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*The Culture of Giving in Myanmar:  
Buddhist Offerings, Reciprocity and Interdependence*

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# A Review of *The Culture of Giving in Myanmar: Buddhist Offerings, Reciprocity and Interdependence*

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*The Culture of Giving in Myanmar: Buddhist Offerings, Reciprocity and Interdependence.* By Hiroko Kawanami. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, xv + 185 pages, ISBN 978-1-350-12417-2 (hardback), \$115.00/978-1-350-12418-9 (e-book), \$103.50.

Gift exchange is absolutely central to Myanmar's Buddhist religious, social, and economic culture, and *The Culture of Giving* constitutes an important contribution to the body of work dealing with this topic. Chapters address the general topic of the culture of giving itself (chapter one), the laity (chapter two), Buddhist monks (chapter three), Buddhist nuns (chapter four), and donor groups and social outreach (chapter five). Throughout this culturally detailed and ethnographically informed book, any one of the chapters could be beneficially used in an undergraduate class dealing with Theravāda religious culture, either as standalone material or paired with other readings that examine gift giving in Buddhist and other traditions. Advanced scholars, graduate students, and others interested in the dynamics of gift exchange will also find this work useful, insightful, and provocative for further questions. In this review, I distill some pri-

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mary foci of inquiry, summarize some matters of interpretive effort, and highlight an area for further study to which the book gestures.

In conversation with various scholars who have discussed traditions, associations, and families associated with the activities of giving and receiving both in and beyond Myanmar, Kawanami fundamentally asks, “whether religious offerings, especially in a Buddhist culture, can stay value-free and above social reciprocity” (6). Each chapter presents ethnographic and other evidence showing how religious transactions in Myanmar are value-laden and deeply enmeshed in notions of social reciprocity. In part a reevaluation of Marcel Mauss’s (much discussed and criticized) ideas concerning gift-exchange and “their usefulness in understanding the continuous transactions that take place in the particular context of Buddhist society in Myanmar” (3), Kawanami demonstrates the complexities of such omnipresent gift exchanges. Whether exploring lay persons, Buddhist monks, Buddhist nuns, or the various communities with which they are associated, both individuals and groups act as givers and receivers, with a whole range of intentions and goals, from the helpful (for example, when a monk redistributes material goods to those in need, including lay people and monastics) to the emotionally stressful (for example, when for petty reasons a monk refuses a lay person’s gift because it fails to meet his standard). Throughout, Kawanami’s discussions offer what should be a final demolition of the old, dualistic model of symbiosis between Buddhist monk and layperson, in which the Buddhist monk acts as a field of merit for lay persons via the simple act of receiving alms from them. As Kawanami contends, the relations of giving and receiving exceed this model, with layers and implications of giving and reciprocity in various, circular directions. In this context, Kawanami’s discussion (chapter two) of the challenges lay people sometimes confront in giving to monks is insightful, with observations ranging from the heavy financial burdens people may face to the burdens of “inheriting” monasteries that their familial predecessors supported. Social interdependence through cycles of giving and receiving can simultaneously consist of beneficial relations and very fraught socio-economic enterprises.

The primary interpretive considerations of the book are mainly presented in the introduction. Kawanami distills debates about “the gift,” examines differences between giving in the Buddhist contexts of Myanmar and giving in the Hindu contexts of South Asia, highlights certain points about the politics of reciprocity, and analyzes gendered views of giving, among other topics. In the process, Kawanami suggests “that social stratification and notions of boundary transgression are weak in South-east Asia, whose societies are fairly egalitarian and meritocratic compared to those of South Asia” (8). While I do not entirely agree with this statement (for example, the evidence presented in Ward Keeler’s recent *The Traffic in Hierarchy*, which deals with Myanmar, comes to mind here, as do Kawanami’s own comments about gender-stratified inequalities between, for example, nuns and monks in Myanmar), it does help explain why and how the cycles of reciprocity (of giving, receiving, and dependence) operate in Buddhist Myanmar. For instance, the culture of giving in Myanmar is not structured around fears of caste transfer pollution between givers and recipients. And rather than a “linear, unidirectional flow” of gifts from lay persons to priests,

in a Buddhist society such as Myanmar, [gift giving] tends to be more circular, and facilitated by a multitude of reciprocal transactions; relationships are conducted in the expectation that a continuous flow of items will be given, received and passed around. (8)

In the conclusion to the book, Kawanami highlights the role of religious transactions in the possibility of building a “society of interdependence,” a society in which mutual dependence is acknowledged and considered to be primary, with a “system in which giving only becomes meaningful when the giver has a willing recipient” (145). In developing this point, Kawanami suggests that

Buddhism teaches us that a harmonious society cannot be achieved by a dichotomous positioning of ‘us’ and ‘them’ or

by othering the other, since after all, everything in our worldly existence affects everything else. (147)

A social application of the Buddhist idea of interdependent co-origination (which has been made by a variety of modern Theravāda and Mahāyāna commentators and groups), this statement clearly counters and implies a critique of exclusionary and violent Buddhist nationalism, which like other religious nationalisms comes to life through discourses and practices of othering.

Nonetheless, scholars and ordinary observers of Myanmar's political and religious tensions might expect more explicit commentary on how the culture of giving that Kawanami discusses intersects with all the problems the country has experienced relative to ethnic fragmentation, rebellion, violence, and war. Kawanami deals with aspects of Buddhist nationalism, narratives of perceived threats to the Buddha's *sāsana* (religion), and a few other associated points earlier in the book. However, the conclusion provides a provocative moment for further inquiry and reflection: Is the culture of giving Kawanami analyzes a system of exclusion that is predicated on establishing borders of practice and identity between Buddhists and non-Buddhists, between "us" and "them"? In this system, is transacting gifts itself considered *the* sacred center of the order of things? Does Kawanami's argument imply that the culture of giving is a system of transactional dependence in which goods continuously flow between monastics and lay people, wherein the very system itself produces powerful social boundaries, often unstated but tacitly assumed, between insiders and their conceptions of quite different outsiders who might endanger the system? For this reader, Kawanami's book opens a fruitful avenue for further analysis of the cultures of giving and the political ramifications of othering in Myanmar and beyond.

**Works Cited**

Keeler, Ward. *The Traffic in Hierarchy: Masculinity and Its Others in Buddhist Burma*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2017.