

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 14, 2019

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# “Buddhism and Religious Diversity in Nepal”

## A Talk by Professor Chiara Letizia

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On April 12th, 2018, Professor Chiara Letizia from UQÀM’s Département de science des religions delivered a talk on “Buddhism and religious (and ethnic, cultural, linguistic) diversity in Nepal.” In her talk, Professor Letizia introduced her audience to the immense diversity that is present in Nepal. Upon examining a wide range of Buddhist traditions in the country, she provided a comparative analysis of how Buddhism functions in a Hindu matrix, further exploring how Buddhism was transformed by ethnic activism in southern Nepal. Letizia’s presentation marks the end of the “Buddha and the Other” lunch lecture series organized by McGill’s Centre for Research on Religion (CREOR), McGill’s School of Religious Studies, and the Department of East Asian Studies (EAS), in the school year of 2017/2018.

Professor Letizia began by depicting the ethnography of Nepal. It is a country with 127 population groups, who speak 123 different languages. While extremely diverse, the Nepali state was constructed around high caste Hinduism. Therefore, Buddhism was always considered to be the “other” in Nepal.

Letizia then shifted her focus to Newar Buddhism, the form of Buddhism practiced by the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley. While South Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism became almost extinct in India, it flourished in Nepal. As such, Newar Buddhism offers one a glimpse of what Buddhism practiced in a Hindu matrix might have looked like in ancient India. Newar Buddhism is unique due to the fact that there is no longer a celibate monastic community. For the Newars, monks are married householders, and monastic initiation is dependent on caste status. Only the high castes (*Śākyas* and *Vajrācāryas*), the only unambiguously Buddhist castes are allowed to become monks. This form of Buddhism reveals the mutual influences of two religious traditions that share the same spaces.

Letizia further explained that Newar Buddhism's ritual celebrations such as the *Rāto Matsyendranāth* festival and devotion to the *Kumāri* fits easily into the Hindu national project. Newar Buddhists adopted Hindu deities and like Hindus are also divided according to caste. Both these traditions parallel each other and borrow significantly from each other. For Letizia, this becomes more apparent when one analyses how Newar initiation rituals follow the same pattern of Hindu rites. In the Newar ritual, known as the *bare chuyegu*, boys become monks for four days, subsequently disrobing to take on the role of a householder. Their monastic vows are only reawakened when they take on their ritual duties at their monasteries. This ritual marks the initiation of the boy into the monastic community. After a public performance of their monastic vows, the boys disrobe and request Mahāyāna vows.

According to Letizia, while this Newar initiation ritual is conducted in a way similar to the Hindu *Upanayana* ritual, especially in structural ways, it also demarcates itself from its Hindu counterpart. One can observe differences from how the boys completely shave their heads, marking their complete renunciation. From a Buddhist perspec-

tive, the ritual also asserts the superiority of Buddhism by transcending the Hindu *varṇāśramadharmā* system, which does not include monastic initiation as a rite of passage. In this way, the boys progress through the three *yānas* of Buddhism. The boys enter Buddhism as celibate monastics, which represents the *Śrāvaka*yāna. They then request Mahāyāna vows, and the ritual initiations culminate with Tantric initiations, symbolic of the Vajrayāna.

Professor Letizia moved on to Theravāda Buddhism by depicting how it also had to adapt to the local reality. Like Newar Buddhism, Theravāda had to develop strategies to deal with the Hindu majority and are shaped by these interactions. Theravāda was brought to Nepal by Newar converts who had the goal of reforming their traditional Buddhism. Letizia explained that Theravāda's characterization as a modern form of Buddhism, which was stressed by nineteenth-century figures such as Anagarika Dharmapala, Colonel Henry S. Olcott, and the Theosophical Society, helped the tradition gain popularity in Nepal. These reformers criticized Newar Buddhism as a degeneration of "pure" Buddhism due to its entanglement with Hinduism. Professor Letizia stressed the fact that the Newar Theravādin reformers rejected practices associated with Newar Vajrayāna, such as the consumption of alcohol and animal sacrifice. They believed that Buddhism should be a mode of existential enquiry not concerned with the performance of ritual. However, as Professor Letizia explained, they could not simply reject all local customs and hence, in an attempt to adapt to the local reality, these reformers created initiation rituals that themselves parallel the Newar Buddhist structure. The reformers offered less costly and quicker rituals in an effort to gain traction in the communities. However, Newars did not see the performance of either ritual as mutually exclusive and initiated their children in both systems. Professor Letizia suggested that this might be due to the fact that in traditional forms of Newar Buddhism, *dhārma* is defined as the appropriate performance of ritual, while in Theravāda ethics

and adherence to a set of moral values is stressed. This point is made more obvious with Professor Letizia's comparison of the Newar "guru maṇḍala pūjā" and the Theravāda "Buddha pūjā." The "guru maṇḍala pūjā" stresses the proper performance of the ritual, while the "Buddha pūjā" is understood as a mnemonic affirmation of a moral intention.

Professor Letizia then tied this discussion into the struggle for secularism in Nepal, beginning during the Rana regime. Buddhism, under the Rana regime, was viewed as a branch of Hinduism. The Ranas solidified the image of Nepal as a Hindu nation, in an effort to create a unified country that would be tied together by language and religion. This process culminated with the promotion of *Daśāi* as the quintessential Nepali religious festival, the enforcing of cow worship, and the promulgation of the *Muluki Ain*, a law that institutionalized caste division and placed high caste Hindus at the top of this caste system. This, in turn, led to the formation of the Janajati movement, which demanded recognition for Nepal's ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences. This is when Theravāda comes on the scene and becomes an active partner in the Janajati movement's struggle for a secular state. These Theravāda reformers sought to remove Buddhism from inside the Hindu fold and demanded the equal recognition of all religious traditions in Nepal. This struggle was only partially successful because it was able to guarantee the recognition of ethnic diversity, but was unable to recognize religious diversity and remove Nepal's tag as a Hindu nation.

Professor Letizia then explained that Theravāda and Janajati activists, primarily from Tharu and Magar communities, then actively started rewriting their history in an effort to convince people to change their religious identification on the National Census. They convinced people by claiming that their respective groups were autochthonous to Nepal and were descendants of Buddha Śākyamuni. This characterization as "original" Buddhists' was a key facet of the Tharu and Magar project

to justify their adoption of Buddhism. Therefore, conversion was understood as a return to one's roots. Another important aspect of this process of conversion was the creation of "Buddhist Awareness Camps," where Theravādin monks and ethnic teachers taught locals the connection between their ethnic group and Buddhism in the native tongue of participants. Rituals were also a point of conflict, and these reformers banned animal sacrifice and the celebration of *Daśāi*. They even promoted substitute ritual performers, who were usually lay ethnic intellectuals, who charged no fee, in an effort to dissuade people from calling Hindu *Pandits*. According to Professor Letizia, the majority of the Hindu structure of these rituals remains. The only significant changes are that now, rituals are accompanied by Buddhist anecdotes and lessons, as opposed to Hindu ones.

Professor Letizia concluded her talk by calling people's attention to the ways in which her talk demonstrated the varieties of Buddhisms one encounters in Nepal. For Letizia, using ritual as a gateway can reveal the mutual influences that these traditions have had on each other. Moreover, it is important to recognize that in Nepal religious identity corresponds to political identity, as was demonstrated by Theravāda's key role in campaigning for secularism.