a further noun to indicate "country" or "realm" has ever referred to the country in the Burmese language. *Myanmā* and *Bamā* are formal and informal variants of the name of the ethnic majority, and not in fact the name of the coun-

try without a further compound. The term is ambiguous in English, combining country, language, ethnic majority, and citizen all. The solution is to replicate clumsy Burmanisms, such as "Myanmar language" (Burmese), "Myanmar ethnic" (Burman), and "Myanmar national" (Burmese).

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