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Book review of 'Newar Buddhism and its Hierarchy of Ritual' by David Gellner

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Contested Hierarchies opens with an excellent introduction by David Gellner which summarizes the valley's historical background and the contemporary context of Newar society. The central chapters trace out most of the major Newar caste groups: Buddhist merchants and priests, urban Sresthas, village patrons, Brahman kingly councilors, and various low castes such as the Citrakars. Chapters Six and Eight by Gérard Toffin are extremely useful because so little of this eminent ethnographer's work has been translated into English. Chapter two by Todd Lewis on the Buddhist Merchants of Asan Twah, is also exciting, because of how it so clearly contextualises the Uray in a specific geographic and historical location. Declan Quigley concludes **Contested Hierarchies** with a comparative analysis which locates Newar caste structures within a wider scholarly context. Quigley illustrates the necessity of using examples of caste from the Kathmandu Valley for wider theoretical debates.

While **Contested Hierarchies** is a welcome addition to Nepalese and South Asian studies, one feature of the book slightly diminishes its effectiveness. Except Todd Lewis' chapter, the book tends to ignore contemporary history. The radical changes which have

occurred since the emergence of the Peoples' Movement in 1990, the rapid 'development' which has occurred since 1951, as well as the overcrowding, inadequate drainage, pollution, traffic jams, water and electrical shortages, and soaring land prices that have become a part of everyday life since the 1980's. This lacuna is not really the fault of the authors, considering that most of the field work was done before these changes became so drastic. Still, a welcome supplement to the book would be a second volume which takes Nepal's contemporary history into account, while still concentrating on indigenous social structures. Such a work could discuss how Newars are using older social patterns to negotiate new trends in social mobility, the relaxation of caste barriers, and the rise of ethnic identity based on culture and language. It should be stressed, that my concluding criticism is offered as constructive response, and in no way diminishes the book's importance. In fact, I hope the authors take it to heart, and produce a second volume which highlights such contemporary changes.

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Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest. Newar Buddhism and its Hierarchy of Ritual. David N. Gellner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. xxiii + 428, 12 Plates.

The Newars have had as much scholarly attention, perhaps more, than any group living in Nepal. One thinks immediately of the large works of Gerard Toffin, Robert Levy, Siegfried Lienhard, Dhanavajra Vajracharya, Kamal Prakas Malla, and John Locke, but also of the numerous smaller if no less important contributions of Todd Lewis, Declan Quigley, Niels Gutschow, Michael Witzel, and many others. And of course, David Gellner. Already well known through a series of excellent articles and papers, Gellner establishes himself with this work as one of the major students of Newar Buddhism. Much of the field work for it was done over a period of nineteen months from 1982 to 1984 and was continued in later trips to Nepal in '85, '86 and '89. Originally written as a doctoral dissertation at Oxford, the work that we have is considerably expanded and revised from its dissertation form. The site for the research was Patan, though the author lived in Kathmandu during his brief visit in 1989.

This is a long, careful narrative, one that contains much that is interesting methodologically, one that is rich in detail. It will benefit all who give it the thoughtful reading and study that it deserves. There is almost no issue, no concept, no argument concerning the intricacies of Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley that the author does not touch on and attempt to answer. In that sense, it fulfills its mission to provide a general statement about Newar Buddhism, thus filling a gap

that has existed for so long in the literature of Buddhist studies. It gives, as far as I know, the most complete description of Newar Buddhism that is now in print. It is essentially a synchronic work, though it uses history in a variety of ways.

Gellner's first chapter is devoted to his aims and methods. In addition to the goals I have alluded to above, the author is interested in showing how Newar Buddhism relates to other kinds of Buddhism, in particular Theravada Buddhism, and to Hinduism, particularly as the latter can be defined in Nepal. His theory and methodology are influenced by the writings of Durkheim, Weber, Evans-Pritchard, and Dumont, on caste and religion and by Sylvain Levi, among many, on Nepal.

In the succeeding chapters, Gellner moves through caste and religious affiliation (chapter 2), the relation of Hinduism and Buddhism (chapter 3), the basic notions of Newar Buddhism (chapter 4), and its basic rituals (chapter 5). He sees as part of his central task the creation of a conceptual framework that is not imposed on his subject from without. Thus, he tells us, his approach is at least in part an emic one, an attempt to include "not just what people do, but what they think they are doing. Since Newars view their religion primarily as a set of practices, it is ritual and custom that hold the centre stage." (p. 3) He also takes pains to

give agency to his informants, such as Asha Kaji Vajracharya, whose words are quoted and views credited. It is through this emic process that the book analyzes Newar Buddhism through the institutions of monk, householder, and tantric priest. These Three Ways, "a fundamental Newar Buddhist schema", organize the major part of the description (chapters 6 through 10). Chapter 11 discusses the uses of tantra, its places within Hinduism and Buddhism, its relation to healers, mediums, and witches, and finally the decline of Tantric Buddhism.

In the final chapter, entitled Social and Religious Hierarchies, Gellner lists the general themes that by this point "have emerged from the material and have been used to organize it." These are that "(i) Newar Buddhism stands somewhere between Theravada Buddhism and Hinduism; but it is significantly different from both; (ii) The hierarchy of the Three Ways provides a framework which integrates and makes sense of the diverse practices which make up Newar Buddhism; (iii) There are different, hierarchically ordered levels of interpretation of the same rite. (iv) Newar data support an analytical distinction between three hierarchically ordered types of religion, a distinction which may indeed be universally valid: between soteriology and worldly religion, in the first place, and within the latter between social religion and instrumental religion . . . These themes interlock and each supports the others." (P. 337) Finally, Gellner is firm, and I think correct, in his conclusion that Newar Buddhism is a distinctive form of Buddhism and is not merely a form of Hinduism. It is not a mere "buddhized aspect of contemporaneous Nepalese Hinduism, as Greenwold would have it, following La Vallee Poussin", nor is it really comparable to the married Saivite renunciators described by Bouillier (p. 340). "The position of Newar Buddhism goes far beyond this: it exists in a Hindu environment, but it does not need that environment. Newar Buddhists do not accept the superiority of Brahmins and do not require their presence: Newar Buddhism has not become a mere sect of Hinduism. Rather, it has preserved a complex ritual and ideological vision." (p. 340)

Gellner's work is on the whole excellent, and in a short review of this kind, one can only pick a few points to raise. I will confine my comments to some historical issues, even though Gellner's concerns are not primarily historical, but sociological and anthropological. Yet he is aware of history, its importance to the culture of the Newars, and uses it in a variety of ways within his work. To begin with, ridding the field of Newar studies once and for all of "Buddhist Brahmins" is a worthy endeavor, and I think Gellner's arguments for the distinct nature of Newar Buddhism, its independence from Hinduism despite the inevitable homologies, are in the main convincing. Another hungry ghost of the field is the notion of the conversion at some unknown moment of Newar celibate monks into Newar married priests. Here, too, Gellner also shows a healthy skepticism about the role of corporate

monasticism in the history of Nepal, though he is less definite in his position. He is aware of, and rejects, the Snellgrovean vision of Patan at some point in its past as a vast university town, a vision that has part of its source possibly in Sankalia's unfortunate book on Nalanda, part of it in the notions of a pure monastic Buddhism as the real Buddhism and all other forms as "degenerate". All this is to the good. But one needs to take an even harder look at the paltry evidence that supports the view that there ever was widespread celibate monkhood and extensive monasteries as corporate institutions in Nepal, particularly as Gellner presents that evidence. Inscriptional evidence of the Licchavi period is at best ambiguous, subject to the usual problems of Sanskrit polysemy and interpretation, and the *vamsavalis* have very little, if any, evidentiary value on this point, Sthiti Malla and Shankaracharya notwithstanding. Available architecture tells us nothing, and, while negative arguments are never conclusive, the lack in Nepal of a long, creative, original intellectual and philosophical Buddhist tradition of text and commentary, as one finds those traditions in India and Tibet, should surely give one pause -- unless one is willing to assume that all the Buddhist literature that is found in Nepal is a Nepalese creation. Indeed, one could argue plausibly that Newar Buddhism chose, as in Kashmir, a non-celibate way for its religious virtuosi at a very early moment rather than a later one, one that made sense in the social and political context of Nepal, and one that may indeed explain, at least in part, the survival of Newar Buddhism.

This last point leads me directly to Gellner's interpretation of Max Weber. Gellner remarks at the outset of his book that Weber underestimated "the degree to which Buddhism always was a religion of the laity..." Here I would disagree, for, as I read him, Weber's point is a more general one: that the problem of any religion that tends toward elitism, as Buddhism surely does, is the problem of firm institutional links between laity, religious virtuosi, and the site political power. What indeed do religious virtuosi do for the laity in return for the latter's patronage? What is the relation between king and monk? Varying solutions were adopted to these problems in India, Tibet, and Nepal. Where those institutional links remained weak, as they surely appear to have been in much of the subcontinent for much of the time, the decline and fall were almost inevitable, particularly when the virtuosi were slaughtered and dispersed by invading armies and the physical plant laid waste, as in the case of Buddhism in India. The surviving laity had no recourse other than conversion to something else, forced or otherwise, and royal power remained at best indifferent. In Tibet, however, the solution that gave political power to the monks and the monasteries guaranteed that Buddhism would not only survive but would thrive among a wide population, with almost no rivals. In Nepal, the ideological identification of the ideals of the monk with the priest who served the laity, can be seen as an ingenious solution that guaranteed Buddhism's survival

in a Hindu environment by insuring continuing patronage from urban merchant classes. It did not insure much more than survival, however, for the link to the center of political power, the kings of Nepal, was never forged, nor could it be, considering the lock that the Brahman/Chettri alliance has had on royal power in that country from the very beginning. *Cuius regio etc.* In sum, whether corporate monasticism disappeared in the fourteenth century as Gellner seems to think, or whether it disappeared earlier, or whether it never was corporate at all, are alternatives that we shall probably never be able to choose among for sure; but its historical existence at any point is simply not a necessary assumption to understand Newar Buddhism.

Though Gellner has freed himself from many shibboleths, there are areas where some of the badly confused ideas of Nepalese history persist. The field of Nepalese historiography continues to be a muddle, one largely created and perpetuated by scholars. After all, what kind of a field is it in which a single manuscript put together in the early part of the nineteenth century by a Newar Buddhist in Nepali, Newari, and Sanskrit, translated into English by two resident pundits in the British Residency, then homogenized into smooth Victorian English by the Resident Surgeon at the Residency, Daniel Wright, can rise to quasi-canonical status, an authority in the field, a work that is deemed strong enough to report, if not accurately, at least with some degree of integrity on the events of the last three millennia, particularly when there is hardly any evidence to support its statements and no continuous tradition, literary or otherwise, against which to check most of it? Although most scholars are aware of the problems that Wright's *vamsavali* has created, its lack of evidentiary value, and the parallel problems brought into Nepalese studies by the *Bhasa-vamsavali* and its cognates, and the bewilderments created by that strange twentieth century hybrid monster, the Hodgson-Hasrat Papers (in which we find that phantom "local historian" known to Hasrat and only Hasrat as Padmagiri), there is still a tendency to acknowledge the weak evidentiary value of the *vamsavalis* and then to cite them as reliable sources anyway. Sthiti Malla, his so-called caste reforms, and the caste lists, explain nothing about the caste situation in the fourteenth century; as far as we know they are late eighteenth or early nineteenth century inventions, and they only illuminate views of caste held at that time. Gellner is well aware that these so called edicts and reforms are attributed to Vishnu Malla and Siddhi Narsingh Malla as well, in what well may be older documents than the *vamsavali*, and that there are no documents of Sthiti Malla's time that refer to any kind of social reform made by him, despite the fact that his reign is one of the most well documented of any of the early Malla kings. In relation to caste, Sthiti Malla, then, belongs in the footnote that he deserves.

At the beginning of his work, Gellner also gives the by now traditional bow to the five periods of Nepalese history, including the early ones, or "prehistoric"

dynasties, the Gopals, Ahirs (or Mahisapalas), and the Kiratas. Here again, this is, as far as I can see, in Gellner's case an unnecessary hangover, perhaps merely pro forma. The Gopals, Ahirs, and the Kiratas have little or no historicity, despite the legends about Gokarna forest about mounds in the center of Patan. Levi's view of the names as the Kirata kings as un-Sanskritic and therefore probably real, is an oversimplification. These names are perfectly Sanskritic phonologically -- this one would expect since they occur in documents that are written in a variety of Indian scripts. But they seem to have little phonological or morphological connection with anything that we know of Tibeto-Burman languages or Tibeto-Burman names. Again, rather than as a record of a distant past, we must try to understand them primarily in the place of their first occurrence -- in the Gopalarajavamsavali, a document of the fourteenth century CE, emically rather than etically.

But beyond these criticisms, essentially minor in nature, there is a larger historical problem that Gellner's work presents, one that the traditional bows to history mask and disguise, not only in his work but wherever they occur in scholarly discourse. In light of the major contribution he has made, one hesitates to criticize him for not writing a book that he never intended to write. From this reviewer's perspective, however, any large work on the Newars needs deeper discussion of their historical position over the last two centuries, the recovery of the accounts of their oppression and suppression, their economic exploitation under the Ranas, and their lack of political power until relatively recently. Gellner only touches these issues. He does not go into them in depth. It is no answer to these issues to say that Newars have not lacked political power because there are and have been many Newars in the government under the Shahs and Ranas. It is not enough to limit discussion of Newar ethnicity to questions of language, culture, and space, to the usual philological fetishism surrounding the origins of the words "Nepal" and "Newar". We are then without answers to what would explain the intense desire for survival in the face of encapsulation that has characterized Newar society for many generations.

We are left with what may be characterized as Late Orientalism, in this case Late Orientalism at its best, but at best Late Orientalism, an Orientalism perhaps more sensitive to the issues of Newar identity, more informed about the relation of Newar society to Newar belief and practice, but one that largely ignores the larger contexts of power, and the politics of society and religion. It is a stage that almost all the best work on Nepal has reached but rarely surpasses.

Finally, Late Orientalism is also caught by the rapidity with which its object disappears. To paraphrase Levi, *le Nepal, c'est l'Amerique qui se fait*. This accelerating disenchantment, to use Weber's phrase, the absorption of the world of the Newars into the market

economy, Gellner also leaves consciously, perhaps to later works or other hands.

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South Asia Bulletin: Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East "Special Issue on Nepal," Volume XII, Number 1 & 2, 1992, pp. 1-92. Guest Editor: Nanda Shrestha

This special issue of the **South Asia Bulletin**, guest edited by Nanda R. Shrestha, includes eight articles that discuss a variety of contemporary topics. The first four of these articles--those by Nanda R. Shrestha ("Enchanted by the Mantra of Bikas: A Self-Reflexive Perspective on Nepalese Elites and Development"), Jeffrey Reidinger ("Prospects for Land Reform in Nepal"), David N. Zurick ("The Road to Shangri-La is Paved: Spatial Development and Rural Transformation in Nepal"), and Stacy Leigh Pigg ("Unintended Consequences: The Ideological Impact of Development in Nepal")--all make important contributions to ongoing debate about "development" in Nepal.

Nanda R. Shrestha's interesting article, building upon his personal transformations from a poor schoolboy in Pokhara dreaming of development to a scholar in an American university who now skeptically views the colonization of the mind involved in development, provides a valuable view of development as *bikas* through the eyes of those who desire it and suffer from an unrequited desire. Shrestha's articulation of his prior and present views helps to shed light on what exactly is desired in the romance with *bikas*, how actual *bikas* becomes confused with *bikasi* objects, and how *bikasi* becomes identified with things western. Striving for these objects and idolized goals alters world views and social interactions. The vision of *bikas* Shrestha details is largely delusory--except for a few individuals, primarily those individuals who milk the process of development as consultants, finding that profits accrue to their acceptance of and propagation of an invasive and seductive ideology. These consultants, as Shrestha notes, are the only ones who achieve state policies and the penetration of the global market economy make him pessimistic about the chances for effective land reform in the near future. In Reidinger's opinion, the unintended consequences of development and reform initiatives have created tensions that aggravate already existing difficulties concerning state control. Reidinger's discussion of the threats to state control, Nepal's current agrarian structure, the effects of previous policies and reform initiatives, and recent reform proposals, is clear and succinct. He acknowledges that the contemporary political situation presents new political space for peasant activism and the expression of their concerns, but at the same time it also contains strong obstacles to the solidification of peasant class political influence, a fact which is apt to leave the strength of political party support in

Kathmandu and with rural high caste communities. Reidinger concludes that elite dominance, continued regional factionalism, the strength of rural patron-client dependencies, the lack of an organized peasantry, and geographical constraints make meaningful land reform unlikely at present.

David Zurick critically examines the integrated rural development (IRD) approach to regional planning in Nepal which was so popular in the 1970's and 1980's. He takes as his case study the Rapti Project and examines the degree to which its outcome was shaped by the territory it was meant to cover, the difficulties of integrating local decision making into the planning process, and a spatial bias that is typical of the delivery of development resources. Here, as in other rural projects, the first steps involved the construction of roads, and the establishment of service centers in hill towns and district headquarters. These steps resulted in strengthened linkages between these locations and the urban centers, linkages which generally contribute to dramatically changed opportunities for rural people, but often with consequences unintended by the planners.

The Rapti Project was the largest of the IRD projects initiated in Nepal, all of which suffered from poor performance, unsustainable gains, lack of accountability, and an unequal distribution of resources. This style of development project necessarily involved top-down imposition of development frameworks that strengthen already wealthy development clientele and fueled the creation of patron-client relationships. Zurick examines changing spatial frameworks, looking at how subsistence systems are replaced by transactional relations and resource entitlements shift to new political and economic brokers. Where conflicts emerged between commercial and subsistence use of land, subsistence growers lost influence and access to resources which deprived further development efforts of their experience and knowledge. The unmanageable project area resulted in unequal distribution. Towns and urban centers, which were easier of access, already important, and useful as showcases for new buildings and facilities got a disproportionate amount of attention. Not surprisingly, the process enriched wealthy landowners and failed to elicit local participation. The failure to provide new substantial opportunities for mountain communities lead to further deterioration in their ecological systems and the dislocation of people from formerly productive and stable land use.