

Domesticating an *Avadāna*: A Case Study in Newar Buddhism

Chandima Gangodawila

Visiting Research Fellow

Centre for Studies in Religion and Society

University of Victoria

PO Box 1700 STN CSC

Victoria BC V8W 2Y2

Canada

Abstract

The avadānas are teaching stories that illustrate the qualities of a pious and spiritual life. There is a long tradition of using them to engage audiences of the laity in an effort to pass on the deeper spiritual truth of Buddhism. However, when a small handful of such stories, out of the hundreds that exist, achieve a distinctive prominence within a particular community, the reasons for this are likely to be found less in the universal truths of the stories than in the ways those stories have been adapted to the unique conditions and needs of that community. Understanding this process requires an approach that addresses the role of domestication: including redacting and editing to effectively localize the stories. A case study in Newar Buddhism demonstrates these processes.

Key words: *Avadāna*, Domestication, Newar Buddhism, Anthropology, Narrations

1. Introduction

This article closely follows insights from the work of Todd Lewis (Lewis and Tuladhar, 2000). Lewis characterizes his work as responding to the need for locality-specific research in religious studies. He describes Buddhist scholarship as having been dominated by philological-textual studies, on the one hand, that usually have left texts unrelated to their community context(s), or on the other hand ethnographic studies that often neglect local traditions and their vernacular domestication. Through application to a specific case study, this article follows Lewis in the effort to articulate an approach that transcends the limitations of each of those methods, leveraging of their individual potential by means of a methodological marriage between them. And, as will be seen, marriage is an apt motif for the discussion to follow. Amid a brief history of the Newar Buddhist tradition, and the Nepalese civilization out of which it grew, the extremely important role of trade among the Newar will be emphasized (Gellner, 1992). The importance of the Newar legacy of expansive trade will be seen to have three significant consequences for the discussion to follow. In the first place, it was this great openness to trade and exchange with others that brought the ideas of Buddhist teaching to the Nepal valley. As is common with trading civilizations, the exchange of goods very often entails the exchange of ideas.

Buddhism flourished in Nepal in some considerable measure due to the second aspect of Newar trade's significance to the following discussion. This is the generally very positive view of merchants and traders within the Buddhist tradition. Not only did Buddhism value mercantilism¹ because it served to propagate Buddhist ideas, but the merchants themselves were often quite financially supportive of Buddhism. In return, Buddhism celebrated honest trade as a cornerstone of a pious life. In this way a certain mutuality of interests emerged between such traders and Buddhism. The third, and more particular, significance of the merchant-Buddhist connection, will turn out to be some of the specific and challenging life choices and circumstances that arose within the Newar context, involving men of merchant families living long periods in foreign lands. This often led to developments that threatened Newar ethnic and kinship bonds.

¹ The term mercantilism is used here only to refer to the traditions and spirit of trade. It is not intended to carry the implications of state sanctioned monopoly charters, as the term is applied in the context of European history.

We will see that the domestication of a particular *avadāna* has involved its localized editing in such a manner as to create a moral lesson seeming to be peculiarly well honed for providing a cautionary tale to such traders about the severe dangers of neglecting the imperative of their primary ethnic and kinship bonds.

Before we can come to that, though, we'll need to explain the nature and history of the *avadāna*, within the Buddhist tradition, as well as what is meant by domestication and localization of texts, and how these processes serve the purposes just described in the specific case of Newar merchants. The *avadānas* are an old and venerated tradition of stories within the Buddhist canon that are celebrated for their value in illustrating the right conduct of the pious and the enlightened. They are valued for their illustrations of this conduct to the laity. The emphasis here is upon a kind of timeless, spiritual universality. However, as Lewis has explored in his book, and numerous articles, the perpetuation of such stories, within any particular context, will often be revealed to have specific local relevance. And, indeed, on some occasions – as in at least one instance found in the *avadāna* considered in the case study below – redactions and editorial license have sculpted the stories ever more precisely for locally relevant lessons. It turns out to be precisely this localization that makes the *avadāna* in question so powerfully relevant to, and gives it its strong emotional and ritual purchase upon, the community under consideration. It is precisely this kind of relevance and purchase that is found at work within the Newar society's assimilation of the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna*. Precisely where the same traditions of trade provide great prosperity, but also threaten social bonds through dangerous importation of the new and foreign, this *avadāna* provides its powerful cautionary tale, addressed specifically to overland long distance traders, about maintaining traditional Nepalese bonds and social norms. It is in this way that the *avadāna* is understood to have been domesticated and localized. All this, however is better understood after the historical and theoretical context has been established.

1.1 On Newar Buddhism

The focus of the paper at hand is strictly on considerations related specifically to the Newar adoption of Buddhism. The name Newar is derived from the name of the valley, Nepal. The Newars, as a function of their trade traditions spread out into Tibet and through southern Asia. Three city-states—Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, and Lalitpur—dominated the valley. There were also smaller towns and villages which lent Newar civilization a greater diversity of settlement pattern. The *Kṣatriya* dynasty from Gorkha, in 1769, conquered the region. The resulting government policies favored Hinduism, leading to a decline of the Buddhist traditions. Despite these developments, however, considerable Buddhist devotional and cultural observance continues in the region. Today, Kathmandu, the capital of the modern state, remains a contact centre for the rest of the world. Archaic cultural traditions continue to survive, among the most unique of them being a *Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna* Buddhist culture (Gopal, 1999).

Mahāyāna is literally translated as the "Great Vehicle." It is one of the two (or by some reckonings three) main branches of Buddhism. "*Mahāyāna*" can also refer to the path of the bodhisattva seeking enlightenment. It is the largest major contemporary Buddhist tradition, estimated to represent 53.2 percent of Buddhist practitioners. In the course of its long history, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism spread from India across a wide range of southern, central and eastern Asian countries. For our purposes, it also found its way to Nepal. According to Lewis, one could surmise that certainly by 1200 *Mahāyāna* devotees in Nepal regarded the basic religious questions as solved: the bodhisattva ideal became the predominant religious standard and the philosophical understanding of the universe. Prior to the aforementioned creation of the modern state, in 1769, the name Nepal referred to a valley in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains. As one frequently finds throughout history, such topography tends to promote high levels of decentralization and independence. The fertility of the valley soil and opportunities for trade made this valley people relatively prosperous by the standards of their time.

The Newars were great traders and merchants. In the central trans-Himalayan region, by 1400, there had been established an ancient and enduring relationship between Newar mercantilism and Buddhism. Among the highland plains most valuable trading goods were salt, gold, silver, musk, and yak tails. A great range of diaspora trade networks arose to facilitate product exchanges of mutual benefit to the participating parties. Though Kashmiri, Bengali, Marwari, and Tibetan traders figure prominently in these trade networks, in the Kathmandu Valley and extending from it, the most prevalent and important merchants were the Newar Buddhists.

From the very beginning of these trade networks, such prosperity and trade, as is also common through history, promoted the simultaneous importation of new ideas. Among those in the early years of Newar mercantilism were Hinduism and Buddhism.

Though, traditionally, the strongest influence on Newar Buddhism has derived from India, recently Tibetan influences have become increasingly important. While the last three hundred years have witnessed a gradual decline of Newar Buddhism, its remnants remain. Monasteries, temples and festivals persist and remain popular and, particularly in urban Nepal, Buddhism continues to enjoy strong qualities as markers of group identity. Though in a sense a relatively small subculture, Buddhism has continued to survive and even thrive amid a sea of Hinduism. This has largely been accomplished through certain acts of accommodation with the Hindu reality. Examples of this have included the adoption of the logic of the Hindu caste system and at least formally supporting Hindu kingship (Lienhard, 1963; Greenwood, 1974, 1978). Lewis' discussion of Newar Buddhism should not obscure the fact that, in the modern setting, the faith is in decline. His book should be regarded as a scholarly reconstruction of the recent past when belief and practice were more vibrant.

1.2 The *Avadāna*

A salient and vital dimension of the Buddhist tradition is the emphasis upon Buddha's capacity to develop a stimulating narrative that evocatively illustrated a doctrinal point (Tuladhar, 2006). The *avadānas*, as they are known, over the years, have been collected and redacted in such a way as to emphasize the importance of moral and ritual acts. The term *avadāna* might be defined as a significant deed or adventure. The thumbnail etymology, such as few Sanskrit Dictionaries find, claims the term derives from Sanskrit; Pāli cognate: *Apadāna* (Williams and Leumann, 1899, p.99). Tyson Yost, in his doctoral dissertation on the integration of the *avadāna* within the Chinese context provides a thorough examination of the etymology of the word, which provides some insight into its meaning. Yost is worth quoting at length on this:

There are two arguments for the etymology of the word *avadāna* among scholars. J.S. Speyer argues that the word derives from the root *ava + dā*, meaning to "to cut off, to select," and eventually coming to denote "glorious achievements." In Indian literature outside the realm of Buddhism, the term is most often used to indicate illustrious actions or feats performed heroically. Within the Buddhist context the term would then denote karmically significant actions, whether good or bad. Maurice Winternitz builds upon Speyer's understanding of the word and defines it as "a 'noteworthy deed,' sometimes in a bad sense, but generally in the good senses of 'a heroic deed,' 'a feat,' with the Buddhists a 'religious or moral feat' and then also the 'story of a noteworthy deed, or feat.' Such a 'feat' may consist of the sacrifice of one's own life, but also merely of a gift of incense, flowers, ointments, gold and precious stones, or the erection of sanctuaries." In contrast, Max Müller derived the etymology from the root *ava + dai* meaning "to cleanse, to purify." Thus Müller defines the word as meaning "a legend, originally a pure and virtuous act, an ἀριστεία, afterwards a sacred story, and possibly a story the hearing of which purifies the mind." Kanga Takahata continues this train of thought by arguing that it is "beyond doubt that the central idea underlying *avadāna* literature is...the purification of mind." Most scholars today follow Speyer in their understanding of the etymology of the word, though it is still far from clear how the earliest Buddhists understood the original meaning and intent of the word (Yost, 2013, p.4).

The important emphasis, for our purposes, is that these texts tell the stories of how past lives' virtuous deeds correlate to subsequent lives' events. They are often venerated by highly orthodox Buddhists. In the present context the term specifically conjures lessons of religious instruction as illustrated by the actions of a spiritually advanced being. The public recitation of these stories became an important part of monastic outreach, providing a widespread laity audience for the religion's teachings. The *avadāna* then should be regarded as among the earliest, fundamental texts of the Buddhist tradition. However, as will be seen, this has not exempted such stories from forms of redaction that tend to emphasize solutions to real world local problems rather than the universally spiritual ones which are their formal jurisdiction. This is what we'll be calling "domestication" of the texts. It's to that topic that we turn next.

2. Domestication

As insinuated above, it would be a serious misunderstanding to treat such texts as the *avadānas* as decontextualized emblems of Buddhism. As a living religion, Buddhism has to be understood as it manifests on the ground, in the lives of real, and therefore specific, people (Durkheim, 1965). How particular people put such texts into practice tells the tale of how the religious practice manifests for them. This brings us to the important topic of the domestication of such stories and rituals. Todd Lewis defines domestication as "the dialectical historical process by which a religious tradition is adapted to a region or ethnic group's socioeconomic and cultural life.

While ‘great traditions’ supply a clear spiritual direction to followers who are close to the charismatic founders, including norms of orthodox adaptation and missionizing, religious traditions’ historical survival has been related—often paradoxically—to their being ‘multivocalic’ so that later devotees have a large spectrum of doctrine, rituals, situational instructions, and exemplary folktales to draw upon (Lewis and Tuladhar, 2000, p.3).” Generally, cultural history suggests that texts of all kinds tend to fade in significance as the contextual conditions change and the functional relevance of the text becomes less important. Thus, when any particular text endures, regardless of what intrinsic spiritual value it may be believed to possess, the actual operations by which it is sustained beyond the conditions of its original creation or adoption tell the story of how such an enduring significance is achieved. These processes are what are meant by domestication. The cultural and/or geographic pervasiveness of a particular tradition’s extent of domestication is of course agnostic on matters of its spiritual truth. What does not seem open to doubt, though, is that there must be some kind of – as Lewis says – multivocality to such a tradition and its texts. In other words, it must have a way of speaking to many different people, in many different contexts, to be able to be so widely domesticated. Indeed, the successful expansion of Buddhism can be largely regarded as a consequence of the success in reaching a wider audience with its vernacular narratives. Such stories would seem to be most successful when most accomplished at meeting the twin needs of providing moral instruction, but within the fabric of a compelling story, with strong elements of plot and character, that hook into the deeply evolved human preference for the narrative form.

In understanding how these processes function, we can draw upon the insights of Hallisey and Hansen. They distinguish three distinct phases in the domestication process. These are 1) Prefiguration: this is the effect of enlarging the reader or hearer’s moral horizon. 2) Configuration: this refers to the function of exposing the opaqueness of moral intention. Finally, 3) Refiguration refers to the healing or transformative potential of such narratives. It is in the latter that the process progresses to the potential for transcendence (Hallisey and Hansen, 1996, p.308). Another important factor in domestication, and the one that will prove to be of particular relevance to our case study explored below, is what might be called localization of the texts. The process here involves a continual editing, whether conscious or unconscious, by the orators who recite the stories, to fix them in the contextual conditions – in our case study, geographic, ethic and familial ones – of the primary audience. As Buddhism had no overarching institutional authority to regulate or otherwise exercise quality or consistency control (in contrast, say, to Roman Catholicism’s efforts at message standardization), there was both incentive and opportunity for the maximum and optimum localization of such texts to their relevant context. This makes the spread of the Buddhist tradition an especially rich and diverse expression of such domestication processes. And, while there is often a presumption of oral traditions becoming locked in time, as later generation after generation simply memorizes and recites the ancient stories, in practice, it’s rarely this simple as every retelling invites the, conscious or unconscious editing of the story. In the case of Newar Buddhism, according to Lewis, such living editing of the classic stories remains very much in effect even to this day (Lewis and Tuladhar, 2000, p.6). He sees such a living editorial process as making Newar Buddhism an especially fertile soil for exploration of these domestication processes.

After all, there is a selection process at work. Why, among the many hundreds of the *avadāna* stories left to us by the Buddhist world, did a particular handful persist so powerfully within the Newar Buddhist culture? The logic of the discussion above would suggest that they in some way lent themselves to vernacular forms that captured something relevant to the particular cultural context. In this way, Newar tradition is seen as providing a promising laboratory for exploring the processes and conditions of this kind of domestication of Buddhist texts. Also, since part of the enduring nature of specific *avadāna* texts lies in their public performance, one should not neglect the importance of ritual in this story of domestication (Tuladhar, 2006, p. 106). It is a widely accepted principle in Buddhism that ritualized practices can embody or give rise to elevated spiritual states. Even the common householder can achieve the *nirvāna* of a dedicated and much-studied monk, given the right ritualized context. And indeed many doctrinal Buddhist texts elaborated upon the proper place and performance of such rituals. Indeed, performance, as such, is of central important to the teaching stories of Buddhism. In this perspective the ends are tied neatly together. Good deeds make good stories that promote good deeds. Again, though, understanding the persistence of any one such complex of deed and story still comes down to recognizing the conditions that perpetuate its recurring relevance within the specific local context. To better understand that domestication process, we turn to the discussion of a particular case of such an *avadāna*’s localization in action.

2.1 Case Study: The *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna*

Now that the foundations have been laid for our understanding of both the *avadāna* tradition and an appreciation of the domestication process, as an explanation for the importance and enduring nature of a particular story, we are in a position to apply these insights to consideration of a particular case study.

2.2 The Context of the Case

The case to be considered here is the domestication of the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna*. Mentioned above was the great importance in the history of Nepal and Newar society of trade. It will prove to be valuable to bear in mind this vital significance of expansive trade as we attempt to place the absorption of this text into its uniquely Newar context. For the case at hand, it is specifically the context of Newar trade with Tibet which is important to understand. As established, Buddhism has long shared a strong affinity with expansive trade. Buddhism is widely recognized to have spread in major part by means of piggybacking upon trade routes. The notion that ideas spread through trade is not new, but Buddhism has had an especially strong affiliation with trade. And in fact the mercantile sector can be said to have significantly underwritten the spread of the Buddhist faith. As a consequence of these historical developments, not only has the trade of Buddhist merchants spread Buddhist stories, but the Buddhist stories have come to spread the virtues of Buddhist merchants. Wealthy Buddhist merchants are often extolled for their donations to the practitioners of the faith. And, no doubt, these bouquets are as much inducements to future action as celebrations of past ones. Likewise, the affinities merchants felt toward Buddhism were not purely altruistic. There were a number of qualities in Buddhist thought that were especially conducive to the interests of merchants.

To begin with, the Buddha had declared trade as one of the four honest vocations (Caroline, 1901, p.881). And, in fact, lending was another of them – not so far removed from trade itself and a valuable resource for ambitious merchants. Also, Buddhist teachings opposed birth-determined socio-spiritual privileges. As merchants everywhere in history found themselves engaged in social (and sometimes more combative) struggles with those of noble birth over resources and prestige, such endorsement had great potential for social and political climbing. Buddhism also, both, prescribes honesty in the dealing of traders and points to the trader's wealth as a consequence of having conducted himself with such moral uprightness, respect and honesty (Gombrich, 1988, p.78). The possibility of coming by one's wealth dishonestly is not ignored. But the very accumulation of wealth is not treated as a sign of dishonesty or poor character as so often is found in some other of the world religions (Carpenter, 1910, p.180). So, merchants had a strong motive to hitch their wagon to this religious train. This leads Todd Lewis to his assessment that: "The early missionary success of Buddhist monasticism must therefore be linked to the devoted patronage and service of the mercantile class and to alliances with the dynamic political-economic sectors of prospering Indic empires (Lewis and Tuladhar, 2000, p.52)."

2.3 The *Avadāna* of the Case

The *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna* is an example of the oral-written travels of these classical narratives given a vernacular turn (Sudarshan, 1968). The summary of the story here is abstracted from the Newari version of the text. It is the story of a son, born to a family in the jewelry business, who announces to his parents his intention to cross the sea so as to enter trade on behalf of the family business. Upon hearing this announcement, the parents are distressed. They point out to the son that the family business has already accumulated great wealth; the son could live in comfort due to the success of their jewelry business. Why then does he want to go off travelling, taking great risk to himself when all he asks for materially is already available to him? His travels will not only require he go far, through many other villages, but eventually he will come to places of great danger, posed by both wild animals and thieves. There will be also dangers posed by the vagaries of nature. Thus, the parents implore him to abandon such talk. After hearing his parents' concerns, the boy has several replies. First, he says, his fate will be his fate. Wherever he goes, he cannot escape it. Second, he cannot be an accomplished man, in the eyes of his parents, or himself, if he simply lives comfortably off what they have earned. He must earn his own fruits of his labour. Nor can he earn the right of meritorious giving unless he earns his own wealth. Plus, he adds, in undertaking a mission of *dharma* no troubles will befall him. Thus, he asks that his parents not to worry, but rather give him their blessing. This they eventually, reluctantly do.

The son, *Siṃhala* is his name, then assembles a 500 man caravan and sets off overland. The only event reported en route is that members of the party damage a *caitya*, to the consternation of the *Siṃhala* who vows to make amends, later. Eventually, the caravan comes to a great sea.

They are to cross it in a ferry, but amidst the crossing a terrible storm arises, shipwrecking them. They barely escape with their lives. Upon the shore where their ship has been wrecked, they are approached by an equal number of flesh-eating demonesses, who have, unknown to the caravan members, taken the pleasing shape of beautiful young woman. They are all wined and dined and seduced by the consorts, treated like lords in this new land. The consorts invite the crew to make love to them “in all the different ways,” leaving the men delighted at their good fortune. It is said to be only after seven days that they finally sleep. *Siṃhala*, though, is awoken from his sleep to be warned by the bodhisattva, *Sri Avalokiteśvara*, about the real identity of the traders’ newly discovered lovers. Incredulous at first, *Siṃhala* is directed to a fortress outside the city. There he finds captive trades of other lands, who had preceded his own, now enchained and slowly being eaten by the demonesses. He speaks with some of the prisoners and, having confirmed the story, returns to the bodhisattva. He gives *Siṃhala* precise instructions on how to escape: go to a sandy shore of the *Brahmapūtra*, meet a divine horse there, and follow its instructions exactly. The next day, *Siṃhala* secretly assembles his men and solicits their judgment of the situation. Many speeches are made extolling the virtues of their situation and praising the good fortunes that have brought it upon them. When *Siṃhala* reveals what he has learned from the bodhisattva, and the instructions for escape that have been explained to him, the men greet the news with consternation. When they execute this plan, the horse informs them that they can be carried across the sea to safer shores, provided that they do not look back. If they obey this command, they are assured, they will be taken to safety. The demonesses, though, discover the plan and fly after them, making great lamentations to create the illusion of enchantment and love. Among their great imploring of the men to return to them and the sensual pleasures they have enjoyed together, the demonesses specifically beg them to at least look back so they may see their beautiful faces once more. Eventually, each one of them does look back, then falls away and is eaten, except for *Siṃhala*. The devouring of the men is described in great, graphic detail.

When *Siṃhala* finally makes it across to the safer shore, he again meets *Avalokiteśvara*, whom he thanks for his escape. The bodhisattva explains that the bad karma from damaging the *caitya* is part of the reason for this mishap, but his own safety was assured by his performance of a *Mahāyāna* ritual, the *aṣṭamī vrata*. *Siṃhala* receives a sword, a prediction of his future and a special *darśan*, before being sent on his way back home by the bodhisattva. However, *Siṃhala*’s demoness paramour pursues him. She creates an apparitional child that resembles him and that she uses to turn others against *Siṃhala*, claiming he’d impregnated her and then abandoned her and the child. She attempts this gambit originally along the road, but then again at *Siṃhala*’s home, after he’d returned, to the great relief of his parents. All the while, the disguised demoness expresses Buddhist devotions to assure her audience she is a devout and spiritual woman.

The people who hear her story, so moved by her beauty and piety turn on *Siṃhala* and demand of his father that the son be compelled to live up to what they believe to be his paternal responsibilities. They insist she must be taken into the family home. Though the parents are persuaded to implore their son along these lines, he firmly stands his ground and finally gives his parents an ultimatum. If they accept her into their home, he will leave it. Finally, they relent and side with their son. The demoness, however, persists and goes to the palace of the king, where she repeats the same story, winning the same sympathy. *Siṃhala* is called before the king, where he is sternly instructed that all women, in their way, are demonesses, and it is his duty to forgive whatever trespasses she is to have made, and to accept and love her. However, the king also adds, understanding the feelings of being seduced by lust, that if *Siṃhala* will not have the fair woman, he should turn her over to the king. Though *Siṃhala* disavows the woman, the king will hear nothing of his claims and decides to take in the alluring woman and her child. However, only days later, having seen vultures circling the palace, *Siṃhala* leads the citizens on a journey that reveals all the palace inhabitants to have been devoured by the demonesses, whom they see fleeing back to their homeland. The citizens now elect *Siṃhala* as their new king and he establishes a just and prosperous society, marked by the regular observance of the *aṣṭamī vrata*. He organizes an army that returns to the homeland of the demonesses and defeats them. Once victorious, though, compassion takes hold of him and he decides not to execute them. Instead, he accepts from them an oath to leave for a faraway forest and never return. Their former homeland is converted to Buddhism and enjoys many social reforms. At last, *Siṃhala* returns to his own homeland, where his citizens “cultivated virtuous minds, served the *triratna*, and found both pleasure and happiness (Lewis, 1993, p.150).”

2.4 The Domestication of the Case

Ivan Strenski characterizes “domestication” as embodying the logic of evolutionary adaptation, which he finds in the history of the *sangha* (Strenski, 1983, p.466). This is the approach cultivated by Todd Lewis, which will be applied here. The resonance of this text with the experience of Newar life is immediately evident. This is particularly so if we focus on the Tibetan trade. There is a long and closely-knit history between Nepal and Tibet arising from this history of trade (Lewis, 1989). A classic trade diaspora was created by the practice of merchant families sending family members to live for many years in major trading cities, such as Lhasa, Shigatse, Gyantse (Lewis, 1993, p.151). They learned the Tibetan language, participated in the local cultural life, and often took Tibetan wives. Assimilation, however, was not complete. The Newar did maintain strong ties both in order to celebrate their own festivals and as bargaining leverage with Tibetan officials. This journey to and from Tibet was a dangerous one. Personal injury, robbery and even death were common enough along these roads. Years of profitable work could be easily lost to bandits. In general, within the great Tibetan cities, the Newar merchants – sometimes quite prosperous – were tolerated with reasonable good form. Though there were exceptions during which they were attacked and sometimes even killed. So, the context of the story is one that Newar merchants would easily recognize.

Given this context, it is understandable why and how the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu Avadāna* was domesticated into the cultural specifics of this Newar trading community. For example, among the ferries that traversed the Brahmaputra River, several were built to resemble the great horse *Vārāhaka* that carried *Siṃhala* to safety. Also, the *Siṃhalasārthabāhu chorten stūpa*, in Lhasa, and a Jokhang shrine had images of his “wife.” The Newar traders treated these with veneration (Lewis, 1993, p.152). The hero of the story was regarded as a bodhisattva, to whom a shrine was erected in *Vikramaśīla Mahāvihāra*, among the oldest Buddhist temples in Kathmandu. It was considered a bearer of good fortune to visit this shrine before traders set out on their month-long journey to Tibet. The bodhisattva is celebrated in many festivals and their processions, often involving entourages of musicians. Perhaps the deepest level of understanding for the domestication of the particular story to the Newar context comes from considering its allegorical dimensions. The story certainly entails common themes within Buddhism that warn about the dangers of pursuing sensual pleasure. However, many of the details are strikingly relevant to the specifically local Newar context. As mentioned, it was common for Newar merchants, living many years in Tibet, to take on Tibetan wives. Often these were beautiful young women. The children of such offspring were characterized from the Newar perspective as “mongrel” or the result of “forbidden intercaste union (Turner, Rivers and Turner, 1931, p.111). As a consequence, even once the fathers returned to Nepal, the children remained behind, supported by the fathers in absentia. Though polygamy was legal in Nepal, these Tibetan wives were viewed with a jaundiced eye and as a particular source of anguish and jealousy for the Newar wives.

From this perspective, then, the first part of the story can be seen as highly cautionary. It warns the travelling merchant that taking on a foreign wife, although she may be alluring and providing unexpected, even taboo pleasures, to do so is a forsaking of one’s original and more profound obligations to the Newar wife. Indeed, it can introduce great danger into the Newar family, threatening enslavement, murder, cannibalism and more. The demoness’ apparitional child also had important allegorical and cautionary aspects. For, it was a reminder that upon the rare occasion that Newar merchants would bring their “mongrel” child home with them, the outcome was often disastrous, bringing family chaos and destruction with them. The general rule was that such bastard children were not welcome in their father’s Newar home or even in the Kathmandu valley at all, for concern that under customary Nepalese law they could lay a claim upon the father’s estate. *Siṃhala*’s rejection of the illegitimate son was an allegorical expression of proper conduct for such situations from the perspective of proper Newar society.

Notable in the above concern is not only a focus upon the privileges of specific wives and children, but ethnically specific ones. This emphasis upon an ethnocentric privileging is also captured in the story, when *Siṃhala*, despite gleaning valuable information from the imprisoned traders in the fortress, that will help him try to save his men, strikingly fails to make any effort to save them from their horrible and far more immediate doom. Lewis notes that this is a good example of the editing process at work, because earlier versions of the story include reference to some notion that the fortress has magical powers that prevent the escape of the present prisoners. Redacting this qualification from the Newar version of the story leaves the impression that *Siṃhala*’s choice may have been made exclusively on ethnocentric grounds, which would certainly dovetail with this ongoing concern about the ethnicity of merchants’ children and proper claims to inheritance.

In contrast, of course, to *Siṃhala*, with his wise refusal to admit the outsiders, the illegitimate son and his alluringly beautiful mother, the king succumbs to this desire. As he admits to already once being the victim of his own lust, we are left with the suspicion that he may have fell victim to it yet again. The consequence though of opening one's doors to such forces is naturally misery and tragedy. It would seem that this story, while making merchants the center piece and hero of the tale, has been domesticated within the Newar context to provide a warning very much tailored to the situation of Newar merchants. Breaking the tight circle of Newar ethnicity and kinship is immensely dangerous: it risks inviting demons into one's home, which will bring catastrophe and ruin. And, interestingly, as we saw with the demoness' proclaiming of Buddhist platitudes, no amount of pious protestation will protect one from this violation of Newar ethnic and kinship bonds. Perhaps more than any other aspect of the story this one emphasizes to us the importance of the relevant domestication. This Newar tale of Buddhist spiritual enlightenment, at the end of the day, ranks devotion to Newar solidarity over expressions of Buddhist piety.

3. Conclusion

Of the hundreds of Buddhist spiritual teaching stories that can be found in the religious canon, why did this *avadāna* gain such widespread repetition and emphasis within Newar Buddhism? Answering that question requires understanding the kind of domestication process explained in this paper. As with much of the tone in Buddhism, the Newar found in this *avadāna* a particular concern for problems unique to the kind of trading life that they knew so intimately. That could be reason enough for its popularity. However, its exceptional popularity, within the ritual and festive context of their Buddhist practice suggests something more than just a valorization of their economic way of life. The analysis provided for the domestication and localization of the text offers us insight into why this text proved to be perceived as so important in the Newar context. The long sojourns in foreign lands presented the danger of taking foreign wives and having mongrel children. Nepal culture and law allowed for this. What was interdicted was the bringing of such wives and children back home with them. To do so threatened the well being of their homes, their families and the fabric of their society. The localized power of this particular *avadāna* lay precisely in its warning about the need to forsake any such claims of alluring foreign wives and their sons. By rejecting them and refusing to allow them into his home, *Siṃhala* demonstrated the right action. Whether right by universal Buddhist principles, it was certainly perceived as right action by the social conventions of Newar society. In contrast, the king succumbed to the foreign allure and suffered the destruction of all, life, family and home. It is this highly relevant localized lesson that constituted the imperative for this specific domestication of an *avadāna* within Newar society. Providing just this kind of explanation for Buddhist texts, which avoids failing to either take the texts seriously, or ignores the context of their performance, was the methodological inspiration for my research and was the declared aspiration of the paper at hand. This case study provides a compelling illustration of the methodological power of this kind of approach.

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