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*The Traffic in Hierarchy: Masculinity and Its Others in Buddhist Burma.*¹ By Ward Keeler. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. xvi+333 pp.

Ward Keeler is an American anthropologist specializing in Indonesian and Burmese performing arts. In the nineties, he started to investigate the Burmese *za' pwe*, then still commonly practised by itinerant artists, which combines a variety of aesthetic forms in night-long events particularly linked to pagoda festivals. Grounded in his expert experience of Burmese Buddhist culture, *The Traffic in Hierarchy* is his first book on Burma, and it advances an ambitious hypothesis on the hierarchical dimension of Burmese social life based on French anthropologist Louis Dumont's theory of hierarchy.

The undertaking stands out as a landmark achievement in light of the dearth of general anthropology in the country since the 1962 military coup and subsequent closure to field research. While the political transition at the turn of 2010 has brought new scholarship in the field, anthropological voices have been limiting themselves to specific matters: ethnicity, Buddhist esotericism, female monasticism, Buddhist meditation, spirit possession, and so on. Keeler's attempt to examine his new ethnographic material collected at intervals between 1987 and 2012 through the lens of the theoretical question of the relevance of Dumont's notion of 'hierarchy' is more than welcome in this context.

Dumont's programme of comparative sociology is aimed at overcoming modernity's reluctance to the idea of 'hierarchy'. He sets up the Indian system of castes as a textbook case of the disjuncture between hierarchy and power to understand the shift from holism to individualism. Aware of criticisms levelled against Dumont's contrast between Indian holism and Western individualism, Keeler argues for a study of the universal tensions between individualism and hierarchy. Southeast Asia would be an example of such an alternative hierarchy.

Keeler's first move amounts to a relativization of Dumont's hierarchy. Given his commitment to Dumont's theory, it is paradoxical that an implicit hesitance to apply the concept of 'hierarchy' to Southeast Asia and particularly to Burma can be found throughout *The Traffic in Hierarchy*, which is revealed by the playful game on the idea of 'traffic' in the title and which is only unpacked in chapter 4, "Taking Dumont to Southeast Asia". In this key chapter, Keeler explains that his argument relies on the hypothesis that 'autonomy' would be the "ultimate value" (pp. 127–31) of the Burmese in the same way that 'purity' would be to Indians and 'unity' to Sri Lankans. At this point, Keeler proceeds to a second move away from Dumont's theory. He argues that the tensions between the search for autonomy—mainly represented by the figure of the renouncing Buddhist monk—and the need for social links or attachment of ordinary lay people would stand for the opposition between individualism and hierarchy. That 'autonomy' stands for the ultimate value of the Burmese may be questioned indeed. In the same way, one could challenge the idea that 'autonomy', as opposed to 'attachment', is equivalent to Dumont's primary opposition of 'purity' versus 'impurity' as a defining construct of hierarchy in the Indian caste system.

In the first three chapters, Keeler uses his ethnographic findings to provide a contrast between monastic autonomy with the established omnipresent hierarchy that he finds in Burma. He first examines how the relative hierarchical positions of people can explain behaviours in heterogeneous situations such as road traffic, public preachings, and tea shops. However, Keeler argues that the dynamics of behaviour in these hierarchical situations are different from those he observed in monasteries where he lived during his fieldwork in Mandalay. He argues that monastic autonomy releases monks from the obligations to reciprocate gifts made by lay people for their living, contrary to what one might witness in the exchange relations of lay hierarchical situations. While this case could be debated on the grounds that monks have the obligation to fulfil the standards of monastic status to serve as a field of merit for lay people, Keeler further claims

that the choice to live a religious life would often be motivated by monks' desire to escape the demands of affective familial links. Besides a degree of subjectivity in this last argument for monks' autonomy, it also moves the sociological explanation of hierarchy to a psychological one.

From the fifth chapter onwards, Keeler turns to an examination of recently published ethnographies of cultural domains and their production of various forms of 'power' according to the degree of autonomy that is allowed to lay persons in attaching themselves to potent entities or beings: power of formulas or amulets, or power acquired through spirit (*nat*) worship or through the cult to the religious virtuosos known as *wei'za*. Meditation emerges as the preeminent practice whose recent popularization among lay persons amounts to a trend towards individualization and a lessening of the contrast between lay and monastic. Keeler then analyses gender construction, contrasting the ideal of autonomy governing the two main figures of hegemonic masculinity—those of the monk and of the performing arts characters—with the ambiguous figures of nuns and transsexuals. He thus offers one of the first reflections on gender presentation and alternative sexualities in Burma.

The applicability of Dumont's sociological concept of hierarchy in Southeast Asia remains in my view an open question. However, through the lenses of his opposition between autonomy and attachment, Keeler throws new light on ethnographies of social relations and life in Burma, which deserves attention.

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NOTE

1. Ward Keeler consistently uses the term Burma despite the name change that occurred in 1989, when the country was officially renamed Myanmar. By so doing, he keeps away from the political controversies raised by the new designation and chooses to ground his discussion in a fully cultural approach.