

The State of Religion in a Non-religious State: Discourses and Practices in the Secular Republic of Nepal 7-8 July 2012, Oxford

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This workshop was hosted by the School of Anthropology and Museum of Ethnography at the University of Oxford and made possible by funding from All Souls College, the British Academy, and the University of Milan Bicocca. The original impetus came from the research on secularism in Nepal that Chiara Letizia carried out between 2009 and 2011 thanks to a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship held at Oxford's Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology.

Prof. David Gellner, Dr Chiara Letizia, Dr Anne de Sales, and Dr Sondra Hausner convened this workshop in order to bring together a group of scholars who share a deep knowledge of the field and have observed religion as it is practised, in order to reflect on the state of religion in the present secular state of Nepal. The participants were invited to discuss the implications of the recent thoroughgoing political transformations on religious practices in the areas where they conducted fieldwork and to reflect on religious practice at the local level in the now officially secular Nepal.

The main questions addressed were: Are religious practices on the wane, or are they rather very much alive but transformed? Are they undergoing a process of privatisation/spiritualisation or are they, on the contrary, gaining a public presence? Has the declaration of the secular state led to a secularisation of the country, or has it instead stirred up religious activism among both the 'liberated' religious minorities as well as on the Hindu side? Has the 'People's War' made the religious experience irrelevant or has the violence of the conflict led to new forms of religious experience in a time of crisis?

During the People's War the Maoists adopted inconsistent attitudes towards religion. On the one hand, they declared that religion was 'the opium of the people', occasionally prohibiting 'superstitious cults' and sometimes deliberately violating religious taboos; on the other hand, there seem to have been occasions when in practice the Maoists themselves also

summoned shamans, worshipped deities, visited pilgrimage places, etc. More generally, some anthropologists have noted the religious aspects of Maoist discourse and the religiously inspired sacrificial symbolism of much of their rituals and ceremonies. What are the current expressions and implications of these contradictory attitudes and discourses on religion?

Another key point seems to be the emergence of a new sensitivity concerning blood sacrifice. In the course of the last fifteen years, reformists of very different types – Maoists, Hindu modernists, Theravada monastics, ethnic activists propagating Buddhist modernism, followers of the Satyahang Kiranti religion – have all converged on a position condemning animal sacrifice as superstitious and backward. The ‘war’ waged by activists and the mass media against the Gadimai *mela* in 2010 was telling: for weeks newspapers ran articles by activists from Nepal, India and around the globe about the backward character of the sacrifice of thousands of buffaloes in this suddenly famous Tarai temple. Has the condemnation of blood sacrifice lead to a reflection on what religion is – once the sacrificial practices are left out? How should we understand the Buddhist activists’ invitation to practice *ahimsa* in a country that has suffered so much violence, or the Maoist ban on animal sacrifice while people were themselves called to sacrifice themselves in the People’s War? And what are the discourses and practices of sacrifice in post-conflict Nepal? How much real change in actual practices has been brought about by the discourses of ethnic activists (for example advocating the boycott of Dasain, or the adoption of Buddhism)?

Many researchers have encountered issues related to religion: the fresh outbreak of possession, the ritual and sacrificial aspects of Maoist ceremonies and discourses, the religious aspects of ethnic activism, the new sensitivity about blood sacrifice, the religious aspects of political leadership and rhetoric, the growing presence of meditation and spiritual practices among urban middle-classes, etc. As far as the latter is concerned, the multiplication of forms of ‘new age’ religions among the urban elite has become evident: meditation *reiki*, yoga, a growing number of followers of spiritual masters (mainly Tibetan Buddhist masters, but also Osho, Sai Baba, etc.) Are these phenomena signs of the spiritualisation and privatisation of religion? How do these new practices coexist with traditional ones? One clear conclusion of the workshop was that, although

Nepal may now be a legally secular state, religious practices, movements, and sentiments continue to thrive.

Nine papers were presented and discussed:

- Chiara Letizia (Milan-Bicocca University), 'Ideas of Secularism in Contemporary Nepal', presented competing views on 'secularism' (*dharma nirapekshata*) collected from social actors of differing religious and political affiliations in Kathmandu and three cities of the Tarai. These views were put in relation with a discussion of court cases dealing with the state and religious traditions in the new secular Nepal.
- Gérard Toffin (CNRS, Paris), 'Neither Statues nor Rituals: Encounters with some new religious organizations and therapists in Nepal', described some new religious movements, linked to the 'Hindu galactic world', which bring a new freedom of choice, a rejection of ritual, and a different more middle-class style of spirituality to urban areas of Nepal. He discussed their main themes and modes of operation, their interactions with Indian and wider transnational connections, and how they borrow from, but also contrast with, traditional Hindu practices.
- David Holmberg (Cornell University), 'Tamang Lhochhar and the "New Nepal"', examined the ongoing creation of Tamang Lhochhar as a primary festival activity directly related to formations of identity and demands for recognition in contemporary Nepal, as well as responding to the needs of far-flung Tamang diaspora populations. Analysing this new ritual, which works to produce Tamang solidarity and leaders at national and international levels, Holmberg contrasted the decline and abandonment of the Chhechu festival, which had a very different relationship to power and resistance.
- Axel Michaels (Heidelberg University), 'Blood Sacrifices in Nepal-Transformations and Criticism', discussed the ideology and visibility of blood sacrifices in Nepal, especially among the Hindu and Buddhist Newars. His presentation dealt with responses and criticism elicited by these rituals, as well as their transformations in a transcultural and media-saturated world. Michaels focused on discourses evolving around the materiality of the blood itself and its imaginaries in the

public sphere, including their presence in the celebration of martyrdom in the Maoist movement. He drew attention to the fact that indigenous Sanskrit-based scriptural traditions theorised the notion of sacrifice very little, when compared to Abrahamic traditions.

- Brigitte Steinmann (University of Lille), 'Confrontations between Maoism and Buddhism among the Tamangs and Tibetan Buddhist Populations of Kabhre-Palanchok', presented an ethnographic panorama of the confrontations between Maoism and Buddhism among the Tamangs and Tibetan Buddhist populations of Kabhre-Palanchok, covering mainly the period from 2000 to 2008. She also presented the case of a 'Tantric Buddhist communist' lama she knows well.
- Ben Campbell (Durham University), 'Tamang Christians and Sensibilities of Distance from Old Times', presented a promotional, evangelising DVD showing the spread of Christianity among Tamang-speaking communities in Rasuwa district. It was noteworthy that the film made use of traditional forms of devotional song, dance, and drama, but in choreographed harmony with modernised DVD-ready, and mobile-phone-compatible, production values, i.e. it presented Christianity through specifically Tamang symbols and cultural forms.
- Ina Zharkevich (Oxford), 'When Gods Return to their Homeland in the Himalayas: Tales and Practices of Religion in the 'Maoist' Model Village of Thabang', shared her research on the long-term impact of the 'People's War' on religious beliefs and practices in Thabang. Two very different reflective informants explained the social and religious changes that had taken place by saying that the gods have left to return to their Himalayan homeland. Although the Maoists might be expected to have attempted to suppress religion altogether, they have in fact presided over a modernisation of it, using development funds to rebuild the Brahma temple according to more urban architectural models.
- Pustak Ghimire (Visiting Scholar, Oxford), 'Women Possessed by the Goddess Bhagavati: On the Spread of a New Form of Worship in eastern Nepal', presented an ethnographic study of the diffusion of a cult of Bhagavati in Khotang district, namely among its Rai, Kiranti, Magar and Dalit communities. Characterised by the possession of women who become 'living goddesses', the cult rose sharply during the Maoist

insurgency and continued to spread after 2007. He analysed some functions of this cult and its interactions with local social and political actors, as well as reasons for its development.

- Martin Gaenszle (University of Vienna), 'Redefining Kiranti Religion in Contemporary Nepal', discussed the strong impact of the new Kirant ethnic organisations on the conception of religion among their communities, and explained how the scope and pace of the changes have been affected by the diaspora. He outlined some basic features of the 'traditional' religion, and what has changed in the contemporary context of secularism: in particular, the emergence of written forms of the tradition, single festivals shared by the whole group (e.g. Sakela for the Rais), specific culture heroes and religious gurus, and the development of a shared Kiranti religious site in Hattiban in the Kathmandu Valley.

During the final session there was a detailed and wide-ranging discussion of different understandings of secularism, both on the part of ordinary people and on the part of scholars. There was no definite conclusion but there was general agreement on the need for further ethnographically sensitive investigation of the topic.