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Is cancel culture coming to Himalayan Studies? Remarks on a recent critique of the life and work of Mary Shepherd Slusser

La cancel culture arrive-t-elle dans les études himalayennes ? Remarques à propos de critiques récentes sur la vie et l'œuvre de Mary Shepherd Slusser

Charles Ramble

In the end, we will remember not the words of
our enemies, but the silence of our friends.

Martin Luther King

- 1 The main purpose of this article by Emiline Smith and Erin L Thompson¹ is ostensibly to proscribe the publication of unprovenanced works of art, particularly from the Kathmandu Valley. Such publications, the authors argue, should be prevented on the grounds that they may increase the value of such items in the illicit art market. The authors further argue strongly against the removal of objects from their original location and their acquisition by private collectors and museums. This second argument is one side of an ongoing debate about whether works of art should remain in the countries where they were produced or whether their export is acceptable on the grounds that, in certain circumstances, they are likely to be safer in a foreign environment that has the appropriate curatorial facilities. The debate is a well-known one, and the cases for and against have been argued in many publications. In the case of Nepal, at least (as opposed to, for example, Tibet on the eve of the Cultural Revolution), the most compelling arguments have been made by those who, like Smith and Thompson, oppose the removal of objects. The works of several of these authors are cited in their bibliography, and since their article adds nothing new to the discussion, there is no need to dwell on this particular matter any further. The authors' advocacy of a prohibition on the publication of unprovenanced artefacts is less familiar and deserves closer attention.

- 2 Calling for an entire domain of potential research material to be placed out of bounds for scholarly inquiry is no light matter, and an imposition of this sort on the authorial freedom of academics requires very persuasive arguments indeed. One might have thought that the authors would approach such a sensitive issue through the conventional procedure of presenting both sides of the argument and concluding, on the basis of compelling evidence, that the harm caused by such publications outweighed the principle of intellectual freedom. A case could presumably be made *against* the perniciousness of such publication. It could be argued, for example, that, from the point of view of national heritage, it makes no difference whether an artefact has great or little commercial value since it is in circulation in any case, and unlikely to find its way back to its rightful place. It could even be argued that the only reasonable chance it might have of returning home would be precisely thanks to it being published: research on and publication of objects makes it much more difficult to traffic and trade them. Whatever the merits of such arguments, playing the devil's advocate in such matters does reassure readers that authors have assessed a situation from all possible angles before pressing home their own case. In such a hypothetical article, one could then expect the authors to present hard evidence, using a number of case studies to demonstrate how the publication of an artefact prevented it from being returned to its proper home. It may well be the case that the publication of any object or class of objects stimulates interest on the part of collectors. This being the case, the author would need to demonstrate why it is only unprovenanced objects, and not objects *in situ*, that provoke such interest. A well-documented article of this sort might go some way to persuading scholars of the inadvisability of publishing unprovenanced works of art.
- 3 Smith and Thompson's article does not follow such a line of argument. Their approach is rather to take the case of a single Western scholar, the late Mary Slusser, who is known to have published studies of unprovenanced artefacts, and to attack her life and work in a remarkably personal way. The following paragraphs are intended not so much to defend Mary Slusser as to point out the flaws in the line of argument adopted by Smith and Thompson, and more generally to question the appropriateness of levelling such a personal assault at a scholar, especially in a reputable academic journal. I should also perhaps emphasise my neutrality (at least for the purposes of this review) in the debate concerning the acquisition of antiquities by Westerners, and the collusion between scholars and collectors: I have never purchased an antiquity, not out of any scruple (much as I might admire such a position), but because I am not interested in owning such things; and though I have written short articles about Tibetan objects in American museums – thereby, perhaps, if Smith and Thompson are right, unconsciously contributing to the illicit art market – I have never written an expertise intended to augment the commercial value of any artefact.
- 4 Smith and Thompson face a certain difficulty in their task of transforming the target of their article into a reprobate of the magnitude that is necessary for their purposes, because the facts behind all their accusations are already well known. There are no revelations: everything is a matter of public record, and most of it is derived from Slusser's own published accounts. The *facts* related to some of her activities concern her acquisition and illegal export of Nepali antiquities. Since the acquisition and export of antiquities, and the provision of expertise to collectors was – and is – so widespread, the authors have had to make a concerted effort to spotlight Mary Slusser as a special

case. They go about this in two ways: first, by setting out to destroy her character, and secondly, by impugning her scholarship.

- 5 The first prong of their attack is a familiar strategy that is historically more associated with courtroom tactics, political factions and repressive governments than it is with academia. Since evidence of Mary Slusser's particular degeneracy is rather thin – or at least unremarkable, since such activities, and far worse, are spread over such a large surface of offenders – it has had to be manufactured by selecting passages of her writings and recollections and educating the reader in how these should be understood by right-thinking citizens. These clips are taken mainly from an interview Slusser gave at the age of ninety-three for the Society of Women Geographers in which, according to Smith and Thompson, she 'described at length the influence of a box filled with mementos from her mother's deceased first husband, who had been an officer in the British merchant marines (*sic*). On rainy days, she and her sister would sit on the floor and pour (*sic*) through the contents of the box' (pp5–6), marvelling at the exotic flotsam and jetsam hauled in from ports of the world by the ancestral dragnet. Smith and Thompson remark that 'from her early childhood, Slusser seems to have seen herself as interested in the "bigger world", with a special interest in Asia' (p6). Is such sarcasm really merited? Is it really so reprehensible for someone to have been inspired by memorable childhood experiences to take an interest in the possibilities that life might offer beyond one's immediate environs? On these grounds we would have to abolish at a stroke the inspirational value of every Tibetan biography ever written; and closer to the realm of Western academia, think of the childhood recollections of the great Sir Harold Bailey, the world's most accomplished scholar of Khotanese – reputed, at the height of his career, to be able to read fifty languages – living in the Australian outback and deriving a foundational interest in Asian civilisations from the lettering on tea-chests that reached his remote family home. Many other such examples could be cited.
- 6 Later in life, accompanying her husband on diplomatic missions, Mary Slusser preferred to see herself not as a Stepford Wife, excelling in cupcakes, but as a scholar, something that the authors treat with similar derision. By now the reader might be wondering why these aspirations are being subjected to such scorn, until we are instructed that they were the harbingers of an impulse to 'uplift her positionality' – nothing to be admired, apparently, but rather a character flaw that would later manifest as her 'taking a patronizing view of Nepalis' (p7).
- 7 Let us then consider some examples of this 'patronizing view'. Smith and Thompson refer to Slusser's recollection of her 'discovery' of Nepali-language journals in which 'an unsuspected and untapped reservoir of historical data' had been 'quietly accumulating' (p8, citing *Nepal Mandala*, pxiii). The authors would have us believe that Slusser's presentation of her discovery 'makes it seem as if [these articles] had been generated spontaneously, without the involvement of their authors' (p8). Perhaps so; but unshackled from the authors' agenda, the same evidence could support another reading: that this personal account was intended for a general readership, for whom the names of individual scholars, whether Western or Nepali, would not mean much. For these non-specialist readers, it would have been enough for Slusser to mention her debt of gratitude to her Nepalese colleagues – which, as it happens, she does in her reference to 'the impeccable historians of the Saṃsodhana Maṇḍala'. Unsurprisingly, this inconvenient evidence of Slusser's appreciation is judiciously omitted in Smith and Thompson's article. It hardly needs to be said that the names and publications of the

same impeccable historians are all scrupulously referenced in Slusser's academic publications.

- 8 Smith and Thompson take Slusser to task for adopting an anthropological approach in her research. Their reasoning is as follows: up until the 1960s, anthropology was considered to be the study of primitive people; *ergo*, insofar as Slusser regarded herself as an anthropologist, she must have considered the Newars to be primitive people. This summary may sound like an improbable caricature of an argument, but it is in fact precisely what the authors say. It is hard to know quite where to begin here. I will leave it to better qualified anthropologists than myself to address this characterisation of the discipline and will confine myself to two observations. The first is that there was already a well-established precedent of anthropological studies of complex, literate societies in the Himalayas when Slusser was conducting her research: Fürer-Haimendorf's monograph of the Sherpas was published in 1964, and Melvyn Goldstein's studies of Tibetan exile communities were already beginning to appear; and before his untimely death in 1959, René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, a member of the Museum of Ethnography in Vienna, had published numerous works combining the methods of philology and anthropology, of which some have remained standard references to this day. The second point is that Slusser did not engage with anthropology at the expense of the literary tradition of the people among whom she worked (something for which Fürer-Haimendorf was justly criticised). She applied the methods of anthropology above all in situations where there was no epigraphic evidence, notably in her reflections on cults that had apparently endured since pre-Licchavi times, and that might, she tentatively suggested, date back to the Neolithic period. In his review of Slusser's *Nepal Mandala*, K P Malla (more about him presently) is cautious about Slusser's confident attribution of such a great age to some of these sites: 'The foundations are of uncertain antiquity', he warns, but concedes that 'some of the sites of the Mother Goddesses – river-banks, ghats etc – may prove to be ancient. Most cult objects are aniconic *and primitive*' (Malla 1983: 131; emphasis added).
- 9 Instead of citing other instances of the authors' selections and interpretations of Slusser's writings to persuade their readers of her cultural condescension, it may be more instructive to hold up a mirror to the authors' own characterisation of Nepalis. The illicit trade in antiquities is a complex system, consisting of multiple interlocking parts, and to focus on just one cog in this machine is to misrepresent the intricacy of the system and to mislead readers who are unfamiliar with its dynamics. Among the components in this nexus, the authors mention 'customs violations' by Western perpetrators of illicit art dealing. The effectiveness of the customs and excise structures of any country is the responsibility of its government. The passage of illegal or dutiable goods across its borders, whether a bottle of whisky over the permitted limit or a Licchavi sculpture, depends on the robustness of the measures in place. The inflation of the commercial value of antiquities may well be the result of competition among international buyers to possess such things, but their traffic depends on the willingness of people to subscribe to the commoditisation of their heritage, or of their neighbours to steal it, and of the government to fail to prevent it from leaving the country. There is, of course, a massive disparity in wealth between Western buyers on the one hand and most Nepalis on the other that would create a local incentive for such commerce, but it is well enough known that certain Nepalis involved in the system were already very wealthy indeed. The point is that this commerce cannot be simplified to the culpability of an individual; it is a system. Thieves, vendors and state employees

(and others) are an essential part of the machinery. For a meticulously researched study into the intricacies of the global trade in antiquities I would refer the reader to Peter Campbell's excellent article on this topic (Campbell 2013). Smith and Thompson are tacitly willing to exonerate the Nepali partners in the system for their part in the process, but in doing so they deprive them of agency. They accuse Slusser of creating a division between 'us' – the educated readers of her books and articles – and 'them', a Nepali public unappreciative of their own heritage. If this is indeed so, how does Slusser differ from Smith and Thompson, who manifestly distinguish between 'us' Westerners who are to be held accountable for our role in this commerce, and 'them', the Nepalis, who cannot be expected to know or to behave any better?

- 10 Smith and Thompson's determination to denigrate Slusser's character through their interested interpretation of selective evidence is supplemented by the use of personal insults. At one point they accuse her (without the slightest awareness of the irony) of 'self-serving obtuseness' – a formulation that clearly pleases them since they acknowledge their debt of gratitude to a colleague for furnishing them with it. Many readers will be saddened to see such language in a reputable journal; or can it be that editorial policies are changing, and that we can expect in the future to see further examples of such debased coinage?
- 11 The second front in Smith and Thompson's attack consists of diminishing Mary Slusser's merits as a scholar. The main anecdote they cite to illustrate her shortcomings relates to her publication of a frieze of the Kasthamandap pavilion that collapsed in the 2015 earthquake. The photos she provided were (on her own admission) 'often poorly focused' and mistakenly included sections of another frieze that happened to be in the same roll of film. The archaeologist Sukra Sagar Shrestha was subsequently able to provide a complete set of photos taken two years prior to the earthquake. A possible *résumé* of this situation might have been an expression of appreciation that Slusser had documented the frieze at all, however imperfectly. But no. The episode gives grounds for the authors to rejoice that Slusser was not in fact 'the utmost and infallible expert on Nepali art' (p12). I wonder what the gentle Sukra Sagar Shrestha, whom I never saw exercised by anything except his frustrations with the government institutions he served, would have thought of his own characteristic meticulousness being rolled up into a rod with which to beat his friend Mary Slusser?
- 12 If this is the best Smith and Thompson could do to point up Slusser's failings as a scholar, they would be annoyed to know that they missed some fine opportunities. Personally, I am inclined to agree with Alexander von Rospatt, whose endorsement of *Nepal Mandala* the authors quote, to the effect that the book is an 'indispensable reference tool' that 'remains to this day the authority for introducing the history of Nepal and its rich artistic and religious heritage' (p2). Most of what I myself know about the pre-Gorkha history of the Kathmandu Valley I owe to *Nepal Mandala*. But this does not mean that the work is without flaws. Some of the most articulate critiques of Slusser's work were written (in English) by Nepali scholars and published in Kathmandu-based journals. The fact is that Slusser was sometimes slipshod with transcriptions, cavalier with dates and occasionally reckless with her interpretations concerning the cultural history of the Kathmandu Valley. I can say this with confidence not because I have the slightest competence in this domain based on any research I might have done, but because I trust and value the assessments of two of Nepal's finest scholars, Kamal Prakash Malla and Prayag Raj Sharma, who published reviews of *Nepal*

Mandala respectively in 1983 and 1984. Neither of these reviews appears in the bibliography of Smith and Thompson's article. I will not rehearse the content of the reviews extensively here, since they are easily available online. They are broadly appreciative of Slusser's work, but both – especially Sharma's – are critical, not only of the deficiencies of detail alluded to above, but also because of the evident orientation of the book to a Western readership, the only prospective buyers who could have afforded the first edition – 'the circle of wealthy foreigners and members of the diplomatic corps who are wont to decorate their shelves and drawing rooms with high brow art, aesthetics, and sophisticated living' (Sharma 1984: 260). Yet again, there is nothing original in Smith and Thompson's resurrection of this forty-year-old critique. Sharma also, incidentally, compares Slusser's book unfavourably with Sylvain Lévi's *Le Népal* (1905–1908) in that it may be 'broader and more encompassing in the scope of the subject treated, but it does not show sparks of similar vision, originality and insight'. K P Malla's review is more forgiving. Smith and Thompson cite a letter from Malla to David Sassoon in which the former deplores the role of US art historians in 'having guided the art pillage of Kathmandu (p17, n94). Malla's rage at the role of Western academics in the impoverishment of Kathmandu's heritage notwithstanding, and in spite of his instructive criticism of *Nepal Mandala*'s shortcomings, he concludes that 'Slusser's book is an exceptional monument to the cross-fertilizing impact of the two traditions of scholarship – the Eastern and the Western' (ibid, p126); and Sharma himself notes that, 'among all the recent foreign authors writing on Nepal Slusser has been the most generous in acknowledging her indebtedness to the work done by native scholars in Nepali and other local languages' (Sharma 1984: 258). What author could wish for greater accolades than these?

- 13 Well-informed and carefully constructed critiques such as those by Sharma and Malla, however critical they may be, can be informative and inspiring (and even entertaining). Reading this article by Smith and Thompson gave me no such feeling of appreciation; it left me rather with the sense of gloom that descends on one in the presence of righteous certitude; a particular type of claustrophobia I have felt only in certain political and religious environments, but never until now in an academic forum. The authors' declared purpose in writing this article was to persuade readers of the iniquity of publishing unprovenanced objects. They have set out to do so by aligning three quantities that are intrinsically unconnected: the propriety of such publications; the author's moral character and the author's scholarly competence. How are we to understand these three quantities to be connected? On the face of it, the causal relationship between these elements would seem to be that articles about unprovenanced objects are published by writers who are deficient as humans and wanting as scholars. But what of a hypothetical example in which such an article were published by someone of unimpeachable character and unassailable academic credentials? Would such an article then be acceptable? Presumably not: clearly, this is not how the authors would wish to understand the logic of their procedure. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the causal relationship intended by the authors is in fact the reverse: the real implication of their argument is that anyone who does not subscribe to their position – that unprovenanced works of art should not be published – is, *ipso facto*, a poor scholar and a bad person. This position is not established by the justification they produce. This is because this justification – the supposed turpitude and incompetence of an author – is not in fact the foundation of their position but the pathological symptom of not subscribing to it. This being the case, the validity of their

position will need to have been established by other means; means are anything but transparent and have more to do with rhetoric and ideology than with rigour.

- 14 If this approach were to be adopted by Himalayan Studies as a sanctioned procedure, we would be entering very dangerous territory. There is much more to be said about this article and its implications for our field than I have said here, and I hope others, Nepalis and Westerners alike, will say it.

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NOTES

1. Smith, E and E L Thompson, 2023. 'A case study of academic facilitation of the global illicit trade in cultural objects: Mary Slusser in Nepal'. *International Journal of Cultural Property* 30(1): 1–20.

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