



## SPECIAL SECTION: TOWARD A COMPARATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY OF BUDDHISM

### Introduction

#### Legacies, Trajectories, and Comparison in the Anthropology of Buddhism

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■ **ABSTRACT:** The anthropology of Buddhism may give the impression of already having a well-established lineage. However, understood as a collective endeavor bringing together specialists from different parts of the Buddhist world in a comparative spirit, it remains very much an emerging project. We outline in this introduction some of the striking features of the beginnings of this subfield, such as how it has undergone a process of emancipation from textualist interpretations of Buddhism, and survey some of its main thematic and analytic orientations, pointing in particular to its most substantial ‘long conversation’, on the structure and dynamics of Buddhist religious fields. Throughout, we focus primarily on the period following an assessment of the subfield made by David Gellner in 1990. Finally, we stress the importance and highlight the promise of a *comparative* anthropology of Buddhism that builds on a critical, reflexive examination of its central concepts.

■ **KEYWORDS:** anthropology of Buddhism, Buddhist ritual, comparison, Mahāyāna Buddhism, reflexivity, religious field, tantric Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism

### The Project of an ‘Anthropology of Buddhism’

To the outside observer, the anthropology of Buddhism may give the impression of having already established a lineage (see, e.g., Robbins 2007: 5), perhaps especially visible from the 1960s to the 1990s, with works such as the seminal essays by Tambiah and Obeyesekere in Leach’s 1968 volume *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, followed by a series of now classic monographs by Spiro (1970), Tambiah (1970), and many more. This early period was marked by the dominance of scholarship on Theravāda (the Doctrine of the Elders) Buddhism, a range of forms found primarily in Sri Lanka and most of continental Southeast Asia. Theravāda Buddhism has often been perceived to embody a closer adherence to the original forms of ancient Indic Buddhism, in contrast with Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) Buddhism (found primarily in Vietnam and more northern parts of Buddhist Asia, from Japan to Buryatia), which is distinguished by



expansive scriptural canons and pantheons, and in particular with Vajrayāna or tantric Buddhism, a strongly ritual-centered current that is found among the latter traditions and is particularly present in Nepal, Tibet, and Mongolian areas.<sup>1</sup>

The reasons for the predominance of studies on Theravāda Buddhism are multiple. Theravāda was perceived as possessing a more coherent textual basis, whereas Mahāyāna and in particular tantric forms were marked by a bewildering conceptual, textual, and ritual complexity. Compared, for instance, with Thailand or Burma, Buddhist practices and institutions in the more accessible Mahāyāna areas (e.g., Japan) were much less prominent, and research was hindered by a (partially enduring) relative inaccessibility of Nepalese, Chinese, Mongolian, and particularly Tibetan sites (Gellner 1990: 98–99). To this one should add academic institutional dynamics: the prominent figures of the anthropology of Theravāda Buddhism have launched very few students into Mahāyāna orbits. Finally, the early scholarship on Theravāda Buddhism retains a somewhat canonical character, due to its prominence as well as perhaps to the perceived closeness between Theravāda and ancient Indic Buddhism.

In this intellectual genealogy, the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford's* 1990 special issue on the anthropology of Buddhism constituted an important step toward developing a balance between Theravāda and Mahāyāna perspectives. David Gellner's introduction ("What Is the Anthropology of Buddhism About?") has been a key reference, and this text aspires in some sense to constitute a sequel. Indeed, aside from Gellner's (2001) later collection of essays, or a few articles assessing the scholarship on Theravāda Buddhism, there are almost no other publications that can be said to have taken the anthropology of Buddhism as an object in itself or even as a key framework, and only very few (e.g., Samuel 1993; Sihlé 2015b) have engaged substantially in comparative discussions with anthropological work in other Buddhist contexts.

What is the 'anthropology of Buddhism' that we have in mind in the present special section? We understand it as an ethnographically based, comparatively and theoretically informed shared endeavor of a *community* of scholars engaged in the study of Buddhist traditions in their various forms and social contexts. In calling for an anthropology of Christianity, Joel Robbins (2003: 192) describes such a community as one in which "people working in different geographic areas publish in the same fora, read one another's work, recognize the relevance of that work for their own projects, and seek to develop a set of shared questions to be examined comparatively." Seen in this way, the anthropology of Buddhism remains very much an emerging project. The increasing intellectual and thematic diversity within this field since the 1990s, conjoined with the relatively modest number of anthropologists working on Buddhism, means that a sense of intellectual community and common purpose would remain elusive were it not for the conscious attempts deployed in recent years through the organization of numerous workshops and conference panels.<sup>2</sup> The word 'toward' in the title of this special section acknowledges this challenge; we are aiming simply to take one further step in that direction.

### **'Buddhism'**

In the 1990 special journal issue mentioned above, one article opens with the comment: "Strictly speaking, there is no anthropology of Buddhism, only the anthropological study of Buddhist societies" (Ramble 1990: 185). Exactly what 'Buddhism' are we talking about here? If we allow ourselves to simplify somewhat the position of the author, Buddhism is presented as "a system of beliefs and precepts" that can be understood through "familiarity with Buddhist literature" (ibid.: 185, 186). Maybe we can start with a more thoroughly anthropological definition of Buddhism that includes practices, institutions, and the like and focuses not on the textual production of a minority of theologians, visionaries, and other rarefied elites, but on the lived religion

of a wide variety of actors—an approach that a large part of Ramble’s research can be argued to illustrate well (e.g., Ramble 2008).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, considering the often complex nature of the religious fields in which we find Buddhist traditions and the varying weight that they carry in these fields, not to mention beyond, we might actually prefer either to avoid the designation ‘Buddhist societies’ altogether or to use it only sparingly, in a reflexive way, paying attention to heterogeneity. Our subfield has all too often assumed without much argument that Buddhism dominates the local religious and ethical landscapes and has shaped these societies. The greatly varying place of Buddhism should be an object of historicized comparative inquiry, not an a priori categorization.<sup>4</sup> In the Burmese context, there is also an issue of the “logic of representation,” argues Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière (2009: 189), citing a phrase by Lopez (1995: 11): scholars may have tended to reproduce socio-politically dominant discourses in their emphasis on the centrality of Buddhism.

So, in a sense, the ‘anthropology of Buddhism’ may be a useful designation, in that it does not assume a priori the fundamental Buddhistness of certain societies. Of course, it remains a shorthand designation that glosses over the great diversity of forms and historical trajectories, as well as issues of definition and delimitation, to which we will return.

Ramble’s opening sentence quoted above also raises indirectly the issue of the singular versus the plural: ‘the one and the many’, in Launay’s (1992: chap. 1) terms, talking of Islam in an African context. There have been culturally relativistic calls to turn to the study of ‘Islams’ or ‘Buddhisms’, and the habit has taken root in some academic quarters, as we can see for instance with the Princeton University Press book series entitled “Buddhisms.” However, we do find discussions of the ‘one and the many’ issue (also in the anthropology of Islam or Christianity) that defend in nuanced and convincing ways the idea of some overarching unity of intellectual object (e.g., see Cannell 2006). And in the words of one former occasional user of the plural: “The question of the 1990s of whether the object of study should be referred to as ‘Buddhism’ or ‘Buddhisms’ seems to have been answered in favour of the singular” (Lopez 2016: 34–35)—a position we fully agree with, as long as its diversity of forms and the historically complex nature of this construct are kept in mind.

Beyond simple arguments of diversity, a more radical critique of the construction of ‘Buddhism’ (or ‘Islam’) as a singular anthropological object has been that of essentializing Buddhism, of constructing an “authentic Buddhism” (e.g., D. Scott 1994: 189–190). In a spirit of post-colonial critique, there have also been suggestions that it is up to Buddhists (*qua* Buddhists) to define what “Buddhism is” (ibid.: 242). But without constructing Buddhism as an analytical category as well, would we not be left without the means to ask certain important and notably comparative questions (something to which we shall return below)? Would there still be a place for a tradition of inquiry about what makes a Buddhist (or, e.g., Indianized) socio-religious or socio-political order, as Paul Mus (1933) and Tambiah (1970, 1976, 1984), each in his own way, have done—or, more recently, as Brac de la Perrière (1989) has been looking at these questions from the ‘subaltern’ perspective of the Burmese spirit cults? In this process, of course, we should not forget the historical complexity of emic perspectives themselves: see, for example, the recent scholarship on the emergence of the category ‘Buddhism’ (or similar vernacular categories) across Asian Buddhist (particularly colonial) contexts, under the influence of Western studies of ‘world religions’ (Masuzawa 2005).

Methodologically, drawing inspiration from prototype theory, as Benson Saler (1993) does with the category of ‘religion’, could be a non-universal, non-essentializing as well as reflexive—and thus intellectually satisfying—way to lay the definitional issue at rest.<sup>5</sup> This strategy combines the flexibility of polythetic approaches with a reflexive identification of the prototypes (and the predominantly Western conceptual genealogies) that lie at the core of the scholar’s use of the concepts. To take a concrete example, a tradition like the contemporary Tibetan Bön religion is extremely similar—doctrinally, ritually, and sociologically—to mainstream Tibetan Buddhism,

and in particular to the Nyingma order. It understands itself, however, as a purely indigenous Tibetan/West Himalayan religious tradition, revealed thousands of years before the time of the Buddha: here we have a strikingly atypical configuration within the context of what we would call 'Buddhist' traditions. With regard to notions of religious affiliation, many Bön adherents (or Bönpos) subscribe to being termed 'Buddhists' or, in Tibetan, *nangpa* (lit., 'insider') while insisting on the historical specificity and anteriority of their tradition. They like to point out that their faith is also turned toward buddhas (Tib. *sang-gyé*), that is, enlightened beings. Many mainstream Tibetan Buddhists dispute the Bönpos' *nangpa* status: an oft-stated prejudice is that Bön is a mere worldly, non-soteriological tradition. Early Western scholars were happy to take at face value this purported radical otherness of Bön, partly due to their fascination with ideas of (assumed) shamanic origins (Bjerken 2004). Summing up, the Bön tradition is not exactly what we as scholars might regard as a prototypical Buddhist tradition, but the analyst need not approach this through a binary, inclusion versus exclusion model. Bön is less prototypical, but it may well be legitimately included in discussions of the wider range of Buddhist traditions from an analytical perspective. The same approach would probably be useful for Japanese *shugendō*, particular ethnic minority forms of Buddhism, Western or other 'convert' reformulations, and many other cases.

### 'Anthropology'

Defining the project as an 'anthropology of Buddhism' also raises questions of disciplinary grounding and boundaries. It is our belief that 'anthropology' (understood here in the fullest sense of the term) has undeniable potential for a study, not so much of what texts tell us about Buddhism, but of Buddhism in its actual lived, social forms. By 'in the fullest sense', we mean an approach that ideally is at the same time ethnographically grounded, linguistically competent (including with regard to relevant literary languages), historicized, comparative, theoretically informed, and educated in textual studies or other neighboring disciplinary perspectives. Given today's need for academic specialization, this is an almost utopian list of requirements, of which most researchers will surely fall short, but which can give us a distinctive sense of direction.

While acknowledging the importance of disciplinarity, we do not think of 'anthropology' here as an exclusive club. Some work that is produced in neighboring disciplinary quarters (religious studies, sociology, etc.) shares a number of fundamental assumptions, methods, and discussions. Interdisciplinary research is also increasingly called for, and it may be argued that one sign of maturity of the field is the ability to engage in discussions with approaches from other disciplinary angles (historical *longue durée*, psychology, and so forth).

By calling for a proper 'anthropology of Buddhism', we argue for the very real need for a more substantial comparative engagement with Buddhist traditions and contexts. We also suggest—and illustrate in our discussion—that the anthropology of Buddhism would gain from occasionally widening the perspective to include insights from, or consideration of contrasts with, neighboring subfields of study, such as the anthropology of Christianity or of Islam. Finally, it is clear that such work can only benefit from an engagement with larger theoretical discussions of the key concepts, fundamental assumptions, and approaches involved in our studies.

## The Trajectories of an Emerging Subfield

### *Early Approaches*

As with Christianity and Islam, Buddhism has never constituted a typical anthropological object. Anthropology started out by focusing on small-scale, non-literate societies. It is only

with impulses like the one given by Robert Redfield's (1955) work on the study of 'civilizations' that approaching Buddhism—or at least its national, regional, or ethnic instantiations (Burmese Buddhism, Thai-Lao Buddhism in Isan, etc.)—as an anthropological object became conceivable.

To the extent that it was mentioned in the early comparative sociology or anthropology of religion, Buddhism has often had the status of a special case. For Durkheim, theistic definitions of religion such as Tylor's were invalidated by the (assumed) atheistic character of (Theravāda) Buddhism. The Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism, with their expansive pantheons and their ritualistic and devotional orientations, had struck early observers as anomalous and degenerate and were often relegated to footnotes. Weber (1921: 219; our translation) described ancient Buddhism as "the most radical form of soteriological endeavor ever conceivable." For him, the Theravāda Buddhist monk virtuoso typified world-rejecting mysticism and, as such, stood as the polar opposite of the Calvinist inner-worldly ascetic. Significantly, both Durkheim's and Weber's analyses were based on early Buddhologists' textual studies and their translations of Buddhist scriptures—admirable works of scholarship no doubt, which however all focused on an anthropologically speaking somewhat peculiar looking-glass: centuries-old texts written by Indic (and later other) renunciants, theologians, and visionaries.

The emergence of anthropological approaches has been marked, in part, by a process of emancipation from textualist understandings of Buddhism. In his 1990 overview of the sub-field, David Gellner depicted the early generations of anthropological works on Buddhism as originating in perplexity. Academic observers, expecting to find a rationalistic, atheistic religion of salvation, world rejection, and individual moral responsibility according to the laws of karma, encountered instead a complex mix of monasticism and spirit cults, hopes of reincarnation in a good, prosperous life accompanied generally by a thorough lack of concern for ultimate salvation, and practices of transfer of merit to living or dead kin. Local lives seemed suffused by rituals functioning according to principles of efficacy quite at variance with Buddhist doctrinal understandings of karmic causality—rituals that were debated by Buddhist modernists themselves, often under the pejorative rubric of superstition. Puzzled, the observers often asked whether these people were "really Buddhists." For Gellner (2001: 59), this early anthropology of Buddhism was often "embroiled in issues of identity and authenticity."

Today (and perhaps already at the time of Gellner's writing), anthropologists seem to have moved beyond the misconceived question of the Buddhistness of their interlocutors.<sup>6</sup> Writing about the historical trajectory of scholarly interpretations of Burmese religion, Schober (2008: 262, 264) points out that the concern with an "original" Buddhism, subject to "colonial curatorship," has given way to the recognition of substantial empirical diversity, with "regional, sectarian ... political and practice-based differences." Thai Buddhism has been described as being 'fragmented' (Keyes 1999) and even (perhaps from a postmodern perspective) a 'cacophony' (McDaniel 2011: 139).<sup>7</sup>

### *Text-Centered Disciplines and the Anthropology of Buddhism*

The strong dominance of text-based traditions of scholarship on Buddhism has meant that the anthropology of Buddhism has had to come to terms with perspectives emanating from these neighboring disciplines. Of course, academic endeavors do not always fall neatly within disciplinary boxes, and some authors have classified approaches to Buddhism on a spectrum ranging from the purely textual to the purely ethnographic (Reynolds 1987: 114; Rozenberg 2005: 44–46).

As has been noted for anthropology more widely (Messick 1993), anthropologists have often lacked the linguistic training needed to include in their analysis the literary, textual dimension of the cultural worlds they encounter. The need for anthropologists of complex literate

civilizations to be well grounded in the textual scholarship has been repeatedly stressed (e.g., Dumont and Pocock 1957; Strickmann 1980; Tambiah 1970). The Vajrayāna traditions show a particular complexity in this respect that has constituted a major challenge. But this textual scholarship should not be integrated uncritically. Houtman (1990: 248–249) has pointed to unreflexive inspiration drawn by anthropologists from the textual scholarship, whether in the categories used or in the privileging of literary over vernacular languages. Anthropologists have started to tackle the complex issue of incorporating into their anthropological analyses, in ethnographically coherent ways, the presence of texts—be they the manuals used by ritual specialists (Sihlé 2009) or the Buddhist texts circulated among lay ‘textual communities’ (Fisher 2016). Rozenberg (2005) has also reversed the common perspective of the dependency of anthropology upon textual scholarship by asking what the contextually less well-informed textual disciplines can learn from anthropology.

## Thematic Emphases

### *Core Features*

Certain key components of Buddhist institutional and ritual cultures have already received substantial attention in anthropological studies. A striking feature, in comparison with other great religious traditions, is the general centrality of (male) monasticism among Buddhist institutional forms—at the very least in terms of symbolic pre-eminence, even in traditions marked by the existence of non-celibate forms of religious specialization, as in Tibet, Nepal (e.g., among the Newar of Kathmandu Valley), or Japan. Accordingly, monastic sites, institutions, actors and their religious activities, or relations with the laity, are key figures in this scholarship—although book-length ethnographies of actual monastic institutions have remained rare.<sup>8</sup> This literature has engaged with themes like that of the gift, an important feature of lay-monastic interactions,<sup>9</sup> or renunciation, showing this notion’s ideological force, even in the context of Japan’s married priesthood (Covell 2005), but also its limits. Thus, it is not Dumontian renouncers, but a qualified, limited form of renunciation that one finds in Tibetan monasticism (Mills 2003). Recent ethnographies have also focused on processes of commodification (Kitiarsa 2012) and the development of forms of ‘prosperity religion’ in the wake of economic transformations and the spread of neo-liberal capitalism (Jackson 1999; R. Scott 2009).

Returning to one of these key themes, Jane Caple’s contribution in the present special section builds on the literature on practices of generosity (*dāna*) in Buddhism and connects this to the anthropology of morality. Noting that ethical debate regarding “the value of particular forms or modes of giving has received little attention,” her ethnography reveals a complexity in merit making that was lacking in earlier scholarly perspectives.

A major feature of ritual cultures that include a strong Buddhist component is the pervasive association of the funerary domain with the Buddhist monastic clergy (Davis 2016; Ladwig and Williams 2012), to the extent that in Japan Buddhism carries the stigma of a “religion of death” (Borup 2008: 157)—a ‘funerary Buddhism’ (Rowe 2011) that is sometimes associated with mercantilism and decline, even if it proves to be creative in this very sphere, as well as aspiring to expand beyond it (Nelson 2014). Another important component of many Buddhist ritual cultures that has attracted significant scholarly attention is pilgrimage: see, for instance, Reader (2005) for Japan or Huber (1999), who has offered a major ethno-historical study of the complexly layered religious sphere on a Tibetan sacred site.

The entanglements of this assumedly world-rejecting religion with the political have been an important focus of research, from pre-colonial political models such as the ‘galactic polity’

(Tambiah 1976) to post-colonial struggles with authoritarian regimes, struggles that play out through the ‘economy of merit’ (Schober 2010) and even reach the sphere of meditation practices (Houtman 1999). A modernist trend within Buddhism, appearing initially to quite some extent in colonial contexts, such as late-nineteenth-century Ceylon, has developed throughout large parts of Buddhist Asia (across sectarian boundaries), displaying often distinctively nationalist features, with Buddhist elites convinced that Buddhism is essential to the nation (Borchert 2007; McMahan 2008; Seneviratne 1999).<sup>10</sup>

From Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand to Tibet, Buddhist actors, including elites, have encouraged or taken part in ethno-political conflicts, violence, and warfare (Jerryson 2010) that often involves religious others such as Muslim minorities (Fischer 2008; Tambiah 1992). Schober (in this volume) further contributes to this scholarship by drawing on recent anthropological discussions of media and mediation. She also demonstrates that in the case of Buddhist-Muslim relations in Burma, gender issues complicate the picture as well. The research that has focused on topics such as ‘Buddhist-inspired’ participation in violence and warfare illustrates what Sherry Ortner (2016) has labeled the rise of ‘dark anthropology’ since the 1980s. Ortner describes it as an “anthropology that emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them” (ibid.: 49–50). Exploring these and other dark corners could help to remove some of the blind spots produced by the public imaginary of Buddhism as a religion of peace and of searching for inner truth.

### ***Key Peripheries—and Beyond***

A number of recent studies have addressed Buddhist, or in various ways Buddhist-inspired, forms that lie outside of mainstream/state-supported (and state-controlled) monastic Buddhism, while always remaining in conversation and tension with it. In Burma, spirit mediums are at the heart of a cult with key historical connections to the constitution of the former Buddhist kingdom (Brac de la Perrière 1989). In Bangkok, the sheer diversity of forms of spirit possession provides a striking illustration of the inadequacy of models of shared culture that far too often still underlie studies of Buddhist contexts (see White 2014 and this volume). In north-east Thailand, wandering ascetic monks—at the center of Tambiah’s (1984) celebrated study of charisma—but also local Lao *mo tham* exorcists have been key agents in the integration of the region into “larger orders of power (Buddhism and the state)” (Hayashi 2003: 303). Charismatic virtuosi in Thailand, or Burmese cults that have sprung up around *weikza*, figures of perfection and immortality, can however also feed millenarian aspirations and sometimes opposition to the state (Brac de la Perrière et al. 2014; Ladwig 2014). One could mention also Japanese *shugendō* traditions of mountain asceticism (Bouchy 2009), or Tibetan *ngakpa*, non-monastic specialists of tantric ritual, in particular exorcism (Sihlé 2013). Significantly, all of these studies complexify the simplistic picture of a twofold sociology of Buddhism: a *sangha* (or monastic order) aiming at otherworldly ends versus a worldly laity that supports the *sangha*. Furthermore, all of them highlight the importance of ritual power, a pervasive dimension of Buddhist religiosities that remains insufficiently recognized.

A substantial amount of recent research has been devoted to giving more visibility to the female component of Buddhist worlds (traditionally depicted from androcentric perspectives highlighting the dominant male monkhood). Numerous studies have focused on female religious specialists (e.g., Falk 2007; Gutschow 2004; Kawanami 2013). Some research has also addressed gender somewhat more broadly (e.g., Makley 2007). Current Buddhist debates such as those on the full ordination of women (which has been absent historically in many Buddhist traditions) have a particular complexity due to the presence of Western feminist voices among the actors involved.

Finally, as everywhere, the boundaries of local Buddhist worlds have increasingly been recognized as permeable to evermore powerful, increasingly transnational flows. The transnational character of Buddhist feminist debates as well as the (not unrelated) emergence of modernist Buddhist trends—the partial redefinition of certain strands of Buddhism brought about by the encounter with Western (and other) projects of modernity—have already been alluded to. Buddhist meditation movements and their international growth are a prominent manifestation of this latter phenomenon (Cook 2010; Jordt 2007; Schedneck 2015), while forms of engaged Buddhism constitute another (e.g., Darlington 2012; Huang 2009). More generally, the remarkable diffusion and adaptation of Buddhist practices, ideas, and institutional formations across the globe over the last few decades have received substantial attention (e.g., Learman 2005; LeVine and Gellner 2005).

### *A Major ‘Long Conversation’*

The strongest thematic and analytic concentration in anthropological works on Buddhism may have been achieved with regard to the question of the structure of the religious field—both its overall structure (relations between Buddhism and other religious traditions with which it co-exists) and the inner structure of the domain of more specifically Buddhist ideas, practices, specialists, and institutions. This question has been approached from a great variety of theoretical stances and methodological strategies, if not ideological leanings, as Gellner (1990: 102–104) has suggested. Buddhism has been described by Evers (1968: 549) as an inherently “incomplete religion,” requiring complementary theistic systems. Gombrich (1971: 49) has called Buddhism “accretive”: it does not cover all needs for which human societies tend to turn toward religions, and thus (so goes the functionalist argument) it is always found co-existing with complementary religious forms. (Tibetan Buddhism, which is equipped with a formidable spectrum of tantric ritual techniques and tends to absorb other religious elements within its fold, constitutes perhaps an exception.) Other early works relied on diachronic models, positing, for instance, that Buddhism is only a ‘thin veneer’ over a core of ‘animist’ practices.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a shift toward two major analytical perspectives: first, structuralist emphases on the synchronic analysis of relations of complementarity, hierarchy, and so on, within local religious fields; second, Redfield’s (1955) ‘great and little traditions’ model of relations between local parts and larger civilizational wholes. Tambiah’s (1970: chap. 21) discussion of this and similar two-tiered models has been an influential theoretical formulation. Spiro’s (1970) model of ‘nibbanic’ (soteriological), ‘kammatic’ (focusing more modestly on the accumulation of merit), and ‘apotropaic’ Buddhism, phrased partly in emic-sounding terms (see Houtman 1990: 248), has inspired several other major works in the subfield (e.g., Gellner 1992; Samuel 1993). A comparison of these variants of a model is instructive in itself. Gellner’s inclusion of the category ‘social religion’ (life-cycle rites, periodic festivals, the ritualization of social groups)—conspicuously absent from the other models—perhaps says something comparatively about the specificity of (tantric) Buddhism in a caste society like the Newar.

Against the grain of most such approaches, but usefully, given a certain academic tendency to privilege soteriology or elite perspectives, Reader and Tanabe’s (1998) ethnographically based work has argued for the central importance, at least in Japan, of one core motive across religious traditions, namely, the search for worldly benefits. Weberian ideal types of religious orientations to the world, of religious specialists, and so forth, have also informed a number of analyses of the components of these complex religious fields.<sup>11</sup> The list continues, encompassing Bakhtinian dialogism (Mumford 1989), post-colonial questionings of academic/colonial discourses on the religious field (D. Scott 1994), and Bourdieu-inspired approaches to a ‘field’ (Ladwig 2011). With

an emphasis on singularities, McDaniel's (2011) ethnographically informed work includes the notion of 'repertoires' and eschews the perceived straitjacket of the category of Buddhism.

Some authors (Brac de la Perrière 2009; Gellner 1990; Holmberg 1984) have provided general comments on this 'long conversation' of sorts—although this is partly a misnomer, given that the protagonists have not always responded to each other's arguments. Comparison has been out of fashion, and anthropologists have not always been reading widely across the subfield. The complex, diverse range of empirical situations is also, admittedly, quite daunting. One analytically creative attempt to examine comparatively situations of religious complexity in Buddhist contexts has been Gellner's (1997) article "For Syncretism." Looking at Thai, Newar, and Japanese data, Gellner argues that we need to differentiate between types of co-existence among religious traditions. Leaving aside postmodern temptations toward deconstruction and particularism, one question that we can ask, he points out, is that of the relative degree of systematicity that we can see in the overall religious field or in certain aspects of the field.<sup>12</sup> In the next section of this introduction, we would like to highlight the importance—and stress the promise—of a *comparative* anthropology of Buddhism.

## Comparison

As Pocock (1961: 90) put it, "comparison is built into the method of the subject." It is a seemingly banal fact that the ethnographic process automatically involves juxtaposing categories of one's own society with that of the society under study. However, the fates of comparative methods and concepts through time and across different schools in anthropology have varied greatly. On the one hand, skepticism toward comparison in the 1980s and 1990s was fed by the deconstruction and redefinition of core concepts such as culture, religion, and so forth (Fox and Gingrich 2002: 2–3). Connecting these notions to their specific modernist and colonial genealogies, post-colonial critiques highlighted their entanglement in asymmetric power relationships. Postulating that "behind the seeming generosity of comparison, there always lurks the aggression of a thesis" (Radhakrishnan 2009: 454), the very epistemological foundations of comparison were attacked. On the other hand, anthropology's preoccupation with cultural and social specificity and the micro-outlook on the diversity of local life-worlds also provoked some justifiable mistrust of grand-scale comparisons. Max Weber's (1921) comparative survey of the economic ethic of the major world religions and his search for socio-cultural features that might present affinities with the development of a capitalist spirit in, for example, Buddhism or Hinduism would today attract only a few followers in the anthropology of Buddhism (see also Gellner 2009).

In contrast to these rather skeptical remarks, Schnegg (2014: 57) has observed that "anthropology is currently experiencing a revival of research projects, comparative in nature and focused on the collection of primary ethnographic data." Generally speaking, comparison on the most basic level enhances a better understanding of the particular through decentering the perspective of analysis. Comparison enables the development of a sharper grasp of both emic and etic concepts and helps us to understand distributions of traits and processes of diffusion and appropriation. Recurrences, patterns, and structures become visible only through the exploration of similarities and differences.

It should be emphasized that the greater emphasis nowadays on process, contingency, and transformation in anthropology, and in the social sciences and humanities in general, does not necessarily imply that basic categories and parameters of comparison evaporate. As analytical categories, a unit of comparison—defined as "the totality which is the point of reference for comparison with another totality of a similar nature" (Sarana 2002: 179)—and an item of comparison—"that part of a unit which is actually utilized in comparing" (*ibid.*)—do not necessarily dissolve through deconstruction or the 'violence of classification'. On the contrary, we believe that injecting flexibility and

reflexivity into these basic categories is essential for developing new comparative methods (see Fox and Gingrich 2002: 19). In this section we offer an overview of approaches used in the comparative study of Buddhism, concluding with a discussion of what could be labeled ‘conceptually reflexive comparison’: by focusing on the genealogy of emic and etic categories employed in comparison, a “network of concepts” (van der Veer 2016: 29) evolves that allows for integrating reflexivity into the comparative study of Buddhism.

### ***Global, Regional, and Intra-cultural Comparison—Within and Beyond Buddhism***

Global and cross-cultural comparative approaches have been most strongly targeted by post-modern and post-colonial critiques. They continue, however, to produce sometimes stimulating results, as with Descola’s (2013) recent classification of nature-culture relationships. Few scholars in Buddhist studies would be willing to work with such a level of abstraction, but one recent example of ambitious grand-scale comparison involving Buddhism (based primarily on the study of ancient Indic literary materials) as one of its units of comparison is Gananath Obeyesekere’s (2002) *Imagining Karma*. Looking at ideas of rebirth and karma in a number of contexts, Obeyesekere states: “The main point of this work is not to demonstrate internal similarity and difference but to examine structural similarities and variations across the great cultural divides that separate Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek rebirth doctrines” (ibid.: xiv). He looks for an infrastructure that “underlies all the variety and multiplicity of existent forms of rebirth anywhere” and consciously refers to a structuralist concept when he invokes the “atom of rebirth” (ibid.: 345). His focus on cosmology, on ideas of the afterlife, and on its links to kinship and social structure in general gives the reader a fascinating perspective on the distinctiveness of (Hindu-)Buddhist ideas of rebirth.

Maria Turek’s article in the present special section also entails some cross-cultural comparative comments. She draws on discussions of charisma in a wide variety of Buddhist and non-Buddhist contexts in order to grasp more finely what a Tibetan charismatic master’s use of a particular religious garment tells us about how a vestimentary practice can be a key instrument in charismatic action. Here, however, cross-cultural comparison is used without employing a structuralist framework or aiming for the same level of generality as Obeyesekere does.

Regional-level comparison is much more common. Most strands of anthropology have a strong link to regional studies, and researchers implicitly or explicitly embed their data in larger regions. Regional comparisons—including culture-area approaches—focus on the distribution of certain phenomena and their regularities or differences across a region (Barnard 2004: 54–55). In recent decades, substantial comparative work has been carried out, especially in Melanesia and the Amazon, with veritable ‘theory schools’ emerging from these efforts.<sup>13</sup>

An example of regional comparison on a relatively small scale is Ramble’s (1990) examination of two rather close village communities in northern Nepal that “display considerable differences in their approach to Buddhism” (ibid.: 187). Drawing implicitly on a much wider set of comparative cases, Ramble characterizes one example as Buddhism “by the book” (ibid.: 191), and the other (comparatively speaking, and with all due respect) as a “monster” (ibid.: 187). In the latter case, Ramble argues that the villagers “have not treated Buddhism as an entire system ... They have used it rather as raw material, divisible stuff which they have broken up and employed in the construction or elaboration of a local tradition” (ibid.: 194). Although rather short and explorative, this kind of small-scale comparison can yield important insights into the processes of localization of Buddhism as well as local dynamics within a given region.

Broader regional comparisons in terms of area and thematic scope might result in less precise conclusions, but they can allow for constructing more extensive arguments. The volume

*Merit and Blessing in Mainland Southeast Asia in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Cornelia Kammerer and Nicola Tannenbaum (1996b), discusses rites and concepts of merit and blessing in the religiously and ethnically diverse Southeast Asian context, marked by a long history of interaction between animist highland and Buddhist lowland societies. Although many Buddhist societies have rites of blessing like their animist neighbors in the highlands, the presence of merit and karma in lowland cultures is a crucial difference, associated with much more developed forms of social stratification. Whereas “Buddhism is profoundly concerned with ranked statuses” (Lehman 1996: 26), animist minorities such as the Lisu and Akha “can be considered aggressively non-hierarchical in opposition and defense to their lowland neighbours” (Kammerer and Tannenbaum 1996a: 13). Despite a plethora of exceptions and religious borrowings, it seems that Buddhism as a state-building religion that introduced script, new concepts of statehood, and kingship also brought with it a higher degree of social hierarchization and political centralization.

This echoes some arguments of James Scott’s (2009) much-debated *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Scott proposes that the uplands of Southeast Asia constitute a zone of refuge for animist ethnic minorities, whose cosmologies and social structures are less hierarchical and more flexible than those of Buddhist lowland societies (ibid.: 21–22). Most hill peoples consciously avoided Buddhist civilization, evading incorporation into the state and taxation—a widespread pattern extending beyond Asia, according to Scott (ibid.: 188–190). Some of his propositions have also been taken up by scholars working in other (non-Theravāda) Buddhist contexts. For example, Geoffrey Samuel (2015) has examined the limited reach of the Tibetan central state in light of Scott’s theory. As with certain cases of global comparison, Scott’s work has been heavily attacked for its grand theorizing and high level of generalization (Michaud 2010), but like the work on merit and blessing discussed earlier, regional comparisons on this scale can reveal key transformations that accompany the spread of Buddhism.

A variant of the regional approach has consisted in focusing on civilizations or ‘families of societies’. Marcel Mauss ([1929] 2006: 61) has suggested that civilizations can be identified by studying “social phenomena which are common to several societies, more or less related to each other,” in other words, a “family of societies” (ibid.: 62). Could one propose then that Buddhism contributes to forming a family, or several of them? In his introduction to *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism*, Manning Nash (1966) refers to Eggan’s (1954) concept of ‘controlled comparison’. We are not too far away here from Mauss’s approach: the units of comparison are constituted by societies presenting a history of cultural exchanges and common key features. Thus, Nash (1966: viii) advocates restricting the comparison to “countries or peoples whose dominant religious orientation is tied to the Pali canon of the Theravadin and who, over time, have had some cultural and social interconnections. This restriction to Theravada countries presents for analysis a common body of belief and behavior, with historical continuity, and a range of small variations which possibly could be accounted for with the data at hand.”

How can we operationalize phenomena that are common to several societies, and how can we redefine a ‘common body of belief and behavior’ in current comparative research? Juliane Schober and Steven Collins have set up a comparative project that takes its starting point from Redfield’s distinction between ‘great and little traditions’ as components of a civilization (Schober and Collins 2012: 159, 161–162)—an approach that is quite cognate to those of Nash and Mauss. Asking “What is (or is imagined to be) trans-local in Theravāda civilization?” (ibid.: 159), they point to flows of images, relics, texts, monastic ordination lines, and conceptions of Buddhist governmentality between Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Questioning reflexively both the terms ‘Theravāda’ and ‘civilization(s)’, they also emphasize that the analysis has to be carried out “in light of the cultural fragmentation, secularization of political power and religious revitalization so characteristic of modern societies” (ibid.: 158). Hereby they pay much more attention to

variation and process than does Nash's formulation of 'a common body of belief', and they introduce more flexibility in the study of what Mauss would call a 'family of societies'.

Some studies, standing similarly at the nexus of textuality, ethnography, and history, have examined shared Buddhist phenomena (items of comparison such as texts, deities and rituals) beyond the Theravāda family. Steven Collins's (2016) collection, *Readings of the Vessantara Jātaka*, deals with this popular narrative of the penultimate human birth of the Buddha in its various social and ritual contexts. No systematic comparative study is attempted, but as central motives of the story are highlighted, underplayed, and transformed in local versions and in associated rituals, light is shed on a diverse range of issues, from marriage and gender roles in Southeast Asia to ascetic ideals and their transformations among Newar Vajrayāna Buddhists in Nepal. The future Buddha Maitreya, whose arrival signals the end of the current age and the coming of a future utopia, would be another productive example. DuBois (2004: 538) notes that "millenarian thought and devotion to Maitreya have appeared in almost every manifestation of the Buddhist tradition" (see also Sponberg and Hardacre 1998). The narratives, rituals, ideas, and practices surrounding the worship of Maitreya could provide an exemplary basis for a comparative understanding of Buddhist millennialism, eschatology, and the revolutionary potentials of Buddhism (Ladwig and Shields 2014: 190–191).

Among the many possible forms of relatively small-scale comparative approach, one further option consists in contrasting different sectors, such as different fields of practice or different sectarian milieux, within a single society. One finds, for instance, recent work on donations to Buddhist monastics, humanitarian charity, remuneration of ritual specialists, and other comparable transactions (Brac de la Perrière 2015; Sihlé 2015a: 348–349; Toffin 2015). This small scale of comparison within the same social and linguistic environment provides for what in Eggan's spirit could be termed a 'highly controlled comparison'. Brac de la Perrière's examination of a Burmese exorcist congregation in this special section likewise draws on similarities and differences between very close items, primarily different Burmese exorcist congregations, here in light comparative touches. The stronger ritualization of the initiation in the case observed highlights with particular clarity—a sort of magnifying glass effect—the fact that these congregations operate a form of internal conversion within the Burmese Buddhist religious field.

Finally, shifting the angle somewhat from our focus on contrasting different parts of the Buddhist world, another key modality is the comparison of Buddhism and other major religious traditions. From an ethno-historical perspective, Todd Lewis (1994) has looked at the expansion pattern of Buddhism and Hinduism in the Himalayas, both comparatively and in the way that they have jointly contributed to the Indicization of the Himalayas. Monasticism has been a key focus of recent comparative work, and Ilana Silber's (1995) macro-sociological study of Theravāda Buddhist and medieval Catholic monastic virtuosi and their relations to the social order, which draws in part on the anthropological scholarship, is a particularly noteworthy example. The interface between culture and the body is another productive domain. For instance, Julia Cassaniti and Tanya Luhrmann (2011) have collaborated on a comparative phenomenology of how Thai Buddhists and US evangelical Christians experience the supernatural. These comparisons that reach out toward other religious traditions and cultural contexts have a strong potential to speak to larger disciplinary communities.

### ***Reflexivity in Comparison***

After this brief overview of the diversity of scales and angles that have been deployed in comparative approaches to Buddhism, let us return to a key question: why compare? We do so in order to better grasp empirical realities, to identify regularities or variations, or to refine the

concepts with which we work, goes the by now well-established wisdom. Peter van der Veer's (2016) recent call for reinvigorating comparison in anthropology incorporates these elements in his outline of a reflexive perspective: "Comparison should be conceived not primarily in terms of comparing societies or events, or institutional arrangements across societies, although this is important, but as a reflection on our conceptual framework as well as on the history of interactions that have constituted our object of study ... That critical reflection often shows that Western concepts do not fit the social reality one wants to investigate" (ibid.: 28). As already mentioned above, the greater emphasis in anthropology on processes and contingency—to which one could add Western hegemony and colonialism, Orientalism, and the power of representation—has led to a questioning of the validity of comparison. Van der Veer argues, however, that this alleged weakness can be turned into a reflexive strength without leaving the field to pure critique and deconstruction. Comparison should be "not a relatively simple juxtaposition and comparison of two or more different societies but a complex reflection on the *network of concepts* that underlie our study of society as well as the formation of those societies themselves. It is always a *double act of reflection*" (ibid.: 29; our emphasis).

An example here is karma. On the one hand, it is primarily an emic concept, deriving in each of its localizations from a history of Buddhist ideas and practices. On the other hand, it is virtually an etic concept, informed by a particular genealogy in scholarship. Historical and textual readings have revealed how much our categories have shaped the "basic oppositions in karma theories" in scholarship (O'Flaherty 1980: xix). Anthropological studies of karma, however, have put a stronger emphasis on popular, emic perspectives (Keyes and Daniel 1983). As with the aforementioned case of the category Theravāda, the scholarly conversation has drawn on (in van der Veer's words) a 'double act of reflection' and has contributed to make visible a 'network of concepts'.

Nicolas Sihlé's comparative work on the gift, exchanges, and other transfers in Buddhist societies also moves between a network of etic and emic concepts. Testart's (2007) rethinking of the Maussian terminology of 'the gift' (cf. Mauss [1925] 2016) and critiques by Heim (2004), Testart (2007), and others on unreflective Western scholarly notions of the universality of reciprocity are the points of departure for Sihlé's (2015b) critical, comparative reassessment of some key assumptions about Buddhist donations and cognate practices. Erick White's contribution in the present special section, although less comparative in nature, also brings together a body of ethnography on possession in Theravāda contexts and theoretical literature dealing with possession more generally, not to mention larger disciplinary issues, such as the 'practice turn'. His discussion reveals the critical, reflexive potentials of comparison: Western connotations of possession (uncontrolled, wild, spontaneous, etc.) have clearly marked earlier studies, which presented Buddhism as a set of regulated, ordered institutions seemingly at the antipodes of possession, overlooking their actual empirical connections.

## Conclusion

Proposals to work toward an 'anthropology of' X or Y are sometimes met by suggestions that these allegedly emergent subfields have long been in existence—a critique that may seem all the more convincing in the case of Buddhism, which has known a period, roughly from the 1960s to the 1990s, of substantial scholarly debate across national forms of Buddhism, in particular on the issue of the structure of the religious field. However, the subsequent years have been marked by a diversification of approaches and themes and a less focused engagement in collective discussions—a certain fragmentation of the subfield.

Reinvigorating the anthropology of Buddhism is both an intellectual and institutional issue. The pioneering works in the field remain important building stones, but many of the basic parameters in the anthropological study of Buddhism have changed. Categories of religion and modalities of comparison have been increasingly problematized and refined, with a stronger emphasis on process and reflexivity. Our aim in this special section is to connect past and potential future trajectories and to move toward an anthropology of Buddhism that is perhaps less self-contained and closed, but which builds on more robust and sophisticated bases and does not evaporate under the pressure of deconstruction and aporias. Our scholarly institutions and networks constitute however another key dimension. It is true that individual contributions—of which there have been many in the past—remain crucial to the construction of any significant body of scholarly knowledge. Our point here is that a real community of scholars engaged with each other's work, across national traditions of Buddhism and across the Theravāda-Mahāyāna divide, is arguably at best only emerging at this point, and that increased attention to the multifaceted potential of comparative approaches is a key factor in pursuing this process.

We close here in the hopes that the following contributions may, each in their different ways of engaging with the literature and data within and beyond the subfield, help in further constructing this larger project. As David Gellner comments in the afterword to this special section, “the anthropology of Buddhism today may be achieving more unity of purpose and more self-consciousness than it has had for a long time.” We hope to witness further developments along these lines in the future.

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#### ■ NOTES

1. While space does not permit to provide an overview of the doctrinal, institutional, or other differences between these major groupings (Gellner 1990: 95–98), it should be emphasized that the validity of several of the above designations has been challenged. See, for example, Skilling (2009) and Skilling et al. (2012) on ‘Theravāda’ Buddhism. In addition, each of these groupings is in itself quite diverse—from ascetic forest monk traditions to prosperity cults in Thai Theravāda contexts, or from devotional Pure Land to humanist, socially engaged traditions in Chinese Mahāyāna contexts.
2. This includes in particular a series of 12 thematic international workshops, entitled “Comparative Anthropology of Buddhism,” organized in Paris from 2012 to 2016 (see Sihlé [2016] for links to the programs), as well as the panel at the 17th Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies (Vienna, 2014) that led to the present special section.
3. See Schopen’s (1991) important critique of our all-too-common ‘Protestant presuppositions’ of the (assumed) centrality of texts.
4. For a critical examination of the articulation of Islam with its varying social contexts, see Marsden and Retsikas (2013).
5. See Saler (1993: 95) for a response to Asad’s (1983) critique of universal definitions of religion.
6. It should be recognized that in many contexts Asian Buddhists themselves question the Buddhist nature of certain practices or societies (Brac de la Perrière 2009; Rumble 1990: 186).
7. On the intellectual trajectories in the past scholarship, see also White in this special section.
8. One of the major contributions, *The Zen Monastic Experience* (Buswell 1992), was authored by a religious studies scholar with substantial ethnographic expertise—something not uncommon given the still modest development of the anthropology of Buddhism properly speaking. A more recent significant contribution to the study of contemporary Korean Buddhism and lay-monastic relations is a dissertation by Galmiche (2011), a sociologist of religion.
9. For a critical overview of the Buddhist gift and other forms of transfer, see Sihlé (2015b).
10. Beyond nationalism, these modernist forms have been characterized by rationalism and ‘Protestant’ features, such as a critique of ‘superstitious’ ritualism and a blurring of the *sangha*-laity distinction.
11. On the notable place of Weberian perspectives in the anthropology of Buddhism more generally, see Gellner (2009: 54–55), Keyes (2002), and Kitiarsa (2009).
12. A more historical comparative study of Buddhist religious fields can be found in Holt (2009).
13. See, for example, Godelier and Strathern’s (1991) classical study on big men in Melanesia, and High (2015) for an up-to-date overview of the vibrant discussions in Amazonian anthropology.

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