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Obituary for John K. Locke

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DR. FATHER JOHN K. LOCKE 1933-2009

BY BRUCE MCCOY OWENS

Father John Kerr Locke, whom most of the readers of this journal are likely to know as one of the world's foremost scholars of Newar Buddhism, died at the age of 76 on March 18, 2009 in the B & B hospital in Gwarko, Lalitpur, Nepal after a long battle with cancer. A funeral mass was held for him later that same day at the Church of the Assumption in Dhobighat, Lalitpur, presided over by Bishop Anthony Sharma: a manner and place of observance that were unthinkable when Father Locke first arrived in Nepal.

He was born in Chicago in 1933, and lived there until the death of his mother, when, at the age of seven, he and his sister moved to West Des Moines, Iowa to live with their aunt and uncle. Upon graduating High School in 1950, he returned to Chicago to study at Loyola University, and shortly thereafter joined the Society of Jesus at the Jesus Spiritual Center in Milford, Ohio. He eventually received his Masters Degree in English from Loyola in 1958, and submitting a thesis on the topic of Wordsworth's Lucy Poems, but the year before had already successfully petitioned the Society of Jesus to join the mission in Nepal. He arrived in Nepal in 1959 in the company of Fathers Casper J. Miller, S.J., and Charles Law, S.J., and became a Nepalese citizen in 1976. His death came after living and working in Nepal for a half century.

His legacy includes not only his meticulous path-breaking scholarship, but also his mentorship and teaching of other scholars and students from Nepal as well as abroad, his critical roles as



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teacher, principal, and superior of St. Xavier's Godavari School, and his service to the Jesuit order. His students from St. Xavier's include many who are prominent in the struggle to develop Nepal's nascent civil society and democratic government, and his students from Tribhuvan University are among those developing Nepal's burgeoning Colleges and Universities. Father Locke was also an active member of the Fulbright Commission Board of Directors, thereby playing a key role in shaping American research in Nepal as well as providing educational opportunities in the United States for Nepalese students and scholars. Father Gregory Sharkey, who describes himself as following in the footsteps of Father Locke in his own scholarship, noted in the memorial speech he delivered at his funeral, that his teaching extended well beyond these institutions. He pointed out that "hundreds upon hundreds of Peace Corps and VSO volunteers, exchange students from Pitzer, Cornell, Wisconsin, and SIT first began to make sense of their experience of Nepal by sitting at the feet of Fr. Locke." For the most part, students from abroad benefited from Father Locke's teaching after he moved from St. Xavier's to the Human Resources Development Research Center in Sanepa in 1972, where he resided for the remainder of his life.

I cannot help but note the critical role he has played in my own research on the festival of Bungaya, or Rato Matsyendranath in Patan and Bungamati, and on the transformation of devotional spaces in the Kathmandu valley. His major work on the first of these topics, *Karunamaya: the cult of Avalokitesvara-Matsyendranath in the valley of Nepal*, was published in 1980, and is based on the dissertation he wrote for his Ph.D. at Tribhuvan University. This volume has served many scholars of Newar Buddhism as the basis for their initial understanding of this extremely complex topic, and for forming the research questions required to develop their own research in its wake. The second of his books, *Buddhist Monasteries of Nepal: A Survey of the Bahas and Bahis of the Kathmandu Valley*, published 1985, records the status of these "monastic" compounds that are at the heart of much that distinguishes Newar Buddhist life at a time when many were falling into disrepair and potential oblivion. It also serves as a compendium of the inscriptional evidence of their histories to be found within them, information gleaned from manuscripts that refer to them, the fruits of his consultations with local scholars and religious specialists about them, and ethnographic information about the contemporary practices of those who live and worship within them.

This is a work of extraordinary compassion, as it was not produced as a basis for its author to make an argument or establish a position on the basis of all the work that went into its production. Rather, it is an invitation for others to act upon the painstakingly gathered information that he has made so readily available, whether through efforts to preserve that which is so obviously fragile, or to further our understanding of Newar Buddhism on the basis of these ubiquitous institutions that shape the architectural, social, and religious fabric of many Newar towns and cities. Father Locke's other published work range from chapters and articles that elegantly convey the complexity of Newar Buddhist religion and society for the general reader, such as his chapter, "Present-day Buddhism in

Nepal," in Maraldo and Dumoulin's 1976 volume, *Buddhism in the Modern World*, to more challenging works intended for the specialist that reveal his profound understanding of Newar Vajrayana Buddhist practice and cosmology, such as his important 1987 article, "The Uposadha Vrata of Amoghapasa Lokeshvara in Nepal."

I had the good fortune to meet with Father Locke several times, and my encounters with him resonate with the experiences of others who have recalled their interactions with him and noted his profound knowledge, passion for teaching, and modest generosity. I first met him at Columbia University in 1979, where he delivered a talk on Newar Buddhist initiation rite, *bare chuyegu*, while visiting to consult with Prof. Alex Wayman, who was an outside member of his dissertation committee. He generously allowed me access to his dissertation while, as I recall, he was in the process of preparing to defend it! Later, when meeting with him in Nepal, he read my work carefully, and was generous with his time and critical insight. I could not help but think what patience and forbearance he must have been compelled to muster in the face of this neophyte scholar who presumed to tackle a subject that he had, as he notes in his introduction to *Karunamaya*, waited nineteen years to take on.

Father Locke's command of Nepali was legendary, and, as was typical of him, he compassionately applied it to authoring a text to teach native speakers to spell their own language. His devotion to Nepal and its people is evident in numerous ways that I have recounted. It is also striking that his important books (which I am delighted to learn are being prepared to be released in new editions) are published only in Nepal, though more prominent international presses would surely have leapt at the opportunity to include them among their titles. To increase the international stature and availability of his work in this way would have, however, deprived rapidly developing Nepalese scholarly publishers of valuable imprints, and put the cost of his work beyond many of his fellow citizens.

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