

Book Review

Ancient Proverbs and Maxims from Burmese Sources: Or, The Nīti Literature of Burma

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Having travelled extensively Himalayan region and South East Asia, a curious mind leads me to explore daily life, culture and religious practices in countries like Bhutan, Myanmar and Lao's PDR. Buddhist studies, visits to *dzongs*¹ and *lakhangs*² in Bhutan³ and temples in Lao and Myanmar as well as long conversations with Buddhist monks and novices reminded me of the importance to have an open mind to learn, unlearn and relearn and thus explore new paths in life.

In Myanmar, I especially remember my first visit to Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon and the encounter with a middle-aged monk (accompanied by a little novice) that generously shared their time with me, exchanging views on Myanmar culture and delightfully discussing about Buddhism. Clear and instructive introduction to Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar!

With very limited material on Myanmar culture and literature translated into English, this book covers collections of codes of conduct, principles of morality, maxims and ethical recommendations for different kind of people (general reader, powerful elites, etc) in ancient times in Myanmar. Reading these beautiful texts will expand your knowledge on Myanmar Buddhist culture and tradition.

Nīti, a Sanskrit- Pāli term, can be translated as conduct, ethics or guide. If applied to books, it refers to a treatise including didactic stories, maxims and sayings for guiding everyday life. In Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, the word Nīti is associated to the following anthological collections: Lokanīti⁴, Dhammanīti, Rajanīti and Sutta Vaddhananīti. When do these Nītis appear in the Myanmar literature? According to the James Gray "the earliest reference to Lokanīti and Rajanīti [...] are to be found in the Arakan Razawin or "Chronicles of Arakan" in connection with Prince Kha Maung's visit to Pegu early in the seventeenth century" (p. viii).

Structured in four sections, one focused on each Nīti (Lokanīti, Dhammanīti, Rajanīti and Sutta Vaddhananīti), the book *Ancient Proverbs and Maxims from Burmese Sources. Or The Nīti Literature of Burma* starts with what was considered one of the most venerated and popular works in Myanmar:

Lokaṇīti. Belonging to the Myanmar gnomic literature and to the Pali non-canonical literature, Lokaṇīti is a miscellaneous collection of subjects for the study of morality (The Wise Man, The Good Man, The Evil-Does, Friendship, Woman, Kings and Miscellaneous).

Second section of the book is focused on the Dhammaṇīti, the most comprehensive of the four Nītis. It provides didactic stories and maxims on numerous subjects: the preceptor, scholarship wisdom, knowledge, conversation, wealth, residence, dependence, friendship, the bad man, the good man, the powerful, women, sons, servants, residence, what should be done, what should be avoided, ornamentation, kings, ministrations, things taken by two, etc. Third section of the book is focused on the Rajaṇīti, originally compiled for the use of the powerful elite (kings and princes). It is an anthology based on the Indian Dharmasastras and provides 136 maxims and didactic stories for rulers⁵. Chronologically it stands after Lokaṇīti and Dhammaṇīti. James Gray even considers that this *Nīti and* Lokaṇīti may have been introduced in the court of Ava, an ancient imperial capital in the Mandalay region, in Myanmar. Finally, the last section of the book contains the SuttaVaddhanaṇīti translated as “Guide for the Advancement of Knowledge”, an anthology with a collection of maxims mainly from Buddhist sources and for daily life (good and bad thinking, parents, sons, husband, wife, knowledge, etc).

In addition, the foreback provides a collection of old Indian sayings, the corresponding stanzas in the nīti and in the Dhammaṇīti. The Nītis are accompanied by rich footnotes with interesting observations on Buddhism, culture and literature in Myanmar, helping to clarify the text and providing additional background information.

This book will be a valuable gem for those interested in learning about Burmese culture and literature in ancient times.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In Dzongkha, it means a complex including courtyards, temples, administrative offices and accommodation for monks. Examples of this beautiful and distinctive architecture of Bhutan (and also south of Tibet) are Rinpung Dzong, Drukgyal Dzong, Jakar Dzong, Punakha Dzong, Trongsa Dzong and Wangdue Phodrang Dzong. Wangdue Phodrang Dzong was destroyed by a major fire on June 24, 2012. Now there is a reconstruction project under development. On 20th April 2016 the Kuenray (hall) of Wangduephodrang Dzong was consecrated.
- ² In Dzongkha, temples.
- ³ Ordóñez de Pablos, P. (2012), Bután: Turismo y Desarrollo Sostenible en la Tierra del Dragón del Trueno (In English, “Bhutan: Tourism and Sustainable Development in the Land of the Thunder Dragon”. Casa Asia.
- ⁴ In Myanmar, Lawkaṇīti.
- ⁵ In Sanskrit literature, the more important manuals on political ethics are Panchatantra and Hitopadesha.