

A New Translation of the Kama Sutra

Perceptions and misperceptions of ancient Indian sexuality

By MICHAEL SWEET

THE COMPLETE KAMA SUTRA.
Translated by Alain Daniélou. Park Street Press, 1 Park St, Rochester, VT 05767. 564 pages, 1994. \$29.95.

The Kama Sutra ("Aphorisms on Pleasure") of Vatsyayana is the only Sanskrit treatise whose name is almost universally known. It is deservedly famous as one of the classic pre-modern works on sexuality, which also gives a rare view of social realities among the urbane upper classes in India during the early centuries of the common era.

The Kama Sutra is also significant for the history of queerness in Indian culture. It presents realistic descriptions of both female and male same-sex sexual activity—an entire chapter is devoted solely to oral sex (*auparishtaka*).

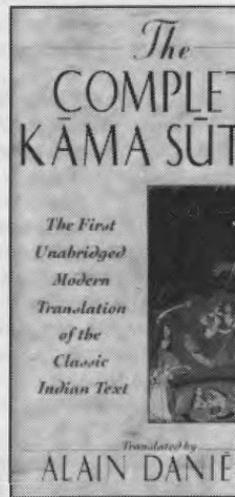
For over a hundred years, the English-reading world has known it through the pioneering translation by Sir Richard Burton and F.F. Arbuthnot, first published in 1883, and frequently reprinted, adapted, and pirated. Burton, a Byronic renaissance man—explorer, diplomat, author, linguist—and Arbuthnot, a British India civil servant and amateur scholar, were audacious in putting out this book at the height of Victorian prudery, but their translation is bowdlerized, abridged, and often in error. It is replete with archaic and comic-sounding terms like "oral congress" and "shampoers," and characterizes males engaging in same-sex activity as "eunuchs," a misconception that has only recently been corrected.

The present work, billed as "the first unabridged modern translation" of the Kama Sutra with its classical commentary, is by well-known French Indologist Alain Daniélou, a figure who parallels Burton in the picaresque quality of his life. Daniélou, now 87, has been at various times a painter, dancer, musician, translator, international endurance race-car driver, and a musicologist, and his autobiography, *The Way to the Labyrinth*, is full of amusing and scandalous stories. He is also openly gay and an orthodox Hindu. His translation is clearly a great advance over Burton and Arbuthnot's, as can be seen by comparing their versions of Sutra 1 of Chapter 9, on oral sex:

"There exist two kinds of eunuchs or hermaphrodites: those who choose the role of men, and those who disguise themselves as women." [Burton and Arbuthnot].

"People of the third sex are of two kinds, according to whether their appearance is masculine or feminine." [Daniélou]

Daniélou's translation is straightforward and accurate. "Eunuchs" has disappeared, which is good since they were never



actually there to begin with. European scholars of the last century routinely assumed the connection of "passive" homosexual behavior with eunuchs, as in Islamic cultures, or thought that the third sex [*tritiya prakriti*] was identical to the *hijras*, many of whom are indeed castrated.

The concept of a third sex has existed from the Vedic period onward, and comprises a category of "unmanly" men, who do not procreate owing to impotence, same-sex preference, congenital sexual abnormalities, and the like. Castration of men was virtually unknown until its introduction by Muslim rulers from the 7th century C.E. onwards.

Daniélou has problems of his own, however. This may be illustrated by his version of Sutra 36 of Chapter 9:

"There are also citizens, sometimes greatly attached to each other and with complete faith in one another, who get married together."

That would be astonishing, if true—gay marriage in ancient India! However, the text says only that they "embrace one another" (*kurvanti ... parasparaparigraham*) and the commentary makes clear that this indicates mutually agreeable sex. That there were egalitarian, sexual relationships among urban, upper-class males is fascinat-

ing in its own right, but a far cry from same-sex marriage, a concept totally unknown in pre-modern India.

Unfortunately, this type of anachronism, projecting modern ideas onto classical India, mars this translation. Thus, Daniélou translates "lesbian" and "gigolo," words which have widely known meanings as "lascivious woman (*svairini*)" and "sycophant (*vita*)."

There are no notes, passages of the commentary are omitted without mention, and the introduction is naively ahistorical. Daniélou, an uncritical proponent of all Indian tradition, presents the caste system, for example, as a wonderful social mechanism, in which all castes "collaborate together without difficulty" (p.7)!

In sum, this translation is well-written, and generally useful, but untrustworthy on specifics. For the non-specialist reader, it is a great improvement over previous versions. Nevertheless, a more accurate translation and study of this important and difficult work, placing it in its historical and socio-cultural context, is still greatly to be desired. ▼

Michael Sweet is a psychologist and clinical assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry, University of Wisconsin-Madison; with Leonard Zwilling he is writing a historical study of queer identities in classical India.

