

Brides of the Buddha: Nuns' Stories from the Avadānaśataka. By KAREN MULDOON-HULES. New York: LEXINGTON BOOKS, 2017. Pp. xii + 227. \$100.

Karen Muldoon-Hules's *Brides of the Buddha* is an examination of the neglected eighth chapter (*varga*) of the *Avadānaśataka* (*Avś*), a cycle of ten stories about female disciples of the Buddha from the classical period. Besides bringing attention to an important but understudied textual source for the study of religious women in premodern South Asia, its most significant contribution is a new focus on the theme of marriage in Buddhist narratives about female renunciation. Muldoon-Hules reads her text against *dharmaśāstra* and other contemporaneous Buddhist and non-Buddhist sources to explore questions such as the existence of Buddhist (as opposed to Hindu) forms of marriage and her text's potential as historical evidence for learning about the early nuns' community. She is particularly interested in marriage (which she calls the "cornerstone of the Vedic ritual system") (p. 24) as a trope used by *avadānists* to simultaneously position female Buddhist monasticism as a going social concern and express anxiety about its continuing viability. In Muldoon-Hules's reading, female religious praxis is a "contested space between Hinduism and the renouncer religions" that produces rhetorics of female renunciation distinct from those of male renunciation (p. 36). Marriage (which is inherently linked to sexuality and fertility) is a major arena where that contestation takes place. Though Muldoon-Hules is concerned only with the premodern period, her idea that premodern Buddhist literary texts reflect or construct a female Buddhist religiosity in which renunciation and marriage are pitted against one another will also provide useful historical background to contemporary ethnographies of female Buddhist monasticism, in which similar themes are often present.

Muldoon-Hules employs an Indological methodology, sourcing broadly from the Indic textual record in a disciplined, precise, and intertextual manner, while also consulting the material record for corroborating evidence. Her most significant methodological intervention to the study of women in ancient Buddhist South Asia in this volume is her insistence that scholars cease to make pan-Indic generalizations based only on the more familiar Pāli sources. Though she doesn't reference methodologically similar scholarship explicitly, Muldoon-Hules' emphasis on the desirability of a strong regionalism in the study of premodern Indic texts resembles other recent work on medieval and early modern South Asia that contextualizes vernacular literatures in the politics and geography of particular localities. Muldoon-Hules looks carefully at the differences between the Northern Sanskrit and Southern Pāli Buddhist sources and identifies geographical information when present, thus moving beyond an assumed pan-Indianism in order to contextualize and localize the *Avadānaśataka* in North India. "Identifying even some of the regional influences and forces acting on north Indian Buddhist communities that differed from those on the island of Lanka," she writes, "would deepen our understanding of the lives of north Indian Buddhist women" (p. 7).

Muldoon-Hules's sensitive readings of the *Avadānaśataka*'s eighth *varga* are often powerful and illuminating. She groups the ten stories of her text into five pairs, drawing out shared themes and points of contrast, while probing for the hidden architecture of the *varga*. To give an example, the *avadānas* of Supriyā and Śuklā (*Avś* 72 and 73) both describe spiritually precocious girls, one from a "Buddhist" family, the other from a "Hindu" family (according to Muldoon-Hules), who go forth as Buddhist renouncers before their first menses (the age when fathers must marry their daughters so as to avoid the sin of *bhrūṇahatyā* or embryo-killing). These stories illustrate a relatively unproblematic scenario for renunciant women, as both girls show undeniable signs of extraordinary spiritual purity and attainment at birth, and both fathers cooperate with their daughters' desire to go forth. By contrast, Mukṭā and Kṣemā (*Avś* 77 and 79), another of Muldoon-Hules's pairs, are caught up in betrothals designed to strengthen political and social bonds (*sāmbandhika*) between families. For instance, Kṣemā, the daughter of King Prasenajit of Kauśāla, is pledged to the son of a rival monarch. Just at the moment when the young groom ceremonially grasps Kṣemā's hand at their marriage ceremony (*pāṇigraha*, which Muldoon-Hules identifies as the "moment of true marriage"), however, Kṣemā rises up into the sky and begins to display magical feats. She is released from her obligation and goes forth as a Buddhist renouncer. In Muldoon-Hules's analysis, all four of these stories constitute a rhetorical negotiation

between female Buddhist renunciation and local marriage practices in which daughters are central to the moral status of the family and an important means to political and social alliances.

In another pairing, Muldoon-Hules examines the theme of *svayaṃvara* (“self-choice”) within the *Avadānaśataka*. The women who star in these two *avadānas*, Suprabhā (*Avś* 71) and Kāśīsundarī (*Avś* 76), are the prototypical “brides of the buddha” mentioned in the book’s title, as they dramatically and publicly choose the Buddha over the other suitors at their *svayaṃvara* ceremonies. In both stories the *avadānists* have, in Muldoon-Hules’s phrasing, “subtly twisted the ‘Hindu envelope,’” rhetorically equating renunciation and marriage (p. 98). Muldoon-Hules’s hermeneutical acuity is evident throughout her readings, but her insights are particularly striking to the mind as she unpacks these two texts. Both girls arrive at their *svayaṃvaras* on chariots, flying ochre-colored banners, and accompanied by painted images of the Buddha. As Muldoon-Hules explains, the chariot plays a pivotal ritual and symbolic role in Hindu weddings; when the bride mounts the groom’s chariot, she effectively leaves her father’s house and enters a new social and moral space. The unusual element of the painted portrait and the obvious color symbolism of an ochre banner (the color of monastic robes) enhance a vivid narrative tableau in which Suprabhā and Kāśīsundarī symbolically self-select the Buddha.

Muldoon-Hules opens an interesting historical topic when she analyzes Buddhist understandings of marriage in the context of Digambara Jain and Newar Buddhist reworkings of Hindu *saṃskāras*. She backs off from exploring, however, whether “deliberate Buddhist appropriation and revalorization of Vedic Hindu *saṃskāras* . . . was [*sic*] already underway in north India at the time of the redaction of the *Avś*,” claiming that this is “beyond the scope of [her] study” (p. 56). While settling this historical question in a definitive manner would certainly be daunting, I’m not convinced that it is so easily avoided. Clearly, the boundaries between “Buddhism” and “Hinduism” are at the heart of Muldoon-Hules’s project in this volume, a fact that points to a deeper theoretical issue that troubled me while reading *Brides of the Buddha*. In her analysis, Muldoon-Hules depends heavily on the categories of “Hindu” and “Buddhist,” without any unpacking or theorizing of those terms. For instance, as mentioned above, part of her analysis of the *avadānas* of Supriyā and Śuklā hinges on the religious affiliations of their families. She also wonders if Kṣemā’s wedding can be considered a “Buddhist” wedding or not (p. 77) and later muses on the “religious identities of young women during the early centuries CE. How could the driving need to find a marriage partner before a girl’s mid-teens have affected her religious affiliation? Indeed, what would define a girl as a young *Buddhist* girl?” (p. 81). But in what sense are these meaningful questions to ask? As the field of Religious Studies has amply documented, terms like Hinduism and Buddhism are based on etic concepts, born of European traditions of understanding religious identity, and arising from the colonial project of studying other cultures. Their applicability to the intellectual and social worlds of ancient South Asia is not self-evident and must be argued for. While it is possible to use them in a general sense as a matter of convenience, a project such as *Brides of the Buddha* in which they are central to critical questioning must explicitly theorize and historically situate such terms. Perhaps if she had undertaken that work of theoretical framing, Muldoon-Hules might have replaced the terms Hindu/Hinduism and Buddhist/Buddhism with, for instance, more emic concepts like *pravṛtti* and *nirvṛtti dharma*, in the end. In any case, such careful critical framing would undoubtedly have carried her (and us) even deeper into, not farther away from, the gendered social world of the *Avadānaśataka*.

Muldoon-Hules holds back from exploring another theoretical issue in a way that also hampers the full expression of her argument. While questions about female agency are central to her reading of the *Avadānaśataka*’s eighth chapter, she fails to engage the large and rich feminist literature on the topic. As feminist scholars have described, female agency manifests in many modalities and registers, including the aesthetic, the ritual, and the day-to-day. It can be rebellious but it can also surface as a choice to embrace culturally coveted norms. Indeed, the question of whether any socially embedded action is ever the product of an individual will, a question that Muldoon-Hules herself raises at several points in her text, has been systematically taken up by feminist scholars of religion such as Saba Mahmood. Thus, raising the question of agency without performing the theoretical labors of definition and typology at worst undermines and at best stunts this important line of inquiry

In conclusion, Muldoon-Hules's work is deserving of high praise for its careful intertextual engagements of a broad array of classical Indic texts, the focus it brings to one fascinating but understudied text, and its wonderful unpacking of the theme of marriage in Buddhist narratives about women. Muldoon-Hules is a scholar's scholar, and, while her book doesn't ask or answer every relevant question, *Brides of the Buddha* provides an admirably solid basis for future ongoing explorations of female religious agency and history in South Asia.

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Contribution to the History of the Wheeled Vehicle in India. By JEAN DELOCHE. Collection Indologie, vol. 126. Pondicherry: INSTITUT FRANÇAIS DE PONDICHÉRY and ÉCOLE FRANÇAISE D'EXTRÊME-ORIENT, 2014. Pp. xiii + 145; 31 figures; 36 plates.

French Indologist Jean Deloche has earned much respect for his important contributions to lesser explored aspects of Indian civilization and history, especially in their technological manifestations. His pathbreaking studies on India's roads, bridges, transportation systems, fortifications, water management systems, ports, boats, and ships are notable for their masses of data accumulated over decades of fieldwork combined with painstaking archival research and an unrivalled analytical care for detail in preference to theorizing. He has also contributed to new editions of accounts by French travellers to India, such as Anquetil-Duperron, Chevalier, and Modave.

Deloche's contribution to the study of wheeled transport in India began in 1980 with a two-volume *La circulation en Inde avant la révolution des transports* (École Française d'Extrême-Orient; English tr., *Transport and Communications in India Prior to Steam Locomotion*, vol. I: *Land Transport*; vol. II: *Water Transport* [Oxford Univ. Press, 1993]). In the preface, he acknowledged his motivation: "During the course of several years we journeyed, walking or by bullock cart, throughout this immense country, covering thousands of kilometres: during the torrid heat of summer, wending along the paths of the Himalaya, during the cool season, following the trails of Rajasthan or treading the paths shaded by coconut palms in Kerala; coming here to a halt at a shelter for pilgrims, there, at the ruins of a Mughal palace serving now as a stable for buffaloes. We ardently loved the Indian roads, and fondly preserve descriptions of these in small exercise books." This "ardent love" led in 1983 to a *Contribution à l'histoire de la voiture en Inde* (École Française d'Extrême-Orient), now translated into English in the work under review, which is, however, more than a translation, since the author took this opportunity to revise and substantially enlarge his original work.

Attempting a comprehensive classification of India's traditional wheeled vehicles is Deloche's first concern; his method is empirical, focusing mostly on typology and functionality rather than on the particular draft animal, the goods transported, or the region of the subcontinent, although the last will remain prominent at every point of his discussion. This approach seems appropriate, considering the wide diversity of dimensions and designs involved. Deloche starts with the carriage's wheels (solid or not, spoked or not), their size (with a region-wise discussion, since the smallest are found in arid regions of the subcontinent's northwest while the highest tend to be in the south), crossbars (if any), and felloes (and their thickness). He proceeds with the axle or axles, since in some types of carriages (mostly in north India) each wheel has its own axle, while in others a pair of wheels has a common axle. Every type of carriage, wheel, and body is illustrated by a wealth of line-drawings drawn from many publications.

The second chapter is titled "Carriages in Indian iconography," although it gathers evidence not just from art depictions but also from archaeology and literature. Deloche begins with the Indus civilization and its numerous toy-cart models of ox-drawn wheeled vehicles of diverse but still poorly understood designs: it is not always clear, for instance, whether "the wheels rotated on a fixed axle or were fixed to an axle that revolved with them." Deloche rightly points to the surprising continuity in the width of